



# Student teachers' reflections on semiotics in Grade 3 isiXhosa literacy lessons



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**Background:** Globally, teaching practice has been at the heart of teacher education programmes. For quality teaching and learning, literacy student teachers are expected to develop metacognitive attributes and critical thinking to integrate theory and practice. Because of the dominance of autonomous models in literacy teaching and learning nationally and internationally, literature continues to report poor literacy attainment, especially for indigenous language learners. Contrasting this deficit view, this article employed languaging as a lens to describe student teachers' reflections on their interactions with Grade 3 learners using multimodal and linguistic repertoires, which they both bring from socio-cultural contexts as well as utilisation of embodied representational modes.

**Aim:** To explore how Foundation Phase (FP) student teachers used languaging and semiotic modes to enhance literacy teaching and learning in Grade 3 classrooms.

**Setting:** An Eastern Cape Institution of Higher Education.

**Methods:** In this qualitative study, four purposely selected FP isiXhosa Home Language student teachers used reflective journals to articulate their individual and peer classroom literacy practices. Data were thematically analysed.

**Results:** Findings revealed the importance of acknowledging authentic and diverse linguistic resources that learners bring from their socio-cultural backgrounds as well as the use of multimodal literacies in the classroom context.

**Conclusion:** This study concludes that languaging allowed learners and student teachers to exploit multimodalities and linguistic repertoires that they bring from their socio-cultural backgrounds.

**Contribution:** This study demonstrates the pedagogical literacy strategies that created live dialogical engagements between student teachers and learners. These can be useful to teacher educators as well as teachers in the Foundation Phase contexts and thus improve literacy teaching and learning, especially in indigenous languages.

**Keywords:** semiotic modes; literacy; student teachers; Grade 3; reflection; languaging.

## Introduction

Reflection is an evolving concept that has gained popularity in teacher education programmes across the globe, including South Africa. It is perceived as an active consideration of any idea in the light of prior knowledge and future goals (Dewey 1933:237). Reflection is viewed as an approach to teaching that allows teachers to improve their understanding of teaching by critically reflecting on their teaching experiences. Expounding on this, Schon (1983) theorises that during reflection-in-action, individuals draw on their experiences to reframe the situation at hand while in reflection-on-action, they carefully examine their actions to think, analyse, identify and solve pedagogical problems related to the classroom context.

Literature highlights that student teachers should be grounded in learning experiences that will enable them to integrate disciplinary, pedagogical and situational knowledge, and apply these in diverse meaningful contexts such as School-Based Learning (SBL) (Ashraf & Zolfaghari 2018; Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2015; Nilsson 2009; Nkambule & Mukeredzi 2017; Nomlomo & Desai 2014). In other words, during SBL, student teachers are required to use reflection as a tool to integrate theoretical and conceptual knowledge gained in their studies with practice-based knowledge encountered in professional contexts.

Several studies worldwide have used the notion of reflection in various teaching and learning contexts. These include studies conducted by Connelly, Mosito and Shaik (2020) and Robinson

and Rousseau (2018) with Foundation Phase (FP) teacher educators and student teachers which aimed at understanding how they implemented reflection in teacher education programmes. A study conducted in Iran described the relationship between Iranian teachers' assessment literacy and their reflective practice (Ashraf & Zolfaghari 2018). The findings of these studies reported that there is a relationship between the subject of research and reflective thinking. In their study, Phatudi, Joubert and Harris (2015:5) highlighted Wasserman's four R's (reciprocity, reflection, relationship and responsibility) as factors that can enable student teachers to put theory into practice. These authors argue that in the process of engaging with learners, student teachers could construct their first-hand personal experiences through critical reflection. This means during SBL, student teachers have opportunities to use their prior knowledge to construct and reconstruct the connection between theoretical and practical knowledge and formulate their personal theories.

Linking theory and practice remained key for student teachers in this study. They used their reflective journals to reflect on FP literacy strategies and practices they engaged in with learners in the school context. The New London Group (2000) articulates that literacy pedagogy has been traditionally perceived as reading and writing and formalised as monolingual and monocultural forms of language. This is evident in the technical ideologies of literacy teaching and learning that are still practised in most parts of the world, including South Africa. For example, in South Africa, technical skills remained key features of the FP literacy curriculum which is characterised by five reading components that are stipulated in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011:4) and various literacy reading programmes. These components include phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and reading fluency. This perspective of using five literacy reading components, according to Tunmer and Hoover (1993), is influenced by the notion of literacy as a cognitive-linguistic process and is described by (Street 2018; Street & Street 1984) as an autonomous skills model. In other words, the literacy curriculum in South Africa does not explicitly state how the learners' knowledge base from different socio-cultural backgrounds must be tapped on pedagogically.

Notably, these cognitive-linguistic processes are inextricably linked and are applied almost simultaneously when applied well in the classroom context. These features (decoding, syntax, morphemes, lexicon, *inter alia*), as articulated by Henning (2016), remain key for learners to comprehend text. This scholar further suggests that for learners to make meaning or comprehend texts, it is crucial that language learning activities be aligned with their sociocultural contexts. More importantly, even though comprehension is included as one of the literacy elements in the CAPS curriculum, there are still various language factors that remain challenging. For instance, the language of the text used in schools might not necessarily be the language that

the learner is familiar with (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011:4; Guzula 2019) and that affects the comprehension of that particular text. When we read texts, we do not only read words but also the content of the text. In that process, we apply our background knowledge to make meaning of what we are reading.

