

Literacy Through Oracy: The Rotary Foundation Litraid Project In Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The Zimbabwe LITRAID Project is a video-led, university level course of instruction for Zimbabwean teachers in the late Primary and early Secondary Schools throughout Zimbabwe. It is taught by distance means, including the use of video equipped vehicles which travel throughout the country. The course was developed jointly by the University of Zimbabwe in partnership with the Open University in England. Its development was funded by the Rotary Foundation to a total

of \$300,000. The aims of the LITRAID project are to improve the reading and writing ability of Zimbabwean school pupils in Shona, Ndebele and English through improving classroom communication and oral interaction in schools. The project comprises five sections, each of which has its own video program and block of academic materials. There is also a study guide and a compendium of readings. Improvements in the literacy skills of Zimbabwean pupils have been brought about through the program. This has been achieved by means of innovative and highly interactive forms of teaching which teachers registered for LITRAID have to carry out and write up as assignments in part fulfillment of the degree qualification in Literacy Studies to which the LITRAID program leads.

INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago, the area of classroom interaction would have experienced some difficulty gaining acceptance as a major component in a definition of literacy. The status of oracy as a key to literacy has until fairly recently been regarded in an ambivalent way in some western 'developed' nations. This has been a source of puzzlement and justified annoyance to peoples whose cultures and literary traditions are largely oral. Some scholars, such as Pattanayak (1991: 105) reporting from within oral cultures, found themselves on the brink of rejecting what they saw as the dubious benefits of literacy, whilst in the so-called developed countries, the speech of children was regarded as being more in the nature of mere data rather than evidence of the fact that language is embedded in culture and action: a good linguistic source for the production of early reading materials (see Hart et al, 1977) rather than the linguistic exponents of the repeatable events of life in a community (Halliday and Hasan, 1985).

In the space of the past decade, verbal interaction, or what Harold Rosen (1988) calls the 'irrepressible genre', has gained acceptance to the point that the "International Decade of Literacy" was launched at the same time that statements of acceptance like that of Chisman (1990) were being

published. Chisman suggests that a definition of literacy be seen in five parts: reading, writing, verbal communication abilities, in addition to mathematics and problem-solving skills (emphasis added). Such a definition, Chisman suggests, would be "accepted by most of the recent scholarly literature (1990:2). Furthermore, he refers to the components of this quinpartite definition as "basic skills", a term which Shafer (1994:77) notes is almost synonymous with the terms literacy and functional literacy.

In short, the term literacy has progressed further and further away from being determined by decoding skills alone and deeper and deeper into being seen as inseparable from the society from which it arises and gains its support. In anticipation of the functional links between language and culture to which Halliday was to allude, Pattison (1982:7) proposed that "...literacy is a combination of variables - individual and cultural awareness of language and the interplay of this awareness with the means of expression" (emphasis added).

If one accepts that 'verbal communication abilities' and the 'means of expression' are, in the current decade of literacy and beyond it, to be regarded as inseparable from the other aspects of what is now agreed to constitute literacy, one is forced to an ineluctable conclusion. Literacy without verbal interaction is likely, if it can still be termed literacy, to be a stunted and dysfunctional artifact, sundered from real life and a ready vehicle for whatever cultural colonization the text before the reader brings. Even then, understanding without interaction would be partial and a product of a painful process of mechanical decoding.

In the late 1980s, Zimbabwean schools were characterized by forms of classroom teaching in which almost all educational input was carried out by the teacher. Attempts by the author of this paper and his co-researchers to record the interaction of pupils with a view to creating materials similar to those produced by Hart et al, were, in the 80s, doomed to failure. If more interaction was to be introduced into the classroom, this could only be done by disturbing a sediment of silence which had been in place since the first missionaries opened schools during the beginnings of Southern

Rhodesia's colonial period slightly more than one hundred years ago.

The researchers of the 80s realized that the sediment of silence would have to be disturbed through forms of intervention which were based on interaction in the traditional society to which the pupils of the new Zimbabwe belonged.

