

LEARNER AND EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVES ON PRESCRIBED DRAMA: A CASE STUDY OF GRADE 10 XITSONGA HOME LANGUAGE IN LIMPOPO, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

This study investigated the drama book experiences of Grade 10 Xitsonga Home Language learners in the Mafarana Circuit, Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The purpose of the study was to explore the factors that influence Grade 10 Xitsonga Home Language learners' ability to effectively read, comprehend, and respond to drama-related questions, especially those not directly derived from the prescribed drama book titled *Ntsanzavalayi* by E.M. Zwane. Using a qualitative research approach and an exploratory case study design, the study employed non-probability purposive sampling to select one school, twelve Grade 10 learners, and two educators. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The study findings revealed that learners face significant challenges in engaging with the prescribed drama text. These include difficulties in relating to the cultural context of the drama, linguistic barriers due to complex vocabulary and textual errors in the book, and an over-reliance on provided summaries and answers, which inhibit critical thinking and independent analysis. Educators predominantly used textbook-driven, teacher-centered methods, which further limited learners' ability to respond creatively to unfamiliar drama questions.

Keywords: Drama education, Ntsanzavalayi, Xitsonga Home Language, learner experiences, pedagogical strategies, prescribed literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Along with human expression, literature and language expression are aspects of life, culture, and history (Mustakim, Mustapha & Lebar, 2018). According to Anggun (2018), language learners must simultaneously improve their speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities. Drama books that include summaries and Q&A exercises might thereby enhance students' writing abilities and reading comprehension (Musawenkosi, 2021). The drama genre is chosen for research because it may captivate people both academically and emotionally, which may facilitate researchers' ability to explain complicated ideas to larger audiences. According to the Department of Basic Education

(2011), teachers are free to choose literary works that promote engagement and critical thinking while also being appropriate for the students' developmental level and culturally relevant. In order to enhance their higher-order cognitive skills, students should be able to discuss and assess literature. According to Saneka and de Witt (2019), home language drama books promote classroom engagement by allowing students to interact with text messages through speaking and active listening.

According to Abaidoo (2018), a popular method for helping students understand drama books is to employ summaries and Q&A exercises in individual or group settings where students address what they don't understand about the genre. While question-and-answer sessions enhance students' verbal and cognitive abilities, summaries enhance their vocabulary, grammar, text structure, and awareness of plagiarism because students are encouraged to write summaries in their own words. However, many South African learners have a number of difficulties when learning to read for meaning in their mother tongue, especially those who are home language learners of African languages (Kim, 2020). The purpose of this study is to look into the variables that affect Grade 10 students' capacity to successfully and thoroughly respond to a range of drama-related questions outside of those included in E.M. Zwane's drama book *Ntsanzavalayi*. Manyike and Phatudi (2019) state that most students do well on theatrical assignments when they use the summaries and Q&A exercises from the required drama book. Even though theater is meant to foster creativity and critical thinking, the question-and-answer format may not adequately convey the breadth of the subject matter and promote the kind of active, interactive learning that occurs when studying drama.

Wardani and Aswir (2022) discovered the same issue as this study, stating that students' incapacity to read theater books with understanding stems from a lack of connection between what they read and what they already know. According to Abaidoo (2018), a lack of resources for teaching the subject, inadequate teacher instruction, improper use of theater teaching methodologies, and low self-esteem among students can all contribute to poor reading comprehension of drama books. As a result, students appear incapable of understanding exam questions that differ from those in their assigned theatrical book. This results in subpar performance in the drama section of the second paper exam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study takes an approach of exploring the experiences of Grade 10 Xitsonga Home Language learners in comprehending and responding to drama texts. The following themes were developed from the reviewed literature.

Challenges in Teaching Literature

Difficulties of Comprehending Language and Vocabulary in Literature

Like any other teaching strategy, there are drawbacks in teaching literature in the classroom. Mavhiza (2019) claims that drama is frustrating for lazy learners. Thus, for learners to improve,

various story-based drama activities should be continuously given to reluctant learners to evoke their interest in the drama book and inspire their activeness in learning drama through constructive meaning-making activities (Mavhiza, 2019). It is challenging for learners to comprehend some expressions in literature texts such as drama books beyond the literal meaning of words due to learners' unfamiliarity with the language and vocabulary used in such texts.

