Winds of change in teachers' classroom assessment practice: A self-critical reflection on the teaching and learning of visual literacy in a rural eastern Cape High School

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ABSTRACT: *The year 2006 saw the implementation of a new curriculum for teaching English First Additional Language (FAL) in grades 10-12 in South African high schools. The curriculum includes the teaching and assessment of visual literacy – a challenge for teachers whose apartheid-era teacher education did not address visual literacy at all. The article is a self-critical reflection on my attempts to teach and assess a unit on visual literacy in a Grade 10 class in a rural high school in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa.*

KEYWORDS: *Visual literacy, self-assessment, rubrics, feedback.*

INTRODUCTION

The "winds of change"[1] have blown through South African education since the first democratic elections in 1994. One question of critical importance is how teachers, who received an inferior education under apartheid, can fast-track change in their classrooms and offer the high quality education that is envisaged in the National Curriculum Statements (NCS). The NCS places a strong emphasis on assessment as a major tool that teachers should use as a vehicle for improving the quality teaching and learning in their classrooms. Such an emphasis calls for a paradigm shift in teachers' perceptions of assessment, and of the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment. From the introduction of an Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in Grade 1 in 1998 to date, teachers (including myself) in South Africa have been exposed to current trends in assessment through workshops, in service training and an abundant supply of curriculum documents, all of which aim to speed up transformation and improve the quality of learning. However, it has been my experience that little or nothing has improved inside the classroom.

To blame apartheid education for not having prepared teachers to offer top-class education on the one hand, or to blame the current NCS as a failure on the other hand, does not take us anywhere. One way for a teacher to respond to the challenges of the new curriculum is to become a "reflective practitioner – one who can think about teaching while teaching and responding appropriately to the unique situations that arise" (Killen, 2007, p. 97). Being reflective means being able to: "pursue actively the possibility that existing practices may effectively be challenged and, in the light of evidence about their efficacy, replaced by alternatives" (Killen, 2007, p. 97). Through reflection I was able to challenge my classroom

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[1] The notion of winds of change originated from the speech made by Harold Macmillan, a British Prime Minister, in South Africa in 1960. He foresaw the political change in Africa from white rule to black rule.

assessment practices and think of alternative ways to close the gap between what NCS envisages about me as a teacher in the democratic South Africa, and what I was capable of doing as a product of apartheid schooling and teacher education.

This article is a critical reflection on my attempts to improve my classroom assessment practice in relation to quality of questions, use of rubrics and provision of feedback during the teaching and learning of visual literacy.

TRACING CRITICAL REFLECTION IN MY ASSESSMENT PRACTICE

Before the implementation of NCS in Grade 10 in 2006 in South Africa, I found myself ill-prepared to teach visual literacy, a new component of English First Additional Language (FAL) curriculum, which I had never experienced either as a learner or as a teacher trainee. Out of a personal desire to improve the quality of teaching visual literacy, I devised a praxis action research case study. The praxis dimensions accounted for my role as an active teacher-participant and, therefore, also change agent within the case study of one Grade 10 classroom in a rural high school in 2006 in Eastern Cape, South Africa, where I taught. Schmuck (2000) describes action research as:

> A recursive ongoing process of systematic study in which teachers examine their own teaching and students' learning through descriptive reporting, purposed conversation, collegial sharing and critical reflection for the purpose of improving classroom practice (p. 17).

The critical reflection that this article explores is at the core of action research, which operates in cycles, or spirals, as one cycle builds on the other leading to spirals of action (McNiff, 1996, pp. 21-23). This article reports on the first cycle. The goals of my study were to:

- Gain a better understanding of the NCS for English (FAL) in relation to visual literacy;
- Improve my performance in teaching visual literacy;
- Empower my learners to analyse and design advertisements;
- Evaluate a unit of teaching/learning on visual literacy.

To achieve my research goals I designed a lesson unit on visual literacy with specific reference to advertisements. The lesson unit consisted of seven lessons to be taught over ten school days in Grade 10, and was designed so that it would, firstly, equip learners with elements of visual grammar, or a meta language of visual design such as: camera angles and shots, non-verbal communication (NVC) signs, foreground and background, symbolic meaning of colour, texture, lighting, focus and juxtaposition. Secondly, it was designed to introduce learners to manipulative language as evident in logo, motto, brand name, slogan, descriptive language and stereotyping. Thirdly, it encouraged analysis and designing of advertisements.

My critical reflection is concerned with contributing to the development of improved visual literacy teaching by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of my initial intervention in order to guide revision and refinement of my actions (Bassey, 1999, p. 28). The teacher-

researcher (myself), students, colleagues and a critical friend (through journals and small face-to-face group discussions and interviews) reflected on and evaluated the unit of teaching. All of these interactions were intended to support best practice in the teaching and learning of visual literacy in a rural high school. I also looked out for unexpected outcomes that were of significance, and reported them (Koshy, 2005, p. 109). Teacher classroom assessment practice, which this article explores, is one example of the unexpected and significant aspects that emerged. I developed a set pattern of the following three questions that I applied to each lesson of the unit researched:

1. What went well?
2. What did not go well?
3. What needed to be improved if the same lesson were to be taught in future?