1. ROTARY FOUNDATION SPONSORS A PILOT INVESTIGATION

From the inception of the LITRAID project, it was understood that any attempt to reach in-service teachers would have to be made by means of distance education. After Independence in 1980, the number of Zimbabwe's secondary schools increased tenfold. Teachers were in very short supply and a large number of teachers left the primary schools to take up employment in the newly established secondary schools. Teacher resources were stretched to the limit. Many schools moved to a system of 'hot seating', in the sense that two school sessions were held during an ordinary school day. Zimbabwe briefly secured assistance from expatriate teachers until its teacher training programs, such as the Zintec distance education program, could produce teachers in sufficient numbers to fill the void. It was plain that any form of staff development for teachers would need to take place by means of distance education.

In the case of the Litraid program, this was brought about through a unique partnership between two academics who had been researching areas of literacy: Dr L. John Chapman, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the Open University in England (unfortunately unable to be present here today) and the author of this paper, a Senior Lecturer in English Language at the University of Zimbabwe.

With the permission of the Ministry of Education and Culture under the leadership of Minister Fay Chung, the Litraid Project was formally launched on 26 April 1988. Video recording began in

Zimbabwean schools in the Midlands Province in the city of Gweru. The videos were converted into a pilot videoed program under the direction of Open University producer and director Valerie Timmis. Funding was provided under a matching grant by the Rotary Foundation in conjunction with the Rotary Clubs of Rubery UK and the Rotary Club of Harare City in Zimbabwe.

This pilot video was made to accompany a small written fragment of an existing Open University course called PE232 Language Development. About 40,000 British teachers had successfully completed this course of the Open University as parttime students, studying at a distance. In the region of 65 Zimbabwean teachers volunteered for a six week pilot course of study using Open University methods such as videoed instruction, tutorial, and the writing of tutormarked assignments. Dr L. John Chapman visited the country during this period and offered Zimbabwean tutors briefing and training of the type used at the Open University.

The part of the Language Development course PE 232 selected for use in Zimbabwe was half that course's Block 5, 'Observing Classroom Discourse'. Four metric tons of PE 232 which had come to the end of their useful life at the Open University, were transported to Zimbabwe with the help of the Ranfurly Library Service, whose patron is HRH The Duke of Edinburgh.

In particular, teachers in the Zimbabwean experiment were asked to familiarize themselves with methods of transcribing and using diagnostically, teacherpupil interaction, or 'teacher talk' in the classroom. The Regional Director for the Midlands Province, Mr. Timothy Benz, identified, as possible candidates for video recording, a number of talented teachers who were believed to be amongst the best in the country. A number of these teachers were recorded on video and Valerie Timmis compiled a 30 minute programme to lead the pilot course of instruction.

The aims of the Pilot Course were twofold: the researchers wanted to determine the extent to which Open University methods could be transferred successfully to Zimbabwe; and they wanted to determine the extent to which Open University materials could, without being customized, be

transferred to Zimbabwe. The answers in both cases were emphatic: Open University methods were definitely fully transferable to Zimbabwe, but Open University materials were not. Hence, Zimbabwe was poised to adopt the Open University's methods and to apply them to materials which would have to be written in Zimbabwe for Zimbabwean conditions.

The Open University's materials were not a complete failure, however. They had the great advantage, during the pilot phase, of allowing Zimbabwean teachers to appreciate what had been a largely unrecognized problem: the metalingual problem which teaching in Zimbabwe still faces and which the Litraid project is striving to correct. "Zimbabweans", as Litraid tutor, Stanislaus Tichapondwa puts it : "...teach about the language instead of teaching the language."

Teachers who had all hailed as excellent the teaching which they saw on television were able, quite effectively, to use the transcription methods of Sinclair et al (1972) as these appeared in Block 5 of PE 232, in order to come to the realization that what was being transacted during the TV lesson they thought was excellent was little more than mere ritual a ritual which was exactly as Tichapondwa had described it, and one which had probably been going on in Zimbabwean schools undetected since the beginnings of at least the colonial period and possibly and possibly dating from as early as the missionary era which preceded it.