As such, if learners are not familiar with a specific theme being read to them, they will not construct and reconstruct their thoughts and that will affect their comprehension skills. Moreover, most learners from indigenous languages are not read to in their homes because of a lack of resources (Mkhize 2016a) and in such homes, learners and significant others engage in other multimodal literacy practices embedded in sociocultural knowledge (Street 2018). These are also shaped by specific community discourses, shared common values and cultural knowledge of various contexts. The unfamiliarity with the written word affects how learners comprehend texts. Furthermore, most teachers in the school context have not been equipped with skills on how to develop learners' literacy skills (Sosibo & Nomlomo 2014) and this affects learners' learning.

A study by Bikitsha and Katz (2013) revealed that the literacy content and pedagogies in CAPS did not serve local interests as it was the direct translation of the English version. In the CAPS curriculum, indigenous languages' literacy activities, methods and practices resemble exactly those of English literacy even though these languages differ in orthographical mapping and otherwise. In the designation of literacy programmes' content, there are no clear pedagogical guidelines on how to utilise learners' ways of knowing which results in epistemicide (killing of indigenous people's knowledge) and linguicide (killing of indigenous languages) as referred to by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2018). This educational exclusion can be associated with the low literacy attainments of African Indigenous Languages learners in standardised tests such as Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Howie et al. 2016) and Annual National Assessment (DBE 2013) that used unfamiliar measures which denied them access to knowledge and leading to misunderstanding of concepts (Cekiso, Meyiwa & Mashige 2019; Kaya & Seleti 2013). If learners are reading a text, no matter how short that text might be, if it is not in their experiential knowledge that will negatively affect how they make meaning of that text. For these reasons, in his study, Makalela (2018) suggested that epistemic biases inherent in the adoption of English as the only language of literacy and education created challenges that can be counteracted by alternative pedagogical frameworks.

The New London Group (2000) highlighted that literacy pedagogy needs to account for the context of learners' culturally and linguistically diverse communities so that they can make meaning of their learning. This view has been concurred by scholars on early literacy teaching and learning (Barton & Hamilton 2012; Gee 2000, 2017; Henning 2016; Kress 2010; Street 1995) as well as other scholars on

African languages (Makalela 2015; Msila & Gumba 2017; Sibanda 2017) who view literacy as historically situated, embedded and enculturated within social artefacts and different literacies associated with the particular language. This view of recognising learners' socio-cultural backgrounds has been cherished across the globe. Among other scholars, Kress (2010) views literacy as multimodal which is the combination of different semiotic modes such as language, images, music, signs and other artefacts.

Consistent with this line of thought, McKinney and Tyler (2019) conducted a study focusing on isiXhosa and English science learners. They used semiotic resources such as multilingual glossaries, translations, translanguaging pedagogies, dialogic engagements and tapping in their metacognitive skills in the learning of science. Findings revealed that offering students opportunities to talk critically during their learning and reflecting on their discoveries developed their metacognitive awareness of the role of language during learning. This study further highlights that creative learner engagements in the classroom context allow them to draw from their marginalised semiotic resources. Relevant to these utterances, in his work, Middleton (2021) focused on music and Maori-language news-shows. Results showed that the titles of the opening news retained many of the language signposts and cultural references that are deeply embedded in Maori language and culture to represent news *by* and *for* Maori. This emphasises the importance of utilising learners' linguistic and semiotic repertoires in the classroom context. In another study, Williams (2013) examined the use of semiotic modes during hostilities, armed conflicts and in peacebuilding among the pre-literate Yoruba communities in Nigeria and concluded that the semiotics reduced armed conflicts and promoted peace in these societies.

It is against this background that this study aimed to explore how FP student teachers used *linguaging* and semiotic modes to enhance literacy teaching and learning in Grade 3 classrooms. The questions guiding this study are the following:

- How do student teachers use *linguaging* to enhance literacy teaching and learning in Grade 3 classrooms?
- How do student teachers use semiotic modes to enhance literacy teaching and learning in Grade 3 classrooms?
- What are the implications of the study for teacher education preparation?

## Literature review

### Viewing literacy practices from a *linguaging* perspective

The term *linguaging* was coined by neuroscientists Maturana and Valera (1980) who believed that language is not an accomplished act but that people continue to make meaning and shape their knowledge and experiences through language. Several authors echo that *linguaging* involves the dynamic and integrated use of different languages and language varieties, and most importantly, the process of constructing knowledge (García & Li 2014; Makalela 2019). In other words, language is viewed as an ongoing process

that continues to be shaped and reshaped, constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed over time through social interactions. Hence, Rowe (2020) opines that it is through *linguaging* that people act in the world and establish relationships. Learners bring a repertoire of linguistic resources from their socio-cultural contexts into the classrooms to make meaning of the world around them (Maseko & Mkhize 2019).