Inadequate Teaching Methods during Question-and-Answer Sessions

According to Kamali, Behjat and Bagheri (2020), during drama lessons, the use of the question-and-answer method can cause the class to become noisy as some learners might shout, scream, or laugh at others' responses. To foresee such circumstances, the instructor should be prepared to apply suitable methods to calm the students down and prevent them from turning the question-and-answer events into chaos. It is arguable, in the case of this study, that when teachers do not have the best strategies for teaching literature, they cannot successfully help learners discover their own mistakes and improve from them, as teachers themselves would not be aware of or skilful enough to help learners overcome literature learning challenges.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Grounded Theory (GT) of Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used in the study since it enables both educators and learners to share their experiences regarding the topic or problem in question. This theory was relevant to the study as it allows for a deeper understanding of how learners interpret experience in their learning environment, promotes independence among participants, enables them to give different meanings and interpretations to the research questions, and involves inducing theory from data generated from participants. Thus, it enabled the researcher to build arguments using valid points justified by the participants' experiences. According to Allen (2023), this theory requires the researcher to spend time with the participants, observe them in authentic settings, and interview them in groups or individually. In the context of the study, GT theory was essential for understanding the learners' challenges and the overall impact of using drama-based materials for language learning. Thus, applying this theory in the study enabled the researcher to actively interact with the participants to learn more about their experiences and challenges of learning language using a drama book with summaries, questions, and answers.

4. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for educational research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from University of Limpopo's Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) (Ethical Clearance Certificate, project number: TREC/194/2025: PG) on the 19th of May 2025. Permission to conduct the research was secured from Limpopo Department of Basic Education, the Mopani West District, and the Mafarana Circuit office, as well as from the principal of the participating school. Written informed consent was secured from both educators and the parents of the Grade 10 learners, with learners additionally providing their own written assent. All participants were assured of their voluntary

participation and the right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences for their academic standing or employment. To protect participant identities, pseudonyms (L1–L12 for learners; E1–E2 for educators) were used throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting, and all identifying information about the school specific locations was removed. The researcher minimised potential discomfort by using respectful, non-judgmental language and allowing participants to skip questions they preferred not to answer.

The study employed a qualitative research method, a methodological stance well-supported by Allen (2023) who emphasises exploring the 'why' and 'how' questions regarding a phenomenon. This method enabled the study to explore the experiences of Grade 10 Xitsonga Home Language learners as they comprehended and responded to drama texts. This study used an explorative case study design, which was relevant for limiting focus to the selected population and subsequent sample whose experiences may differ and yield different answers to the research questions, while exploring Grade 10 learners' experiences in comprehending and responding to drama texts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The study employed a non-probability sampling method and applied purposive sampling to select one school due to its accessibility to the researcher. Specifically, 12 learners and 2 educators were selected to participate, allowing for a deep exploration of their individual experiences and challenges in relation to drama texts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, enabling participants to express their experiences fully. According to Michelle, Kiger and Lara (2020), inductive thematic analysis is a technique for categorising, examining, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes'). An inductive thematic data analysis was used to organise the data obtained from semi-structured interviews.

Direct quotations are presented extensively in the findings section to demonstrate that themes emerged from participant experiences, not from researcher bias. The researcher's position as an external investigator without prior involvement in teaching Xitsonga drama at the selected school further supported neutrality. The coding and theme generation process followed an inductive thematic analysis approach, informed by the study's qualitative framework. The researcher familiarised themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to understand learners' comprehension patterns, responses to drama texts, and expressed experiences. Thus, the coding and theme generation process enabled the researcher to systematically analyse the semi-structured interview data and uncover how Grade 10 Xitsonga Home Language learners experience comprehending and responding to drama texts. The researcher read the transcripts while listening to the recordings to ensure transcription accuracy and to become familiar with the data. Field notes taken during interviews were integrated into the transcripts to capture non-verbal cues, classroom experiences, and contextual observations. During this stage, preliminary ideas, recurring concepts, and noteworthy statements were noted in the margins of the transcripts. The researcher carefully examined each transcript line by line to identify meaningful units of information related to learners' experiences of comprehending and responding to drama texts. Themes emerged by exploring the relationships between the categories and by discovering overarching patterns that addressed the research goals driving the study. Themes conveyed