A particularly poignant moment in this filmed lesson of the pilot project, is the part in which the teacher asks pupils to read out their answers to a comprehension exercise. In his zeal to point out that pupils should always answer comprehension questions in their own words, the teacher calls pupils to the front of the class in order to make an example of them, if they unwittingly used the words of the question as the preamble to their answers.

T: So far, how many have finished, oh quite a number, nearly all. Now I will ask question 1 and find out how you have

answered the question. Why had the red maize cob been sent around? Can you read your answer?

P: The red maize cob had been sent around..

T: Stand in front. And you, read your answer?

P: The red maize cob was passed out as a sign of..(?)

T: Right, someone else? Yes?

P: The red maize had been sent around because it was the sing

..

T: Just stand in front. Someone else? Why had the red maize cob been sent around? Someone else? Yes?

P: The red maize cob had been sent ..

T: Yes, come in front. Yes?

P: The red maize cob had been sent around..

T: Yes, come forward. Now the last person. We need a girl this time we need a girl, who is that going to be? Yes?

P: The red maize cob had been sent ..

T: Yes come forward. the purpose of our lesson, boys and girls is to show ourselves. When we answer comprehension questions, we must try, as far as possible, to use our own words. Now I will read this question, when I have read it, you only read the first three words of your answers, right? Count 1, 2, 3 in your answers, just 1, 2, 3. Why had the red maize cob been sent around? Together, read it loudly.

P: The red maize cob.

T: Yes, stop there stop. Now, once more, why had the red maize cob been sent around?

P: The red maize.

T: Right. Now, I want you to read your first seven words of the answer together. Why had the red maize cob together!

P: The red maize cob had been sent.

T: You are all happy, isn't it. You are enjoying the song from the choir. Once more the same seven words. Why had the red maize [Repeat] cob had been sent around?

P: The red maize cob had been sent.

T: There you see. This is what we must not do. Go back to your places, that's alright. This is what we must not do in

comprehension."

2. THE MAIN ROTARY FOUNDATION 3H LITRAID PROJECT

An immediate result of the pilot project was that more exciting and interactive teaching began to be carried out by those teachers who had been involved in the pilot scheme. Headmasters asked those who had participated in the pilot project if they would consider offering staff development seminars in their schools for teachers who had not been fortunate enough to participate.

At the end of the pilot project, the students were given diplomas by Rotary International certifying their attendance. The Rotary Foundation sent an evaluator to Zimbabwe: Dr. Richard Walker of Queensland Australia, who, as chance would have it, had been a member of the research team with Norman Hart at Mount Gravatt College of Education in Brisbane, Australia.

Part of Walker's recommendation to the Rotary Foundation's International Committee on Literacy that Zimbabwe be awarded the fully funded Litraid Project as part of its 3H (Health, Hunger and Humanities) program reads as follows:

"This project would serve well as a 'lighthouse' project for this part of the world and for other large developing countries where the attainment of universal education is being handicapped by the need to improve the skills and qualifications of large numbers of teachers. Its priorities differ from those of the Thailand 3H literacy project because the conditions and needs differ greatly between these two developing countries. As such, it is all the more valuable as a second 'lighthouse' Rotary literacy project" (3 March 1989)

In the event, shortly after Walker's recommendation to the Rotary Foundation, that organization awarded 3H funding of \$300,000 to develop a full one year video-led course of instruction for

teachers, in the form of a Diploma in Classroom Text and Discourse, to be fully accredited, in due course, by the University of Zimbabwe.

The structure of the course, for which the written modules have been placed on display, is set out below.