Semiotic modes, also referred to as signs, or codes or multimodal modes, is a term that was coined by Halliday (1978). The author suggested that semiotic resources are actions and artefacts we use to make meaning of our lives. A mode of presentation, as articulated by Edwards (2015), is a semiotic resource system moulded in a community over a period to make meaning. Concurring with this view, Archer (2017) posits that a mode is a semiotically articulated means of representation or communication. These include linguistic resources, talk, storytelling, technologies, songs, rhymes, gestures, images, indigenous games and music as well as less obvious everyday objects, food, dress and so forth, all of which carry cultural value and significance. These semiotic resources, according to Kress (2010), contribute to the construction of meaning-making that occurs through multiple forms in various contexts. This suggests that literacy practices are hybrid and make more sense to those who share the code.

Research proclaims that the use of autonomous literacy skills is still evident in many schools that still value and privilege print literacy above all other modes or forms of communication (Hamilton 2012; Rowe 2020). To counter this autonomous view to literacy, an ideological position focuses on multiple and multimodal literacies which encourage classroom discourse that is construed and operates from learners' sociocultural knowledge, experiences, linguistic networks and interests (Bloome, Kalman & Seymour 2018; Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001; Street 2018, 2003). This position believes in and values the use of semiotic resources, social semiotics, signs, symbols, modes and codes in the school classroom context.

Several studies related to this notion documented how English student teachers constructed their identities digitally through multimodal narratives they created in their classrooms (Kajee 2018). Giampapa (2010) and Stille (2011) reported how student teachers were able to draw on their linguistic, cultural and multimodal resources to create dual-language texts. A South African study by Moodley and Aronstam (2016) reported on how FP student teachers created multimodal digital stories during their coursework and during reading lessons in classrooms in multiple schools. Musanti and Rodriguez (2017) while using translanguaging pedagogy with bilingual Spanish and English student teachers discovered that these students applied their multilingual skills in imaginative ways during academic writing. These findings concur with a study by Makalela (2015) which reflected that student teachers' communicative repertoires resided within and beyond their traditional linguistic codes.

## Facilitating literacy classroom practices

The National Curriculum, Assessment and Policy Statement (DBE 2011) envisages that learners acquire and apply knowledge, skills and values in ways that are meaningful to their own lives. Subsequently, teachers should provide various opportunities for learners to engage in purposeful and strategic conversations (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell 2012). Classroom conversations, as defined by Joubert et al. (2015), are mutual interactions between the teacher and learners, and learners and learners where teachers explicitly promote shared discussions and learners use language and previous knowledge extensively to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their knowledge to make meaning of their learning. Jewitt (2008) as well as Guzula (2019) advocate for the importance of immersing learners' literacy learning in situated practice, which is focusing on learners' previous experiences during classroom interactions. This view is supported by Rowe (2020) who argues that oral *linguaging* is a basis for teaching and learning and it acknowledges learners' social-cultural contexts, shapes their literacy practices and promotes cognitive growth.

In their case studies with Grade 3–6 and Grade 11 learners, Guzula, McKinney and Tyler (2016) revealed that multimodal orientation to language practices offers pedagogical strategies for meaning-making to children's *linguaging* in many classrooms. Supporting this, Moore and Hart (2007) argued that translanguaging keeps learners free, intrinsically motivated to communicate in the classroom, and emotionally and cognitively engaged. In some instances, bodies are used as semiotic resources. For example, Stein and Newfield (2006) posit that the use of bodily articulation in understanding the meaning of the lessons taught in class is influenced by culture, history, gender and memory. These authors, as well as Jewitt (2008) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), argue that bodies are repositories of knowledge, but knowledge is not always known through language. It can be sensed, felt, performed and imagined. Subsequently, Jewitt (2008) articulates that, to some extent, semiotic resources have always been associated with language and were less understood as gestures, sounds, movements, or other forms.

## Research methodology

This study is premised on an interpretive qualitative research approach that seeks to understand how people construct knowledge and make sense of the experiences of the world around them (Kumar 2011; Merriam & Grenier 2019). In other words, qualitative researchers focus on discovering how people experience their real-world or how individuals think and perceive their real environments. Using the qualitative interpretive method of inquiry assisted the authors to understand how student teachers made sense of their literacy teaching and learning as articulated in their reflective journals. More specifically, it assisted us to define and interpret how they used *linguaging* and semiotic modes to enhance literacy teaching and learning during SBL. This interpretive qualitative research inquiry helped us to gather these real-life experiences and enabled us to analyse and answer the research question.

## Context and participants

The study was conducted in the Faculty of Education, Foundation Phase Department in a university in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The population was final year isiXhosa home language Bachelor of Education student teachers. They participated in the first author's Master's study that aimed at exploring and describing student teachers' self-reflections of implementing isiXhosa literacy strategies with Grade 3 learners. The inclusion criteria were that they should be studying FP, are isiXhosa home language student teachers, are teaching isiXhosa literacy in Grade 3 classrooms during SBL, and are willing to participate and share their experiences. A call to participate was advertised and circulated with a date of an information meeting to all the fourth-year isiXhosa home language student teachers. On the day of the meeting, the first author explained the purpose of the project, what participating entailed, including the ethical aspects. They were informed that those who were willing to participate could advise the researcher via email. At the time, 21 fourth-year students were registered for the isiXhosa Home Language method module. Fourteen of them volunteered to participate. We were supporting the first author with some of the students who volunteered during SBL directly and indirectly. As such, because of ethical considerations and power relations, we decided to choose four out of 14 volunteers, as the first author was not their mentor lecturer during SBL.