reoccurring meanings about how learners experienced and understood the process of understanding and responding to theater texts. At this step categories were refined, amalgamated or reorganised until clear themes emerged. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with Grade 10 Xitsonga Home Language learners was examined using thematic analysis. The process was inductive and interpretative. The coding process involves numerous systematic phases to assure trustworthiness, consistency and meaningful interpretation of the participants' experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as established in qualitative research. The credibility of this study was strengthened by the long-term engagement with the selected school and the use of direct quotations from the learners and educators to ensure that the findings reflected the voice of the participants accurately. Transferability was addressed by providing a thick description of the research context, including the specific circuit (Mafarana, Mopani West), the grade (10), the language (Xitsonga Home Language), and the prescribed drama book (Ntsandzavalayi), allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was established through a clear and auditable research process, including the documentation of the purposive sampling strategy, the semi-structured interview protocol, and the step-by-step inductive thematic analysis procedure (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Finally, confirmability was achieved by grounding all interpretations in the raw data (interview transcripts) rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The interview questions findings are presented in this section, based on semi-structured interviews conducted with Grade 10 Xitsonga Home Language learners and their educators. Following the inductive thematic analysis approach described by Michelle, Kiger and Lara (2020), several interconnected themes emerged from the data. These include learners' difficulties in relating to the cultural context of the drama (Mavhiza, 2019), linguistic barriers caused by complex vocabulary and textual errors (Mbokodi & Madiba, 2019), over-reliance on summaries and memorised answers (Abaidoo, 2018), and the predominance of teacher-centered, transmission-based pedagogies (Kamali, Behjat & Bagheri, 2020). The impact of these challenges on learner performance and self-confidence is also explored, alongside educators' reflections on their teaching methods and proposed strategies for improvement. The following subsections present direct quotations from participants to illustrate these themes in detail.

Data from Learners' Interviews

The following questions were asked regarding the challenges learners encounter in learning drama and their impact.

What challenges do you experience when learning drama?

L1: *"I can't relate to the story because the setting and problems are from a long time ago. It's hard for me to understand why the characters make certain choices because their world is so different from mine. The book doesn't help me make that connection."*

L3: *"The mistakes in the book are the hardest part for me. There are a lot of spelling mistakes, and sometimes the sentences don't make sense."*

L4: *"The language in this book, Ntsandzavalayi, is too heavy for me. The words aren't the ones we use every day. I must stop at every sentence to try to figure out what it means, and by the end of the page, I forget what the story is about. It feels like reading a different language when reading alone."*

L5: *"The questions in the book are hard. They don't simply ask 'what happened'; they also ask, 'why do you think this happened?' or 'what does this mean?'. I can't even start to think about the 'why' because I can't understand the 'what'."*

The responses to the interview question on challenges in learning drama reveal an important relationship between language, cultural relevance, and literary comprehension among learners. Although learners identified different obstacles ranging from dated settings to textual errors their explanations provide deeper evidence that the core difficulty is not a lack of effort or interest, but a breakdown in meaning-making. Statements such as “the setting and problems are from a long time ago; their world is so different from mine” (L1) indicate that learners are actively trying to relate to the text but are unable to bridge the temporal and cultural gap. Similarly, L4’s comment that the language is “too heavy” and “not the words we use every day” forces them to “stop at every sentence,” causing them to forget the story by the end of the page. This suggests that when dramatic texts are disconnected from learners lived realities and everyday vocabulary, cognitive engagement diminishes, and comprehension becomes fragmented. Such responses support sociocultural perspectives of learning, which argue that knowledge construction is strengthened when learners engage with content through familiar linguistic and cultural mediums. The inability to follow the plot due to archaic language reflects higher-order failure not because learners lack analytical ability, but because linguistic load prevents basic narrative retention.

The learner responses also highlight how the sequence of questioning can expose or obscure true understanding. L5 explains, “They don’t simply ask ‘what happened’; they also ask, ‘why do you think this happened?’ I can’t even start to think about the ‘why’ because I can’t understand the ‘what’.” This indicates that the problem is not the nature of the questions themselves, but the prerequisite of basic comprehension learners may possess the capacity for critical thinking, but these higher-order skills remain inaccessible when surface-level understanding has not been secured. These findings support Cervetti and Wright (2020) argument that superficial adaptations are insufficient for meaningful learning; simply providing a text in a local language does not guarantee comprehension if the vocabulary remains archaic or the context

culturally remote. Similarly, they reinforce Nation's (2021) view that language and culture play a central role in teaching and learning. Learners' expressed frustrations demonstrate that errors in drama may reflect linguistic and cultural barriers rather than a lack of intellectual ability, and that meaningful literary understanding develops only when learners can read fluently, relate to characters' motivations, and discuss events in ways connected to their own realities.

Which factors contribute to the challenges you experience?

