The Understanding of Literacy by Selected University of Zambia Undergraduate Students

by

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Abstract

This paper emerged from a field research aimed at establishing the understanding of the term literacy by selected University of Zambia undergraduate students. Data was collected through face to face interviews with 24 students randomly drawn from ten schools of the University of Zambia. Although students were randomly selected, there was an exclusion criteria used where students who were studying on a literacy and language programme were not involved on this study as they knew much about literacy already. In qualitative research, interview is a method of data collection that require a researcher to ask direct questions to the respondents. The data collected was analyzed thematically with the help of the constructivist theory where emerging constructive information was treated as it was presented by respondents. The findings revealed that most students at the University of Zambia knew literacy as reading and writing. Very few mentioned other forms of literacies such as information literacy, computer literacy, financial literacy, legal literacy and functional literacy. The study recommended that, although students across the university were studying in various fields, they should find time to understand certain forms of literacies such as computer literacy, financial literacy and media.

Keywords: Literacy, Initial literacy, Conventional literacy, Critical Literacy, multiliteracies

1. Introduction

The concept of literacy would at first glance seem to be a term that everyone understands but at the same time, it has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways (Mkandawire, 2018). People's notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values and personal experiences (Barton, 2007). Personal experiences help them reconstruct reality to make meaning, a phenomenon called constructivism (Nkhata, Mkandawire, Nachiyunde, Phiri-Nalube, Kaani, Mulenga,Phiri, Chileshe, Sichula, Sikayomya, Munachaka, Banda, Mulauzi, Serenje-Chipindi, and Chipindi, 2019). The focus of this study was to establish the University of Zambia Students' understanding of the term literacy and to determine forms or types of literacies that they knew.

In today's world, literacy as an emerging academic field of study is one of the complex terms to define. Mkandawire, Simooya and Monde (2019) contended that there are two major senses in which the world perceive the concept of literacy. The first one is conventional literacy that has to do with reading and writing skills while the second one is a body of knowledge and skills in a field. These views were further reported by Barton (2007), who contended that conventional literacy has to do with reading and writing skills while literacy as a body of knowledge is confined to specialized skills found in different disciplines. Mwanza (2016;, 2017) and Mwansa (2017) perceived literacy as reading and writing which is a basis for a child to succeed in education. In the increasing complex world with rapidly changing social, environment and technological realms, literacy is the foundation of basic education (Mwansa, 2018). In modern world, literacy has multiple meanings ranging from awareness, skills, competence, abilities, access to information and knowledge possessed in a particular field. Literacy is not only a concern for major concern for Zambia but is also the focus of attention across the world and this is demonstrated in recent initiatives related

to literacy, in the attention paid to measuring levels of literacy and in the seriousness with which the outcomes from transnational tests are regarded. The two main reasons for seeing literacy as important are the links with economic stability and individual well-being. Again, however, definitions of what it means to be literate are evolving.

United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2013) stated that 'it had one mission statement focused as a forefront runner of global literacy efforts and dedicated to keep literacy high on national and international agendas.' There is reference to 'the uses of literacy' and acknowledge that these changes as technology change or advance: 'The uses of literacy for the exchange of knowledge are constantly evolving along with advances in technology ((UNESCO, 2013). In this regard, from the internet services to text messaging, the ever-wide availability of communication makes for greater social and political participation. A literate community is a dynamic community, one that exchange ideas and engages in debate. Iliteracy, however, is an obstacle to a better quality of life, and can even breed exclusion and violence. As part of its brief, UNESCO maintains statistics on levels literacy across the world both from developing and developed countries.

1.1 Focus of the study

This study sought to establish the understanding of literacy by the University of Zambia undergraduate students. The study further wanted to ascertain the form or types of literacies that the undergraduate students at the institution knew. The University of Zambia is one of the highest tertially institutions of learning in Zambia (Mkandawire and Ilon, 2018). In order to collect the data on this study, specific research questions for the study were formulated and these have been presented in the next section.