Table 1 indicates the student teachers' biographical information. Caires, Almeida and Vieira (2012) articulate that a deep and holistic understanding of the process of becoming a teacher remains key for teacher education programmes. These include understanding the phenomenal and idiosyncratic aspects such as *who* the student teacher is (their educational background, early school experiences and reasons for choosing teaching as a profession), *how* they perceive their practice teaching experiences (feelings, thoughts and attitudes), *what* their main concerns, constraints, challenges and successes during practice teaching are and *who* their support system during this crucial time is. This knowledge

**TABLE 1:** Student teachers' biographical information.

Student teacher	Age	Sex	Matriculated at city, urban or rural school	Personal literacy information
Student teacher Z	22	F	Rural school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IsiXhosa Home Language (Grade 1 to 12)</li> <li>• English First Additional Language (Grade 1 to 12)</li> </ul>
Student teacher S	24	F	Ex-model C school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IsiXhosa First Additional Language (Grade 1 to 12)</li> <li>• English Home Language (Grade 1 to 12)</li> </ul>
Student teacher T	24	F	Ex-model C school and township	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IsiXhosa First Additional Language (Grade 1 to 5)</li> <li>• English Home Language (Grade 1 to 5)</li> <li>• and IsiXhosa Home Language (Grade 6 to 12)</li> <li>• English First Additional Language (Grade 6 to 12)</li> </ul>
Student teacher A	22	F	Rural school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IsiXhosa Home Language (Grade 1 to 12)</li> <li>• English First Additional Language (up to Grade 12)</li> </ul>

Source: Magangxa, P.N., 2019, Exploring student teachers' self-reflections on implementation of isiXhosa literacy strategies with Grade 3 learners: A single case study approach, (Master's thesis), Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth.

F, female.



will guide teacher education programmes in understanding the diverse experiences that student teachers bring to the context, their beliefs and their assumptions, and how these different needs can be addressed.

The information in Table 1 has always been important in the designation, teaching and assessment of literacy modules in this university. Most importantly, these remained vital when student teachers were linking theory and practice in the school classroom context. It was key to understand their language abilities as these were significant aspects in the teaching and learning of literacy in the classrooms.

## Data collection

This article focused on the student teachers' reflective journals only. Literature indicates that reflective journals are metacognitive documents that afford student teachers opportunities to think deeply about their own practice (Bashan & Holsblat 2017; Pai 2016). These student teachers visited schools for SBL 3 days a week. They observed lessons taught by mentors during this period and taught their own lessons. They reflected weekly on all their experiences and classroom interactions with learners. The first author tried as much as possible to be sensitive, intuitive and open to new insights to find and interpret data from reflective journals (Merriam & Grenier 2019).

The first author established which strategies they used to elicit learners' prior knowledge during their lessons as it is important to acknowledge that learners bring their knowledge base to the learning environments. Additionally, The first author looked for literacy strategies they used in the classroom to enhance learners' learning, the beliefs and assumptions that guided the use of these strategies, and their experiences of using these strategies. This was important as literature continues to report that student teachers find it difficult to teach literacy in the school classrooms (Gxekwa & Satyo 2017; Howell 2016; Mudzielwana 2014). Having taught them methods of teaching literacy in isiXhosa in the FP for 4 years during their coursework, it was key to understand how they integrated this knowledge with school classroom experiences and formulate their own theories. Most importantly, studies (Alexander 2003; Ramadiro & Porteus 2017:41) highlight the benefits of Mother Tongue Bilingual Based Education teaching and learning during FP years where the mother tongue is a medium of instruction in the FP and maintaining it in the Intermediate Phase while adding English as a second medium of instruction. As such, student teachers reflected on how they used reflective thinking as a tool for linking theory and practice during SBL.

## Reflection workshop

A workshop, whose main purpose was to create a safe space where participants could work collaboratively and interact with each other to make meaning of the concept of reflection,

was conducted with the participants prior to data collection. Reflection is a necessary and imperative feature in teacher education programmes as well as lesson planning and teaching. This workshop was an extension of readings on reflection that were given and discussed with student teachers throughout literacy module lectures. It has always been key to acknowledge that literature asserts that student teachers find it difficult to link theory and practice, hence this workshop. During the one hour workshop, students were guided by the following questions:

- Thinking back on the readings (Dewey 1933; Schon 1983; *inter alia*), what is your understanding of reflection?
- Why is it important to reflect?
- Can reflection improve one's teaching?
- How can one use reflection to link theory and practice?

These questions were followed by the reflection guide that was co-constructed by student teachers and researchers. This guide specifically focused on the teaching and learning of literacy in the school context. It consisted of some of the following questions:

- Did you plan for your lesson?
- Describe the aspects of your lesson plan that worked according to plan.
- Which areas did not go well? Why?
- Did you achieve your objectives? Why or why not?
- Did learners engage productively during the lesson? To what extent?
- Were there any challenges? How did you overcome them?
- What could you have done differently in this lesson?
- Did learners achieve the lesson objectives? How do you know?