L1: *"The main problem is that the summaries are too short. They tell you what happened but not how or why it matters. It's like reading a news headline without the story."*

L2: *"The problem is that the questions in the book are the same every year, so our educator just makes us memorise the answers. But if the exam question is articulated differently, I fail because I never really understood what it meant."*

L7: *"The problem is that the questions make you think deeply, but the summaries and answers are only for surface-level learning. They don't match up."*

Learners L1, L2, and L7 collectively identify three interrelated factors that undermine drama comprehension. L1 points to insufficiently detailed summaries that provide plot outcomes without explanatory depth, describing them as "like reading a news headline without the story." L2 highlights the predictability of textbook questions, which remain unchanged year after year, leading educators to encourage memorisation rather than understanding; when examination questions are rephrased, L2 fails because genuine comprehension is absent. L7 adds a metacognitive observation that the cognitive demand of questions (requiring deep thinking) is mismatched with the surface-level nature of summaries and answer keys provided in textbooks. Together, these participants reveal that the challenges are not individual deficits but structural misalignments between teaching materials, assessment design, and the cognitive processes required for literary analysis.

The responses to this question reveal an important relationship between assessment design, cognitive demand, and learner dependency. Although learners identified different factors ranging from overly brief summaries to mismatched question types their explanations provide deeper evidence that the core problem is not the difficulty of the drama itself, but the structural misalignment between how content is summarised and how it is assessed. Statements such as "the summaries are too short... like reading a news headline without the story" (L1) indicate that learners recognise when surface-level information fails to support deeper understanding. Similarly, L7's observation that "the questions make you think deeply, but the summaries and answers are only for surface-level learning" shows that learners are aware of the cognitive gap they are expected to bridge without adequate scaffolding. This suggests that when teaching materials prioritise brevity over explanatory depth, learners are left with fragments of information that cannot support analytical tasks. The findings support Martin (2019) argument that superficial

teaching materials produce superficial learning, and reinforce Duke and Cartwright (2021) view that assessment design must encourage critical thinking rather than pattern recognition.

How do such challenges affect your performance?

L1: *"It affects me badly. I get low grades on literature tests. I can't answer essay questions about themes or characters because I don't understand them well enough."*

L2: *"I fail mostly on the drama section in Paper 2 examinations. When the exam has a question from Ntsandzavalayi, I just try to write anything based on what I remember from the summary, but it's never the right answer."*

L3: *"I hate Xitsonga Home Language. I feel so discouraged because I can't understand my own home language subject. It makes my overall average go down or sometimes fail because of failing home language, which is the mandatory subject to pass."*

L7: *"It makes me less sure of myself. I don't join class discussions about the drama because I'm afraid of saying something wrong."*

L8: *"I have to depend on cheating from others who might understand better, because I know I will fail if I depend on what I know."*

Learners L1, L2, L3, L7, and L8 describe a cascade of negative consequences stemming from unresolved comprehension difficulties. L1 reports low test grades and an inability to answer essay questions about themes or characters, directly linking surface understanding to assessment failure. L2 specifies that failure concentrates on the drama section of Paper 2 examinations, where reliance on memorised summaries proves useless, leading to random guessing. L3 expresses emotional and academic discouragement, stating hatred for Xitsonga Home Language, declining overall averages, and risk of failing the mandatory pass subject. L7 describes eroded self-confidence that prevents participation in class discussions due to fear of being wrong. L8 admits to academic dishonesty, depending on cheating from peers because self-reliance guarantees failure. Collectively, these responses demonstrate that drama comprehension difficulties do not remain isolated but infect academic performance, emotional well-being, classroom engagement, and ethical behaviour.

The responses to this question reveal an important relationship between ongoing struggles, learner identity, and academic outcomes. Although learners described different effects from low grades to emotional discouragement their explanations provide deeper evidence that the impact extends beyond poor test scores into self-concept and classroom behaviour. Statements such as "I get low grades on literature tests. I can't answer essay questions about themes or characters because I don't understand them well enough" (L1) indicate that surface-level comprehension directly blocks access to higher-order literary analysis. Furthermore, L3's statement, "I hate Xitsonga Home Language It makes my overall average go down or sometimes fail because of failing home language, which is the mandatory subject to pass," indicates that struggles in drama jeopardise overall academic progression and generate negative attitudes toward the subject and even the home

language itself. L7's comment about avoiding discussions and L8's admission of cheating reveal that these challenges erode confidence and push learners toward disengagement or academic dishonesty. These findings support sociocultural perspectives of learning, which argue that classroom environments must foster psychological safety and meaningful access. As Duke and Cartwright (2021), when learners cannot access content, they do not simply fail they withdraw, cheat, or develop lasting negative relationships with the subject.

How do educators help you to overcome the challenges you face regarding literature?