1.2 Research Questions

This study wanted to answer the following research questions:

1). What was the understanding of literacy by University of

Zambia undergraduate students?

2). What types or forms of literacies did students at the University of Zambia know.

1.3 The Constructivist Theory

This study was motivated by the constructivist theory which purport that knowledge is constructed by members of the community, Manchishi (2013) and Mwanza (2018) observed that the constructivist theory help people make their own meaning from their experiences. Furthermore, the concept of constructivism is interpreted and applied in various disciplines.

The major position of constructivism is that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When people encounter something new, they reconcile it with their previous ideas and experience, maybe changing what they believe, or may be discarding the new information as irrelevant.

The constructivist theory was based on the premise that when people meet new information outside their comfort zone, they tend to create reality or meaning of their own. Therefore, in understanding how UNZA students conceptualise literacy, this theory was ideal for this study. Brinkley and Kelly (2003) noted that literate readers actively construct meaning in context and these people employ various reading strategies to cope up with daily demands. Such readers have positive attitudes towards reading and read for the purposes of recreation and information acquisition. Meaning is constructed in the interaction between reader and text, as well as social contexts of particular situations. Reading implies that the reader brings with him or her a repertoire of knowledge, skills, cognitive and metacognitive literacy strategies. These skills are well situated in the constructivist theory as explained in this section.

2. Method

This was a qualitative study as data was collected through face to face interviews with 24 undergraduate students of the University of Zambia. According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2015: 149) as cited by Mkandawire (2019) stated that "the research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest". This view is supported by Cohen (2007) and Yin (2011:133) who stressed that "all interviews involve interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviews as method of data collection was used because it was more appropriate on talking and probing them about what they know. The study employed simple random sampling to select the ten named schools of the University of Zambia out of the thirteen existing schools of the institution. Simple random was also used to select 24 undergraduate students of the same institution.

2.1 Exclusion

Although students were randomly selected across schools, there was an exclusion criteria used for some students from the school of education that were studying literacy related programmes such as Bachelor of Education in Literacy and Language, and Bachelor of Adult Education because they knew much about literacy already.

2.2 Inclusion

Any undergraduate student who was not studying literacy programmes or literacy related courses within the University of Zambia was eligible for the study. This included those students found in schools where literacy related programmes were prominent such as scchool of education.

3. Findings and Discussions

The findings and discussion of this study are presented according to research questions and themes gotten from the data coupled with constructed realities from field information. The research questions that this research sought to understand were as follows (1)

What was the understanding of the term literacy by the University of Zambia students? (2) How many forms or types of literacies did students at the University of Zambia thought existed? The data collected from these two research questions is presented below in subsequent themes.

3.1 *Understanding of literacy by the University of Zambia undergraduate students*

This research question sought students' understanding of the term literacy at the University of Zambia. When researchers asked what they understood by the concept of literacy, one student stated that "literacy is being enlightened". Another one said,; "literacy is having knowledge about something". A third student said; "literacy is someone's skill set of understanding things". A fourth student explained that "the term literacy is diverse because others think of literacy as knowledge that relates to a specified subject". Defining literacy as knowledge in a field is supported by Barton (2007), who contended that literacy refers to a body of knowledge about a particular subject matter. The views were also supported by Mkandawire (2017) who perceived literacy as knowledge individuals possess in a particular field. This imply that some students at the University of Zambia understood literacy as knowledge that an individual possess in a particular field.

As exemplified by Greek Enlightenment during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. The literacy thesis posits that literacy gave rise to the skepticism that became an unstoppable motive for development. The literacy thesis originally pitched by Havelock's 1963 "The consequences of literacy'' proposes that literacy not only drives but is the essential park for intellectual development (Halverson 1992: 301). A number of university of Zambia students also associate literacy with enlightenment, it was reported that some students defined literacy as "being enlightened", this definition shows that some UNZA students fully understood and had clear awareness of what literacy means and how it can drive civilization.