2.1 The Video Led Course of Study

The award of major funding for the development of the full project meant that Litraid could develop a high budget distance teaching program without the constraints which had been experienced during the pilot study. Litraid could now become a comprehensive and freestanding video led course of instruction comprising:

- * 5 instructional videos (average length 30 minutes each, and recorded on Beta cam SP. All on-line editing was carried out in Zimbabwe. Music involving the use of traditional musical instruments such as the mbira or thumb piano, was copyrighted to the project)

- * 5 written blocks to accompany each video

- * a study guide

- * video notes

- * a compendium of readings

The videos were made in 1991 and editing was completed in 1992. Written blocks were developed mostly by Zimbabwean authors between 1992 and 1995. Dr. L. John Chapman, an academic of international renown in the area of literacy, authored the block on the teaching of reading. All

units were all professionally edited by Open University Editor in the Faculty of Arts, John Pettit, who was also the author of the study guide. During the editorial process, units were often transmitted electronically between the University of Zimbabwe and the Open University using Zimbabwe's fairly recently established email service which has only limited connectivity to the Internet.

The course components involve two 'talk' blocks (units 1 and 3) and two 'text' blocks (units 2 and 4). Unit 5 examines the impact of the Information Age on the classroom in Zimbabwe and on text development. In a separate but related study, the author of this paper is using the techniques of corpus linguistics to sample computationally Zimbabwe's reading environment. A full list of the members of the course team appears in Appendix A.

Tutors, trained to Open University standards and specifications, were appointed in the following centers throughout Zimbabwe: Harare, Bindura, Gweru, Kwe Kwe, Masvingo, Mutare and Bulawayo. The first intake of students was planned for 1995 and these teachers have now, as will be further reported below, moved successfully through the program.

2.2 Outreach Capability

The award of major project funding also meant that Litraid could achieve its aim of being an 'outreach' program: that is to say that it would have at its disposal a video equipped vehicle with its own power supply that could reach teachers in remote parts of the country regardless of whether they were connected to the national grid. The project acquired such a vehicle, a Landrover Defender, in 1993 at a cost of almost 28,000 British pounds.

Rotary Foundation Volunteer Joseph Gate, a retired headmaster of great distinction, of the Rotary Club Whitehaven in England, operated the outreach service on three successive visits to

Zimbabwe. His work involved not only the directing of tutorials in remote centers, but also the supervision of each and every student's dissertation or Classroom Investigation Module due for submission in July 1996. The main text for guiding students through this research was kindly made available to students on the Litraid course by Professor William Prescott of the School of Education at the Open University. It is entitled 'Professional Development in Action' and is Open University Course E621 MH. At the Open University, this course leads to the award of a Certificate of Professional Development in Education.

2.3 The First Student Intake

In January 1995, under the direct supervision of Rotary International, the first intake of almost 120 Zimbabwean teachers commenced their studies on the Litraid course. During the year, Rotary Director Antonio Serrano visited the project and attended a number of tutorials. His reports to the Rotary Foundation were extremely positive and he was impressed not only by the dedication of teachers on the programme, but by the way in which the local Rotary clubs had assisted in the provision of facilities and refreshments for the teachers on the course throughout the regions. Rotary International subsidized the students' fees for the first year and provided some students with a transport allowance.

Although the Litraid materials are fully selfaccess materials and students have no need to read beyond the compendium of readings and the units themselves, five tutorials one per video and block were held during the academic year. A typical session would involve a three hour tutorial on a Friday afternoon or a Saturday morning. Most sessions are broken into two, with a tea break in the middle. Although most students travel to the regional meeting point for the tutorials, the outreach vehicle allows tutorials to be held in more remote places if necessary. Their tutor can discuss aspects of students' assignments and issues arising from the unit on which the assignment was based. This would normally take place during the first half of the tutorial and during the

second half, the video is usually shown for the next unit and an approach to the issues it raises for the classroom are then explored tentatively. Teachers are expected to come to these sessions having already read the relevant unit. After the tutorial, they return to their classrooms to implement new ways of teaching set out in the unit or as required by the Tutor Marked Assignment (TMA).