L1: *"The educator didn't help me at all. The educator would give out the work and then pick it up later to grade it."*

L2: *"The educator merely helped me by posting the right answers on the board so that everyone could copy them."*

L5: *"The educator didn't help me. The educator would give the class an assignment, and then they would pick it up later to grade it."*

L10: *"My educator did help, but only when we asked for it. If a lot of us questioned anything that was hard to comprehend, the educator would explain it to the whole class. We had to be brave enough to ask for this kind of help, but it worked."*

L12: *"The finest thing my educator did for us was tell us to work together in groups. The educator said we should study with our buddies. This way, we could talk about what we believed we knew and learn from each other."*

Learners L1, L2, L5, L10, and L12 present a divided picture of educator support. L1 and L5 report receiving no help whatsoever, with educators merely distributing assignments and collecting them for grading without any teaching intervention. L2 describes a marginally more helpful but still inadequate approach: posting correct answers on the board for copying, which produces memorisation without understanding. L10 offers a contrasting but conditional positive experience: the educator helped when learners asked, explaining difficult concepts to the whole class if multiple students questioned them; however, this required learners to be "brave enough" to seek help. L12 reports the most effective support: the educator encouraged group work and studying with buddies, enabling peer discussion and co-construction of knowledge. These responses indicate that meaningful support is rare, reactive, and dependent on learner assertiveness, whereas passive or answer-transmission approaches dominate.

The responses to this question reveal an important relationship between pedagogical practices, learner agency, and the effectiveness of support. Although some learners described receiving help, their explanations provide deeper evidence that much of the assistance offered was passive, reactive, or insufficient for building genuine understanding. Statements such as "The educator didn't help me at all. The educator would give out the work and then pick it up later to grade it" (L1, L5) indicate that for many learners, the educator functioned primarily as an assigner and evaluator rather than as a facilitator of learning. In contrast, L12 describes proactive support: "The

finest thing my educator did for us was tell us to work together in groups, we could talk about what we believed we knew and learn from each other.” This response supports sociocultural perspectives of learning, which argue that knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and peer interaction. However, L10’s observation that help required learners to be “brave enough” to ask reveals a critical flaw: struggling learners, who already lack confidence (as seen in L7’s response), are the least likely to request help. These findings reinforce Mkhize and Mtsi (2021) view that effective teaching requires deliberate, structured, and proactive strategies rather than answer-giving or passive assignment distribution.

What methods do educators use to teach drama?

L3: *"The lessons in drama were just like the lessons in writing. The educator largely used the 'chalk-and-talk' method. They would write a summary of the story on the board, and we had to jot it down in our notes. I never did any acting, read aloud, or talked about why characters do what they do."*

L8: *"The style of instruction was by itself peaceful. During class, we were constantly told to read the play on our own. After we read quietly for a while, the educator would ask us specific, factual questions to see if we got the story. The method completely ignored the essence of drama, which is to work together and put on a show."*

Learners L3 and L8 provide aligned critiques of instructional approaches that ignore drama’s generic essence. L3 describes a “chalk-and-talk” method where the educator writes story summaries on the board for learners to copy into notebooks; there is no acting, no reading aloud, and no discussion of character motivations. L8 adds that instruction was “peaceful” but passive learners read the play silently on their own, followed by the educator asking factual comprehension questions. L8 explicitly names what is missing: “the essence of drama, which is to work together and put on a show.” Both participants indicate that drama is taught as if it were prose or poetry, stripped of performance, collaboration, oral reading, and interpretive discussion. The methods prioritise individual silent reading and factual recall, which contradicts the collaborative, embodied, and interpretive nature of the genre.

The responses to this question reveal an important relationship between teaching methods, the nature of drama as a genre, and learner engagement. Although learners described different instructional approaches, their explanations provide deeper evidence that the methods used largely ignored the performative and interactive essence of drama. Statements such as “the educator largely used the ‘chalk-and-talk’ method. I never did any acting, read aloud, or talked about why characters do what they do” (L3) indicate that drama was taught as though it were prose fiction or poetry through summary, transcription, and silent reading. Similarly, L8’s observation that “the method completely ignored the essence of drama, which is to work together and put on a show” shows that learners themselves recognise the mismatch between instructional methods and the genre’s demands. These findings support sociocultural perspectives of learning, which argue that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and embodied activity. Providing access to a

text is insufficient; learners need pedagogical approaches that align with the text's genre. Msimango (2021) emphasises that culturally grounded teaching practices include recognising that different genres demand different instructional strategies. Teaching drama without acting or discussion preserves the written artifact but destroys the living experience necessary for comprehension.

Do summaries, questions, and answers provided in books help you in learning drama? How?