Seventeen (17) students out of twenty four (24) that were interviewed defined literacy as either knowing how to read or write or both. They reported that "literacy is the ability to read and write". This definition was supported by other previous studies such as The Zambia National Literacy Frame Work (2013) which reported literacy and reading and writing skills. In addition, Kelly, (1996: 37) defined the term "literacy" to refer to "the ability to read and write". The definitions in the discussion was reported by a number of students and this was reported according to the findings in the previous findings. Defining literacy is a traditional way of looking at literacy which is conventional in nature. Literacy in the modern world is perceived in this sense only but includes other forms of knowledge.

Furthermore, three other students reported that literacy as 'the ability to communicate through writing'' and some students reported noted that literacy has to do with having special skills and they reported that "literacy is having a skill acquired at school or naturally''. Some students reported that " literacy is being exposed to the world''. All the mentioned definitions of literacy are vital and valid as they have been previously supported by other studies. For example, Banda (2000), stated that the definition of literacy is in some cases largely dependent on the two terms, "education" and "school". The understanding is that whoever does not go through schooling has no education and, therefore has no literacy. The university of Zambia students also associate literacy with schooling by rising the notions of, being able so solve basic mathematics and also being able to acquire level of education after high school. Some students reported that "Literacy is being able to solve basic mathematics", while others said "Literacy refers to being able to acquire a certain level of education after high school". These two notions have given rise to the situation where other non- school forms of education are called adult literacy, a term Graham-Brown (1991:1) describes as " a convenient hook to hang what are cheaper forms of education provision". This implies that the respondents understand the concept

of literacy and relate it well to the environment around them and schooling.

Margeret (1993:1) attempted to respond to the question "what is literacy?" she noted that the term literacy is 'very rarely carefully defined, ideas'. In the preface of her book, she stated that:

> *Literacy offers us access to information, ideas, opinions and by creating the potential for reflecting, provides opportunities for making and communicating meaning and for learning.*

In line with Margarets' definition on literacy, the respondents also associate literacy to the following: *"Literacy is understanding others without causing arguments;, Literacy is being able to understand and apply some principle".*

The above definitions of literacy show that the university of Zambia students understand the broad view of the meaning of literacy because it is evident from the data that students understand literacy as a tool that enables individuals to make meaning and to learn and one would argue, along with other scholars. In order to operate effectively within a society, individuals need to make sense of and understand the world in which they operate. In societies a great deal of information is required and societies present challenges, in order to make sense individuals are required to reflect on them in order to communicate with others and to learn.

Literacy is a term that has a number of definitions. In some cases, the definition of literacy is linked to the official language of a country, which in African countries is the foreign language. This is following a student who during an interview reported that, "Literacy is being able to speak 8 international languages like Trevor Noah" this definition has no clear statistical figures. Global figures on literacy level are noted as both unreliable and hard to interpret, (Holmarsdottir, 2001). However, It is also assumed that literacy statistics for Africa "do not include persons who are literate in other languages other than the official languages" which are French, Spanish, English and Portuguese, to be specific, (Arnove

and Graff. 1992: 285). While this finding is supported by literature, it is debatable to argue that the number of international languages a person knows is equivalent to literacy. Despite this, the findings showed that UNZA students were aware of the term literacy even though others had a narrow view of literacy than others.

Literacy was also defined as "*being able to communicate to others*". Other definitions given during the interviews were as follows; "*Literacy is being able to communicate in a certain language, literacy is being wise in analyzing issues*", another student reported that, *"literacy is having wisdom and knowledge"*, while another one stated that, literacy is being able to know the law of country. Furthermore, another student associated literacy with business and reported that, *"literacy is being able to run a business",* lastly, one student reported that, *"literacy is being able to do a thing in order for you to survive"*. Other definitions of literacy from students were as follows:

> *Literacy is being able to operate a computer. Literacy is being able to come up with decisions that everyone understands and follow. Literacy is right reasoning. Literacy is being able to speak 8 international languages like Trevor Noah. Literacy refers to being able to acquire a certain level of education after high school. Literacy is the ability to understand human rights. Literacy is having some agricultural knowledge and do something about it. Literacy is being able to count. Literacy is being cultural alert. Literacy is the ability to analyze different subjects. Literacy is being able to approximate appropriately. Literacy is being able to socialize with others. Literate is understanding other without causing arguments. Literacy is being able to solve basic mathematics. Literacy is being able to understand and apply some principle. Literacy is knowing how to sustain yourself. Literacy is the ability to interpret science*

These definitions suggests that undergraduate students at the University of Zambia, understood the concept of literacy with

about three out of twenty four that exhibited ignorance of what the term meant. The three students indicated that they had heard about literacy before, but they were not certain what it meant.