Students were also required to reflect on how they observed and taught using outcomes stipulated in the CAPS document, and how they used FP themes, literacy elements, critical literacy, emergent literacy, multiliteracies, songs, rhymes, stories, children's literature, assessment, classroom management and print environment. These concepts were key in enhancing successful literacy programmes in schools. They were also required to reflect on the challenges, constraints and successes of teaching literacy in schools. They submitted journals after every three weeks so that more guidance and understanding of their teaching and learning can be captured.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee (Human) (reference no. H18-EDU-ERE-016). The study was guided by the ethical guidelines stipulated by the university. This included permission from the Faculty of Education, University Ethics committee because the study involved students, DBE who afforded us ethical clearance me (The first author) and student teachers' informed consents. Participants were informed about voluntary participation that they might

withdraw without penalty and were assured anonymity, confidentiality, privacy and transparency (Denzin & Lincoln 2018). Most importantly, the participants were not the cohort of students whom I formally assessed during SBL. Additionally, because reflective journals are personal documents, for ethical reasons, consent was requested from participants to use them.

## Data analysis and results

Thematic Analysis was used in this article to manage and analyse data. Units of meaning were identified and grouped into similar categories that were later coded into themes (Clarke & Braun 2013) to answer the main research question. The key for reading the data findings is as follows:

- Student teacher T – ST T;
- Student teacher A – ST A;
- Student teacher Z – ST Z;
- Student teacher S – ST S;
- Reflective journals – RJ.

## Results

The findings of this study showed that the FP isiXhosa Home Language student teachers and learners used *linguaging* and various multimodal practices to exhibit multiple modalities and fluid linguistic discourses while enhancing teaching and learning in Grade 3 classrooms.

Two themes emerged from this study:

- authentic and diverse linguistic resources;
- the body as a semiotic mode.

### Authentic and diverse linguistic resources

The student teachers engaged learners in fluid linguistic literacy practices to make meaning of teaching and learning in Grade three classrooms. This is aligned with the CAPS's vision for learners which stipulates that Grade 3 learners should be able to communicate effectively using visual, symbolic and language skills competently (DBE 2011). As such, teachers should provide various opportunities for learners to engage in purposeful and strategic conversations (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell 2012). For example, ST A introduced elements of a short story. She said she sang a song with her learners:

*Abantwana, abantwana, abantwana bathand'ufunda* [Children, children, children like to read]

*Ndabanik'incwadi ndathi funda la* [I gave them a book and said please read here]

*Abantwana, abantwana, abantwana bathand'ubhala* [Children, children, children like to write]

*Ndabanik'incwadi ndathi bhala la* [I gave them the book and said please write here]

Singing is one of the socio-cultural values in African communities. African people sing different songs for

different gatherings to portray specific emotions, to instil values or to raise some awareness. Student teachers and learners in this study sang songs related to topics discussed in class using their bodies and other gestural modes. This song led by ST A encouraged learners to love reading and writing. Singing songs, rhymes or chants with FP learners is key for literacy development. It is one of the routines used when introducing lessons or when the teacher wants to capture learners' attention. Songs are also used to harmonise the learning environment or calm down learners. As soon as ST A grabbed learners' attention or set the scene for learning, she asked learners questions related to the topic of the day which was elements of the short story. She used various language skills to elicit learners' prior knowledge, and encouraged them to express their ideas and feelings about the drama series as displayed in the excerpt below:

### Extract 1: Reflective journals

**ST A:** *Khanindibalisele ngamabali, iisoapie eniwabukela kumabonakude kwi TV* [Please tell me about soapies or drama series that you watch on TV.]

**Learners:** *(Bechaza ezi soapie [giving various soapies]) The Queen, Generations, Movhango, Igazi, Uzalo, Skeem saam (nezinye [and so forth])*

**ST A:** *Ngoobani abantu abapha ku-Uzalo* [Who are the characters in the drama Uzalo]

**Learners:** *NgooNkunzi, Mamlambo, GC* [naming characters]

**ST A:** *Nindixelele ngooNkunzi, Mamlambo, GC nabanye. Aba bantu ke sibabiza ngokuba ngabalinganiswa. Xa ufuna ukukhumsha ungathi zii characters. Ngaphandle kwabo ngekhe libekhona ibali. Ingaba niyabazi asingomagama abo okwenene lawa? [You mentioned Nkunzi, Mamlambo, GC, and others. We call them abalinganiswa [characters]. Without them, there would be no story. Do you know that those names are not their real names, they are acting?]*

**Learners:** *Abantwana baphendule bonke bathi* [Learners replied in chorus]. Yes, Teacher!' (ST A, 22 years old, female)

Student teacher A used oral communication as a basis for teaching and learning and engaged learners in explorative talk. She provided a range of opportunities for learners to make meaning of experiences gained from their socio-cultural contexts and in the process developed their language and cognitive abilities. Student teacher A and learners drew on each other's semiotic linguistic resources and pre-existing knowledge to learn new content. They used fluid language repertoires (isiXhosa and English) and various semiotic resources or signs to articulate their thoughts. For example, she used the word *soapie* prevalent in the social context when enquiring from them about television (TV) stories they watch at home. She also mentioned '*kumabonakude* [television] and -TV-' simultaneously as it is the word learners use daily at home. She used the English word 'characters' to introduce learners to vocabulary about elements of the short story. This idea is encouraged by Moats (2010) who articulates that creating conversations with learners in the classroom

context enhance literacy teaching and learning. This was reiterated by ST T when she wrote:

*'Ukufumana ulwazi lwabantwana bam lwangaphambili ndizama ukubabuza imibuzo kuqala kwesi sihloko mhlawumbi ndizabe ndisifundisa. Umzekelo, ukuba isihloko sithi "Usapho lwam" ndibabuza ukuba bahlala nabani emakhayeni wabo kwakunye neminye imibuzo ezakubangela ukuba ndikwazi ukungenelela ndibafundisa ngesihloko sosuku.'* [To elicit learners' prior knowledge, I ask questions on the topic. I teach and talk with them about it. For example, if the topic is 'My family', I ask them with whom they stay at home and other relevant questions that lead me to tell them about the topic of the day.] (ST Z, 22 years old, female)

Afterwards, ST A asked learners to narrate the drama series *Uzalo*. They did. They used their cognitive-linguistic repertoires to retell the drama with logic and enthusiasm. However, she mentioned that during these conversations they started to talk at the same time. She said she told them: *'Hay, kaloku sanungxola, xa omnye umntu ethetha siyammamela kuba nawe xa uthetha abanye abantu uzakufuna bakumamele.'* [No, do not make noise, when one speaker is talking, we listen to her or him because when you are talking you would also like others to listen to you]. Even though ST A interpreted this talk as noise, learners at this stage were enthusiastic. They were interested in the conversations, but it was good that she was conscientising them about listening to each other and taking turns to speak which is one of the skills stipulated in the CAPS curriculum – *listening and speaking*. At the same time, she asked them things they knew from their socio-cultural backgrounds. The learners were able to interact with each other as well as their teacher which is encouraged by Vygotsky and Cole (1978) and *linguaging* theory which enhances the value of respect. However, sometimes, according to her, it was necessary to use classroom management routines to control their behaviour. For example, she would say in English, 'Eyes on me in 345' Then learners would immediately stop whatever they were doing and focus on her.

Then the lesson proceeded to the next element of the story, *place and time*.

### Extract 2: Reflective journals

**ST A:** *Nicinga ukuba lo mdlalo weqonga wenzelwa phi?* [Where do you think this drama takes place?]

**Learners:** *(In a chorus they gave various answers) Endlini, Elokshini, Ecaweni, E'town'* [In the house, in the location, in church, in town]

**ST A:** *OK! Ngoku ndixeleleni kusedolophini okanye kuselalini?* [OK! Now tell me is it in the city or in the village?]

**Learners:** *Etown, others said Elalini* [village]

**ST A:** *Kutheni nisitsho?* [Why do you say so?]

**Learners:** *(Kept quiet)* (ST T, 24 years old, female)

Student Teacher A used another word *umdlalo weqonga*, which also means drama series or soapie, exposing learners to wide semantic knowledge. She wanted learners to

understand the concept of 'setting' in a story. She asked them where the drama takes place and they gave several answers. She rephrased her questions while responding positively to them. They used *-e-* as the locative prefix, which stands for *-in-* in English, displaying their cipher and lexical knowledge. Learners and ST A continued with *linguaging* throughout their interactions mixing isiXhosa and English. For example, learners said, 'etown', which means 'in town'. They engaged in explorative talk using language fluidly among themselves to make meaning of their learning. As the lesson proceeded, she asked them why they thought it was happening in the city or village. She reported that learners kept quiet. According to the student teachers, one would assume that learners were not used to higher-order questions. Each time they were required to answer out of the box, they kept quiet. Student Teacher Z highlighted that learners did not want to think critically. When they made a statement and you ask them why they thought so, they just looked at you.

To scaffold her learners' learning, ST A reported that she said:

*'Ndiyathanda ukubukela umdlalo weqonga uSophia the First. Ndingathanda ukuthi lo mdlalo weqonga wenzeka edolophini kuba ndibona izakhiwo, iindlela zokuphila zabantu, iimoto, iindlela nezinye izinto. Ukuba bekuselalini bendizakulindela ukubona ooronta, iindlela zomhlaba, iinkomo, neegusha.'* [I like watching drama series, Sophia the First. I would say that drama happens in the city. I see the buildings, people's way of life, cars, roads, and other things. If it were in the villages, I would expect to see mountains, rondavels, gravel roads, cows, and sheep.] (ST S, 24 years old, female)

She was linking visual text (*Sophia the First*) to another one (*Uzalo*) to mediate learners' learning. Then she asked learners to use the same information to answer the question.

### Extract 3: Reflective journals

**ST A:** *What time do you think the drama Uzalo is played?*

**Learners:** *One learner said, 'namhlanje'* [today].

**ST A:** *(Rephrased her question) 'Nicinga ukuba eli bali lenzeka kumaxesha akudaaala ngokuyyaa kwakukho ookhokho bakudala okanye kweli xesha lethu?* [Do you think it is a story from long ago when our ancestors were still alive or is it nowadays?]

**Learners:** *Lakudala'* [long ago], *others 'langoku'* [nowadays].

**ST A:** *Kutheni nisitsho?* [Why do you say so?]

**Learners:** *(Kept quiet)* (ST A, 22 years old, female)

ST A used the same procedure to mediate their learning by eliciting their knowledge base and encouraging them to take risks and voice their thoughts.

**ST A:** *(She then asked) Yintoni ingxaki kweli bali?* [What is the problem in this story?]

**Learner:** *(One learner answered in English) 'problem'.*

The learner meant 'ingxaki', which is 'problem' in English and not the problem in the story. This validates what is reiterated in several translanguaging studies that learners are not



monolingual beings, they bring linguistic repertoires in the classroom context and languages are interdependent in nature (Makalela 2015). This showed that learners seemed to regard this classroom as a safe space for learning. They felt free to take risks and respond to questions asked during interactions using language as a resource for learning. Student Teacher A said she told them that there is always a problem and a solution in the story. The student teacher used bilingual strategies most of the time encouraging learners to cross over languages blurring the boundaries (Makalela 2015).