L1: *"The answers and descriptions didn't help me learn about drama. They just helped folks remember the proper answers to the right questions. I think that remembering the truth is very different from really getting the ideas, characters, and artistic purpose of the drama."*

L2: *"No, the book's materials didn't help me learn. They were like a 'shortcut that doesn't lead anywhere.' They gave me answers that made me feel safe, so I assumed I knew what I was talking about. But this illusion made me think I understood the story's plot, emotions, and deeper meaning when I really didn't."*

L4: *"The resources weren't helpful at all. The only time they would help was when the test question was the same as one in the book, which never happened. I realised that the test questions made me think more deeply and critically, while the book's questions were more about facts."*

Learners L1, L2, and L4 unanimously reject the usefulness of textbook materials for genuine learning, while offering nuanced explanations of why. L1 distinguishes between remembering correct answers and truly understanding ideas, characters, and artistic purpose; the materials only serve the former. L2 employs vivid imagery, calling the materials "a shortcut that doesn't lead anywhere," and warns of an "illusion" of understanding learners feel safe and confident but cannot transfer knowledge to unfamiliar questions. L4 adds that the materials are only helpful when test questions exactly match textbook questions, "which never happened," and recognises that examination questions demand deeper critical thinking while textbook questions focus on factual recall. Collectively, these responses indicate that textbook materials not only fail to teach but actively mislead learners into overestimating their comprehension, creating a false confidence that collapses under authentic assessment.

The responses to this question reveal an important relationship between textbook design, learner perception, and the illusion of understanding. Although learners unanimously agreed that the materials did not help them genuinely learn, their explanations provide deeper evidence that these resources actively create a false sense of competence. Statements such as "the answers and descriptions didn't help me learn about drama. They just helped folks remember the proper answers to the right questions" (L1) indicate that learners can distinguish between rote memorisation and genuine comprehension, even when teaching materials blur that line. Similarly, L2's description that "this illusion made me think I understood the story's plot, emotions, and deeper meaning when I really didn't" shows that learners are aware of being misled by resources that prioritise answer provision over conceptual development. L4's observation that "the test questions made me think more deeply and critically, while the book's questions were more about

facts” reveals a fundamental misalignment between textbook assessment and examination assessment. These findings strongly support Msimango (2021) argument that surface-level resources produce surface-level learning that collapses under pressure, and that materials must be designed for meaning-making, not memorisation

Educators' interview

How do you prepare your Xitsonga drama lessons?

E1: *"Before I teach a section, I read the chapter or act again. After I finish that chapter in the book, I carefully look over the questions and activities at the end. I use these parts of the book to give an overview of the complete lesson."*

The educator response reveals an important relationship between lesson preparation, textbook dependency, and the limits of teacher guidance. Although the educator describes a structured routine, the explanation provides deeper evidence that preparation is text-centred rather than learner-centred. The statement, “Before I teach a section, I read the chapter or act again. After I finish that chapter in the book, I carefully look over the questions and activities at the end. I use these parts of the book to give an overview of the complete lesson” (E1), indicates that the textbook’s end-of-chapter questions function as the primary, if not sole, framework for lesson design. This suggests that the educator is not designing learning experiences based on learner needs, misconceptions, or developmental levels, but is instead outsourcing pedagogical decisions to the textbook publisher. Such an approach may produce lessons that are efficient to plan but misaligned with the deep comprehension learners have already reported lacking.

This response also highlights a missed opportunity for diagnostic or responsive teaching. By using textbook questions to “give an overview,” the educator assumes that those questions appropriately map onto what learners need to understand. However, learner responses elsewhere in this data (L1, L2, L4, L7) consistently report that textbook questions are too factual, too leading, or mismatched with examination demands. This disconnect between educator preparation and learner experience supports sociocultural perspectives of learning, which argue that effective teaching requires ongoing negotiation between content, learners, and context. fidelity to a flawed textbook is not pedagogical responsibility it is pedagogical abdication. Reeves and Muller (2020) similarly emphasises that educators must adapt materials to their learners’ linguistic and cultural realities, not merely transmit whatever the textbook provides.

What teaching methods do you use in your drama lessons?

E1: *"I mainly teach in a fashion that is typical of educators, with the instructor at the centre. This means I must give a lesson to the full class to explain the plot of the part they are studying. After this explanation, I use a question-and-answer method from the textbook to check if the learners comprehended what they heard and remembered it."*

The educator response reveals an important relationship between teacher-centred instruction, the question-and-answer method, and the erosion of critical thinking. Although the educator presents

a coherent sequence, the explanation provides deeper evidence that the methods used directly contradict the requirements of drama as a genre. The statement, “I mainly teach in a fashion that is typical of educators, with the instructor at the centre. This means I must give a lesson to the full class to explain the plot of the part they are studying. After this explanation, I use a question-and-answer method from the textbook to check if the learners comprehended what they heard and remembered it” (E1), indicates that instruction prioritises transmission and recall over exploration and interpretation. The phrase “comprehended what they heard and remembered it” is particularly revealing because it equates comprehension with auditory memory, ignoring the need for learners to analyse, infer, connect, or question.