3.2 Forms or Types of Literacies that University Of Zambia Students Thought Existed.

This research question sought to understand the types of literacies that students at the university of Zambia thought existed. With regards to the questions, the data was collected through personal interviews as explained in the methods section. The data presented below was collected from the interviews with UNZA students.

Eight of the twenty four students involved in the study reported that they were aware of what literacy meant but had no idea that literacy had types or other forms. For instance, one of the students said, "*I know that literacy has to do with reading and writing but I don't know the types or other names that go with it*". Another one said, "*Literacy is literacy, that's what I know*". Another student said; "*what do you mean by words that go with literacy or types or whatever…. I thought literacy is just reading and writing*". These students seem to know literacy but they are not aware of the types of forms of literacies.

About ten of the students interviewed mentioned several types of forms of literacies or words that were used with literacy. These students mentioned the following terms or forms of literacies: Computer literacy, Basic literacy, Financial literacy, Business literacy, Cultural literacy, Social literacy, Mathematical literacy and Initial literacy. The aforementioned forms of literacy were reported by the university of Zambia students including reading and writing as form of literacy. One of the students said, *" I have heard people talk about computer literacy, media literacy, business literacy and financial literacy. I hope that's what you call forms but these things am not sure what they mean"*. The other students reported the following forms as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Types/forms of literacy reported by students.

Forms/ types of Literacy reported	Number of Students mention
Computer literacy	9
Basic literacy	1
Financial literacy	4
Business literacy	3
Cultural literacy	2
Social literacy	1
Mathematical literacy	1
Information literacy	6
Basic literacy	3
Initial literacy	24
Reading and writing as a type of literacy	21

Note that some students mentioned more than one form of literacy.

As can be seen from the table above, the responses reported by the respondents when asked about any form of literacy that they knew during the research interviews were different, but the majority of students were aware of what literacy forms were, though there were many other forms of literacy that they did not mention.

Students that mentioned the existence of computer literacy were in agreement with Beyers (2008) who defined computer literacy as the ability to understand the concepts, terminologies, and operations that relate to the general computer use. The essential knowledge needed for one to function independently with a computer. This includes being able to solve and avoid problems, adapt to new situations, keep information organized and communicate effectively with other computer literate people. Furthermore, Mkandawire and Daka (2018) and Stigler, Gallimore and Hiebert (2000), discusses the concept of cultural literacy in various contexts. These authors stated that cultural literacy and cross

cultural literacy is one's ability to understanding and appreciating the similarities and differences in the customs, values and beliefs of one's own culture and the cultures of others (Mkandawire, 2015).

Understanding other cultures helps as understand ourselves even more deeply. Similarities between culture and cultures is applied in a variety of ways. For instance, with regard to text analysis, what a text means depends on what readers bring to the text and what they bring will depend on the background, training, values, traditions, beliefs of others, there is no culture that can survive or live on its own (Mkandawire, Simooya, and Monde, 2019).

Basic literacy has been discussed as well to refer to a type of knowledge that is expected to be known by everyone in a particular field. In the world today, people expects everyone to know basics of conventional literacy that is to know how to read and write. For example, everyone is expected to know how to read and write as a basic literacy skills. Students also mentioned Information literacy which refers to the ability to use information to access information, but some scholars like Foster (2013) equate information literacy with knowing how to use libraries and conclude that terms such as library instruction and bibliographic instruction are more appropriate than information literacy.