Lastly, ST A placed vocabulary words such as *laqaza* [look around], *ukukholiseka* [to be satisfied], *libhinqele*, *ukuqinisekisa* [to be sure] on the flannel board. These words were discussed, linking their meaning with knowledge from learners' socio-cultural contexts. Discussing vocabulary that is in a text with learners enhances text comprehension and increases semantic knowledge. Concurring this view, ST Z reported that, '*Sithi ke ngoku sixoxe ngamaqama ngendlela eyonwabisayo*' [We then discussed vocabulary words in a fun and playful way]. This illustrates that student teachers used language and a wide variety of semiotic resources in the classrooms as well as learners' linguistic repertoires because they understood that literacy learning is embedded in socio-cultural contexts (Joseph & Ramani 2011; Street 2018). This created hybrid language practices in these classrooms with high levels of learner participation. For instance, when discussing the word *ukuqinisekisa* [ensure], one boy said, 'If you killed someone you would want to make sure if he or she is dead.' Student Teacher A's response was, 'O ok, but is it good to kill anyone?' Learners replied in chorus, 'No!' She also affirmed this answer and used this event as a teachable moment, understanding that these learners stay in social areas where they witness deaths and killings associated with gangsterism.

After vocabulary discussion, ST A read an isiXhosa story to the learners from *Vula-Bula* (a collection of graded stories prescribed by the DBE). The readers are available for all the learners. According to her, they were reading along with excitement. She used lower and higher-order questions drawing inferences from learners and other comprehension strategies as well. She also used voice intonation to model good reading skills. Learners were asked to relate story elements to the story they had just read. They had to do this activity in groups and write on the chart that was provided. As such, student teachers and learners used *linguaging* during their authentic literacy interactions in the classroom. Moreover, student teachers used various semiotic modes to help learners to understand literacy events.

### The body as a semiotic mode

The second finding revealed that student teachers and learners used their bodies when engaging in innumerable literacy practices in the classroom. They used gestural codes, facial expressions and other modes highlighted above to ignite imagination and expose learners to critical thinking and rich language other than spoken language. Gestural codes included representational gestures and modelling

gestures where they enacted or depicted what was being taught and learned in the classrooms.

For example, ST S presented a storytelling lesson. After inviting learners to sit comfortably on the mat, she first told them, '*Sizakuqala isifundo sethu namhlanje ngokudlala umdlalo othi "fly-fly"*' [We will start our lesson today by playing a game 'fly-fly']. This game was played in English and isiXhosa. Learners were expected to respond by clapping hands if their teacher mentioned anything that was flying and not to clap if it was not flying. For example, she would say: '*... ntaq' yabhabha? [a bird flies?] ... ilitye liyabhabha? [a stone flies?] ...*' They used gestures and expressed their metacognitive knowledge about things that fly and those that do not. This game increased concentration, vocabulary, listening skills, following instructions and promoted bilingualism. She reported that learners were laughing, happy, enthusiastic, excited and they enjoyed the game a lot as this game is usually played in their cultural contexts where language, music, gesture and gaze are all resources of meaning-making.

A similar game was played in groups in ST Z's class. Each group had various pictures and words on the theme *Imizwa* [Emotion]. Taking turns, one learner would pick up a picture of an emotion, for example, a happy face. Then others would pick words showing that emotion in both isiXhosa and English and say those aloud. In the next round, a learner would pick up a word, then others would use body language to depict that emotion and look for a picture showing that emotion as well in another language.

Student Teacher S started telling the story. This was a story about three chickens that looked for a job in a neighbouring farm that made and sold butter. She initiated her story by asking questions related to its theme. She used vocal intonation, rhythms, gestures and various structures of language that broadened learners' conceptual and vocabulary development. She also incorporated singing in the process. For instance, when the chickens were suspected of stealing butter from the Farmers' storage they were randomly searched at the gate. So, the chickens, attempting to deny, were singing while lifting their 'arms', *Bheka Mlung'wam, andinanto* [Look Master, I have nothing]. Student Teacher S dramatised the story using arms, Gutiérrez body and facial expressions. Even when butter fell from one of the chickens' arms, she used the ideophone to depict the action. She said, '*Yaphakamisa iphiko layo inkukhu ... Yhoo! Thaxa! Ibhoto lo yomlungu!*' [The chicken lifted its wing and the Farmer's butter fell]. Learners were attentive all this time, laughing and some giggling. After the story, she asked learners questions to establish their comprehension. Then she asked learners to volunteer miming the story.

Learners, thus, enthusiastically volunteered to act out the story. They mimed with passion and in their own version. They used unspoken language reproducing, expanding and juxtaposing input and output (Makalela 2015) to demonstrate an imaginative understanding of the characters and the theme of the story. Others who were not on stage were cheering and giving suggestions to the actors. When the



mime reached the part where the chickens were searched at the gate, all learners who were spectators started singing along to that song '*Bheka Mlung'wam*'. There was a sense of excitement and fun in the classroom.