This response also highlights how the question-and-answer method, as implemented, likely tests only surface-level retention. Because the educator uses questions “from the textbook” and learners have already reported that textbook questions are leading or overly factual (L7, E1’s own admission elsewhere), this method cannot diagnose deeper misconceptions. Furthermore, there is no mention of performance, role-play, group discussion, or any activity that leverages drama’s embodied, collaborative nature. These findings support Reeves and Muller (2020) argument that dominant pedagogical methods often prioritise teacher convenience over learner comprehension. Teaching Xitsonga literature requires methods that honour the oral and performative traditions embedded in African language literatures. A chalk-and-talk, question-and-answer approach to drama is not merely ineffective it is pedagogically inappropriate for the genre

What challenges do you encounter when teaching Xitsonga Home Language literature?

E1: *"I put a lot of responsibility on the way the textbook resources are developed. The summaries are too brief, and the questions are too leading, which means that the solutions are already given, and the learner doesn't have to think critically about the content. This design, even if it isn't meant to, makes people lazy in school."*

E2: *"I will talk about two big problems. The first is that learners are completely dependent on and need the summaries and answer keys. This dependence leads to a culture of looking for shortcuts, which makes it hard to really absorb the topic. The second problem is the big language barrier. The formal, old-fashioned Xitsonga used in the drama is quite different from the everyday language that learners speak, which makes it hard to understand from the start."*

The educators’ responses reveal an important relationship between textbook design, learner dependency, and linguistic distance. Although both educators identify different challenges, their explanations provide deeper evidence that the roots of difficulty lie in structural features of the materials and the language gap between home and school. E1 states, “The summaries are too brief, and the questions are too leading, which means that the solutions are already given, and the learner doesn’t have to think critically... This design, even if it isn’t meant to, makes people lazy in school.” This indicates that the educator recognises how textbook design actively discourages critical thinking by providing answers alongside questions. However, framing the consequence as

learner “laziness” may obscure the deeper issue: when materials remove the need to think, learners adapt to that environment, but the fault lies first with the design, not the learner.

E2 provides a complementary but distinct diagnosis: “The first is that learners are completely dependent on and need the summaries and answer keys. This dependence leads to a culture of looking for shortcuts... The second problem is the big language barrier. The formal, old-fashioned Xitsonga used in the drama is quite different from the everyday language that learners speak.” This response directly aligns with learner reports (L4 in previous data describing language as “too heavy”). Together, these educator responses support sociocultural perspectives of learning, which argue that learning environments shape learner behaviour. Dependency and shortcut-seeking are rational responses to materials that reward memorisation over understanding. As Yosuf and Makhuzeni (2020) argues, direct translation or archaic vocabulary does not constitute meaningful access. Makhuzeni (2020) also emphasises that when the language of instruction is distant from learners’ spoken language, comprehension fractures at the most basic level, making all higher-order goals unattainable

What strategies can be used to help learners overcome drama challenges in Xitsonga Home Language?

E1: *"I suggest that we stop relying only on the questions in the textbook. I propose making activities that are more fun and personalised, such as 'scavenger hunts' where learners must identify statements in the text that show what kind of person a certain character is. I also suggest having learners work in groups where each group is responsible for understanding and explaining a chapter to the rest of the class."*

E2: *"I push for two important strategic improvements. The first is that learners must do things like play out scenarios as part of their presentation. This brings the narrative to life and gives you a deep grasp of the characters' motivations and conflicts. The second technique is to teach analytical vocabulary directly to learners. This means telling them what words like 'theme,' 'symbol,' and 'characterise' imply and how to answer questions that use these phrases."*

The educators’ responses reveal an important relationship between proposed strategies, active learning, and the explicit teaching of analytical language. Although both educators offer different suggestions, their explanations provide deeper evidence that effective solutions must move beyond textbook dependency and toward embodied, collaborative, and vocabulary-focused instruction. E1 proposes “making activities that are more fun and personalised, such as ‘scavenger hunts’ where learners must identify statements in the text that show what kind of person a certain character is” and “having learners work in groups where each group is responsible for understanding and explaining a chapter to the rest of the class.” These suggestions indicate an understanding that drama requires active engagement, textual evidence collection, and peer teaching all of which contrast sharply with the passive, individual, summary-based methods currently used. The scavenger hunt, in particular, transforms reading from a solitary chore into an investigative, purposeful activity.