Social literacy was another form of literacy that was reported. In an effort to define the term "literacy" Williams (1990) begins by noting the social nature of literacy. He holds that to be literate has meant different things in different situations or social contexts. He further alluded that is possible to be literate in one context but not in the other.

Initial literacy, is a type of literacy that looks at the time or stage an individual learns or is expected to learn the basics or the process of acquiring basic skills in a particular field such as reading and writing in a particular field such as reading and writing in a particular language. It is critical foundation of conventional literacy as it has to do with knowing expected skills in a conventional manner (Mkandawire, 2012).

Critical literacy is a type of literacy that looks at the teaching of critical consciousness skills relating to an individual's ability to perceive social, political and economic oppression and to take action against the oppressive elements of the society, (Freire, 1970) and Mwanza (2016). Reading as form of literacy was supported by Constable et al

(2000:15) defined literacy by combining it with reading thus:

> *The terms reading and literacy are used jointly to convey a broad notion that includes the ability to reflect on reading and use reading experience as a tool for attaining individual and societal goals. Because written text is an important means for conveying the human experience of events, ideas, and emotions, the ability to read and reflect on reading maybe viewed as essential for individuals to understand themselves and their world more fully.*

Writing was another form of literacy reported by most of the respondents, however, Williams et al (1990) alluded to the assumption that there are three types of literacy identified relate to one another as one forms the base of the other. For instance, in a study conducted by Chileshe etal (2018) indicated that the term literacy was used to refer to the ability to read and write as the slogan found in many Primary Reading Program materials in Zambia say, we Speak what we Read and we Read what we Wright (Constable et al., 2000).

The term literacy is one that has been adopted by practitioners from a variety of backgrounds. A search of the literature identified several descriptions of other forms or types of literacies which were also mentioned by respondents in the study. These forms included literacy (Day ,1997), Economic Literacy (Whitehead, 1989), Electronic literacy (craver 1997), Information literacy (Kulthu 1991, Mutch 1997), Internet Literacy (Martin 1997), Multimedia literacy (Hofsteter 1995), political literacy (instate of Education 1993), Adult literacy (Mkandawire and Tambulukani, 2017), functional literacy (Silavwe, Mwewa, Mkandawire, 2019) Addo-Adeku, 1992), Scientific and technological literacy (Layton, 1994), Statistical literacy (Haack 1979), Teleliteracy (Bianculli 1992), critical literacy (Comber, 2001), and Visual Literacy (wild 1991).

An examination from the forms of literacy highlighted show that there are many forms and ways in which literacy can be applied supported by a number of different studies of which the respondents reported part of those they were familiar with and some came to learn of the varieties of literacy after an example was given, the above listed forms of literacy were not the only valid ones, there was more to the use of literacy and how it could be applied in different disciplines of the world.

Literacy demand that an individual should be able to demand, evaluate, interpret, analyze and understand the information at hand before using it (Mkandawire, 2019 a). Therefore, in relation to the research findings, most of the students at the University of Zambia were literate and knew something about literacy and their forms. This was evident from the data obtained in the field, which indicated that Students ability to evaluate, interpret, understand and use the concept of literacy by giving different definitions and various forms of literacy.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations of the Study

The conclusion and recommendations have been split into two sub headings as discussed below.

4.1 Conclusion

Undergraduate students of the University of Zambia defined literacy differently as illustrated in this article. Some defined it as knowledge in a particular field, while others as being able to speak more languages. It was noted that some students had challenges in identifying forms or types of literacies while others identified literacy types or forms such as computer literacy, basic literacy and initial literacy. In this article, an attempt has been made to provide the University of Zambia students understanding of the concept literacy and its forms.

4.2 Recommendations of the Study

The study made the following recommendations:

(i)   Undergraduate students of the University of Zambia should learn to understand the concept of literacy as it affects their lives on a daily basis.

(ii) Undergraduate students of the University of Zambia should also focus on broadening and deepening their understanding of literacy awareness by integrating and linking the concept of literacy to every field of study in the University.

(iii) Unza lecturers should also highlight issues of literacy to their undergraduate students in classes when they are teaching.

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