## Discussion of findings

The narrative accounts presented in the findings of this article illustrate that student teachers used *linguaging* to implement different FP literacy events and practices and utilised various semiotic modes with learners in the classrooms. Literacy events are interactions and activities evident in the classroom context between teachers and learners and are aligned to the literacy curriculum. Student teachers and learners engaged in multiple resources to communicate, make meaning and promote holistic literacy teaching and learning.

Authentic and meaningful teaching and learning experiences, as explained by Moodley and Aronstam (2016), are evident when FP teachers use various literacy practices such as songs, rhymes, play and stories in the classroom context. Evidently, student teachers in this study used songs for different reasons to develop learners' oral skills. As noted by Nevile (2010), music and songs are connected to various intelligences such as rhythmic, kinaesthetic, etcetera, and are sometimes used to expand cultural knowledge. For example, a study conducted by Middleton (2021) revealed that Yoruba communities used various semiotic modes, including songs, to maintain peace in Nigeria. In the classroom, songs enhance language skills such as listening, speaking, comprehension, reading and writing. Moreover, they allow teachers and learners to convey their feelings, attitudes, humour, excitement, *inter alia*, and reinforce language learning.

Findings further revealed that student teachers used explorative talk during interactions with learners to enhance their literacy learning. During classroom talk, student teachers and learners used isiXhosa and English, dialects and other languages that are spoken in their communities so that they could make sense of their literacy teaching and learning. Using familiar languages in this classroom empowered student teachers and learners to communicate effectively (Mgijima & Makalela 2016). Because communication has always been multimodal, they used textual, aural linguistic, spatial and visual resources to construct and reconstruct meaning (Wei 2018). These literacy practices were embedded in learners' socio-cultural backgrounds. Learners utilised their pre-existing knowledge base such as 'TV, problem, soapie', linguistic and other semiotic resources to make sense of their learning. This illustrates how a variety of language repertoires and pluralities (García & Kleifgen 2018) used by learners in their socio-cultural contexts is transferred to the school classroom context. When introducing new content, student teachers used lower and higher-order questioning skills through *linguaging* tapping, and eliciting information learners bring from their social contexts in order to develop their metalinguistic and metacognitive intelligence. Literature highlights that learners build from their historically and culturally accumulated literacy practices to learn new

concepts in the classroom contexts (Mkhize 2016b; Morrison et al. 2019; Nomlomo & Katiya 2018; Sefotho & Makalela 2017; Street & Street 1984).

Learners in these classrooms were afforded many opportunities to engage in hybrid language and literacy practices. Gutiérrez et al. (1999), as cited in Guzula et al. (2016), opine that hybrid language and literacy practices are systematic, strategic and sense-making processes among those who share the code. For instance, during storytelling, ST S used gestural codes that attracted learners' attentive listening and learners used facial expressions to show their emotions and appreciation of the story. Storytelling, according to Bloch (2016), exposes learners to a special form of language that is holistic, rich and complex. Literature reiterates that the multimodality nature of storytelling encourages meaning-making that is achieved through situated configurations across oral and body gestural modes such as talking, gazing, sound, listening and dramatisation (Alexander 2003; Bezemer & Jewett 2010; Halliday 1978). This bodily orientation was used by student teachers during SBL as language alone, as opined by Stein and Newfield (2006), is limited in its capacity to express the full range of human experience. Expounding on this, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) write that rhythm is indispensable, infusing together the meanings expressed in multimodal and communicative events.

When learners later mimed the story, they displayed their intricate, multi-layered literacy skills including kinaesthetic development, thinking strategies and meaning-making drawing on many different sensory modal, cognitive and semiotic resources to interpret their understanding of the story. This illustrated that multiple semiotic pedagogies interplayed in the classroom context unleashed creativity and agency in learners and teachers in unexpected ways (Stein & Newfield 2006). Furthermore, it showed that gesture has the potential of influencing critical thinking and imagination, empowering learners to escalate their confidence and improve their language and literacy learning. Norris (2004) articulates that embodied modes are those in which a person uses his body or a tool that is directly connected to his or her body to make meaning. On the other hand, a disembodied mode is when a person does not use his or her body directly to produce meaning. Embodied sensory representational modes include language, body posture, facial expression, gesture, image and music (Newfield 2011).

## Limitations

Data presented and analysed in this study were gathered from a sample of fourth year isiXhosa Home Language literacy student teachers and not the entire population. It is also important to highlight that for the purpose of this article, not everything that student teachers reflected on is reported.

## Conclusion

This article explored how student teachers used *linguaging* and semiotic modes to enhance literacy teaching and learning in

Grade 3 classrooms. By providing opportunities for learners to speak in isiXhosa and English and by encouraging learners to use their bodies as a semiotic mode, learners were able to understand the content and respond appropriately. As such, it is critical for teacher education programmes to develop awareness that learners' literacies and literacy learning are embedded in their social, cultural and political contexts and thus equip student teachers with skills and knowledge that will enable them to transcend the boundaries of predetermined codes and modes (Yilmaz 2019). Based on the findings of this study, teachers and curriculum advisors need to be aware of the benefits of engaging in multimodal representations and modes through classroom interactions with learners. This will enable learners to communicate effectively in the classrooms, take risks, co-operate, co-participate, co-construct knowledge, get a deeper understanding of content and make sense of their learning.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Miss Magangxa, upon request.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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