E2 pushes for two complementary strategies: “learners must do things like play out scenarios as part of their presentation. This brings the narrative to life and gives you a deep grasp of the characters’ motivations and conflicts” and “teach analytical vocabulary directly to learners what words like ‘theme,’ ‘symbol,’ and ‘characterise’ imply and how to answer questions that use these phrases.” These responses directly address two previously identified gaps: the absence of performance (noted by L3 and L8) and the difficulty with higher-order questions (noted by L5). By advocating for role-play and direct vocabulary instruction, E2 recognises that learners cannot answer “why” questions if they do not understand the words used to ask those questions. These findings strongly support Msimango (2021) argument that meaningful learning requires both culturally relevant activity and explicit language development.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the systematic and interconnected nature of the issues with Xitsonga theatrical instruction and learning in the Mafarana Circuit. Instead of being the product of a single flaw, they are the outcome of a perfect storm of contributing factors. Learners are at an immediate and demoralizing disadvantage since they begin the cycle with a required textbook that is often linguistically confusing and full of errors. This is fundamentally out of step with the interpretative and participative aspects of dramatic literature, and it is made worse by a teaching approach that is primarily transmission-based, relying on passive knowledge transfer and rote memorization. Because of this, learners' engagement with the book remains superficial and is more focused on passing exams than on understanding or enjoying it. The result is a deeply embedded loop of subpar performance, disengagement, and bad morale. A coordinated, multifaceted approach that considers curriculum resources, educator development, classroom practice, and structural support is therefore required to solve this issue.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

To break this cycle and create a more fruitful and significant engagement with Xitsonga drama, the following specific recommendations are put forth:

Replace or revise the prescribed drama text, *Ntsandzavalayi*

The Department of Basic Education should establish a systematic review process for all prescribed literature texts to ensure linguistic accessibility (using everyday Xitsonga rather than archaic, formal language), cultural relevance (settings and conflicts that learners can relate to), and factual accuracy (free from spelling errors and nonsensical sentences). A moratorium on the current text should be considered while suitable alternatives are identified.

Shift from teacher-centered to interactive, performance-based pedagogy

Educators must replace "chalk-and-talk" methods with drama-appropriate strategies including role-playing, hot seating, Readers' Theatre, and tableaux vivants (frozen scenes). Lesson plans should mandate at least one performance or collaborative activity per drama lesson, moving

learners beyond silent reading and summary copying toward embodied engagement with characters and conflicts.

Replace textbook summaries with scaffolded explanatory materials

Schools and educators should develop or adopt supplementary resource packs that include chapter-by-chapter explanatory notes (not just brief summaries), learner-friendly glossaries of archaic Xitsonga terms, and higher-order questions with modelled answers that demonstrate the process of analysis rather than providing final answers only.

Teach analytical vocabulary explicitly and systematically

Educators must dedicate specific instructional time to teaching the meaning of analytical terms such as "theme," "symbol," "characterise," "motivation," and "conflict," including how to interpret and answer examination questions that use these terms. This should include side-by-side comparisons of factual versus analytical questions with guided practice.

Promote collaborative learning as a structured classroom practice

Rather than occasional group work, educators should implement cooperative learning models such as the Jigsaw Method and Literature Circles, where each group member has specific responsibilities, and groups are accountable for explaining chapters or scenes to the rest of the class. These addresses learners stated preference for peer learning while building individual accountability.

Provide drama-specific professional development for Xitsonga educators

Teacher training workshops must move beyond general CAPS orientation to focus specifically on drama pedagogy, including modelling of performance-based strategies, explicit comprehension instruction (e.g., Think-Aloud Protocols), and strategies for bridging formal literary Xitsonga with learners' everyday spoken Xitsonga.

Establish Professional Learning Communities for Xitsonga literature teachers

The Department of Basic Education should facilitate regular, structured meetings for Xitsonga educators within circuits to share successful lesson ideas, analyse common learner errors, collaboratively design higher-order questions, and develop contextually relevant supplementary materials.

Reform drama assessment to prioritise critical thinking over factual recall

School-based assessments and examination question design should reduce reliance on questions that can be answered through memorised summaries. Instead, assessments should require learners to cite textual evidence, explain character motivations, compare themes, and respond to unfamiliar phrasings of questions, aligning with the critical thinking demands already present in external examinations.

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