2.4 The Role of Tutor Marked Assignments

A discernible intervention in the students' teaching is inevitable during the course, as all five of the TMAs (Tutor Marked Assignments) involve writing up a lesson the teachers have tried out, based on the TMA. TMAs are set in such a way that it is impossible to produce a TMA without having conducted the lesson. In this way, the Litraid course ensures that the interventions in the area of methodology planned by the course team are actually carried out. Reverting to less interactive forms of teaching becomes difficult because the new types of lesson so raise the expectations of pupils that they resist a return to conservative or ritualized types of teaching they experienced before Litraid began. Improvement in the interactive tenor of the lessons becomes a one way path for teachers over the one year period of the course. Those interviewed at the end of it confessed that would be incapable of returning to the ways in which they used to teach before they commenced their studies.

During the first year of Litraid and in accordance with Open University practice, a selection of all TMAs written by students was sent to the Open University for evaluation and monitoring by the Course Assessor who set the TMAs and who was also the external examiner to the first intake, Dr. Neil Mercer, Reader in the Centre for Language and Communication in the School of Education at the Open University. Neil Mercer has published several books in the area of classroom discourse and, in particular, his work concentrates on forms of knowledge which can be deemed to be current and 'in play' in any particular classroom setting. Monitoring has the primary benefit of assessing the work of the tutors and the extent and usefulness of their comments written on each monitored

assignment.

2.5 The Examination of the First Intake

The first intake of students wrote the Litraid examinations in all of the regional centers throughout Zimbabwe on 5 January 1996. The examination was conducted to the same standards as those that obtain at the Open University. A team of three came from the Open University to Zimbabwe to conduct the examination. Zimbabwean members of the Litraid team were not involved in the marking of examination scripts. Dr. Mercer's report has been most encouraging. He ranks Zimbabwean teachers on the course very highly. Almost all of the students have opted to continue their studies towards a BA (Literacy Studies) degree of which the Litraid Diploma is to form one half.

2.6 The Future of Litraid

The BA (Literacy Studies) is a new offering of the Centre for Distance Education at the University of Zimbabwe and a unique offering in central and southern Africa. The full course is likely to comprise:

- * The Diploma in Classroom Text and Discourse (part time study of Litraid materials for one calendar year);

- * A Classroom Investigation Module (6 months of classroom research, leading to the production of a dissertation from within the teachers' own classrooms. This study is supported through tutorials by Litraid tutors and academic support is offered by the Open University Course Module E621 MH Professional Development in Education;

* Further examination papers at the end of the second and third years of study provided by a course team appointed by the Centre for Distance Education.

The direct involvement of Rotary International ceased with the official handover of the project to the Centre for Distance Education at the University of Zimbabwe in February 1996. Interviews carried out with Litraid teachers by John Pettit of the Open University are strongly indicative of the success of the project so far. The Litraid program for 1996 has more than 500 applicants so far and the course has not yet been advertised in the press.

The interviews conducted by John Pettit indicate, too, that teachers who have not been on the Litraid programme will come under strong pressure to make their teaching more interactive. The reason for this is that in 1996, the pupils (approximately 40,000 of them) who experienced the benefit of having exposure to teachers engaged in Litraid, will be less than tolerant of entering the class of a teacher who still teaches in the 'old ways'. A summative evaluation is planned for a year hence when it is hoped that Joseph Gate will return to Zimbabwe as a Rotary Foundation volunteer in order to assess whether there has been any regression in the daily practice of teachers who have completed the program.

3. CONCLUSION

The success of the Litraid project has been not so much a recognition of teachers' ability as it has of the potential of children in Zimbabwe. The teachers confess in the interview material collected as early as the pilot project that they found the introduction of talk, especially talk in English, very difficult, but it is plain that their difficulties drove them into more and more participative forms of teaching, to the point that the children who were less able could be helped by their peers.

The most beneficial form of recognition for teachers has not only been the metalingual problem alluded to earlier, but the recognition that the silent child in the silent classroom is endowed with a wealth of language ability and potential which a teacher can harness to impel the lesson forward in innovative ways. As Hart et al (1977) put it so long ago:

"Young children come to school from a very successful language program - very few indeed have failed to develop a remarkably sophisticated and efficient functional oral language system. They are effective language users in the oral form - they have been and are still highly successful language learners. They have learned through speaking and listening."

(Hart et al., 1977, p.120)

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