These questions gave me "the ability to step back and critically analyse situations, to recognise and avoid bias to obtain valid and reliable data, and to think abstractly" (Koshy, 2005, p. 114). The process of analysis gave me the opportunity to construct personal theories as I listed successful strategies and what did not work effectively. The successes included the learners' ability to: (i) use elements of the language of visual literacy correctly (ii) analyse an advertisement in terms of visual presentation, target market, product, logo, motto, slogan, manipulative language and stereotyping and (iii) develop critical language awareness. The shortcomings included: lack of resources, low language levels, constant interruptions during tuition, limited or no visual literacy background and the short duration of the lessons. It also emerged that teacher classroom assessment is central to teaching and learning if the outcomes of the NCS are to be achieved. In this article I have focussed my critical reflection on my classroom assessment practices only with a view to evaluating what happened and why, in order to encourage me to try out new ideas and promote changes in pupils' learning behaviour.

ANALYSING THE QUALITY OF MY TEST QUESTIONS

At the end of the lesson unit on visual literacy, I set a test (see Appendix 1) with the aim of finding out if the learners understood elements of visual literacy and could apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills to the analysis of an advertisement. I also wanted to know where the information gaps were, and to fulfil school assessment requirements. The test was based on a print advertisement and required twenty-five responses from learners. This test was administered to forty-five learners during a fifty-minute lesson. After I finished marking and recorded the test scores I felt very disappointed by the learners' performance, as the marks ranged between 5 and 32 out of 40. The range of marks suggested that I needed to reflect on both my teaching and my assessment.

With an action research second cycle in mind and my personal conviction that I needed to start identifying problems in respect to my practice, I critically evaluated and reflected on the quality of the test questions through a process of item analysis. My first step was to focus on the number of correct responses per question and then convert these to a percentage as shown in the column graph (see Table 1). The graph indicates correct responses to each item. I was

particularly interested in the 12 items that were correctly answered by less than 50% of the students.
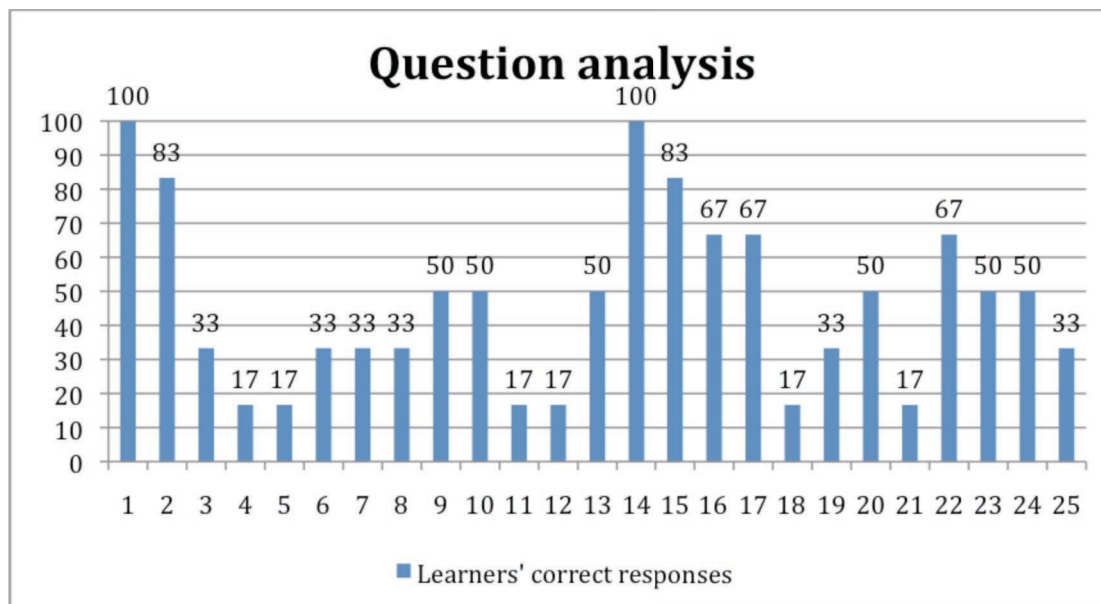
Question analysis

Table 1: Item analysis of learners' performance

My second step was to ask the following questions in an attempt to explain the test results:

- What did I want my students to learn?
- Were students learning what I wanted them to learn?
- How could I modify my test items so that as many students as possible would be successful?

These questions encouraged me to think about the alignment between what I taught, the questions I set (that, together, constitute the content validity of the test) and what the learners were able to do. In examining each of the 12 test questions very closely, I analysed my test in terms of validity and reliability.

VALIDITY OF THE TEST

"Validity concerns the extent to which the test tests what it is supposed to test!" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 334). When assessment tasks measure what educators want them to measure, they are said to be valid tasks. However, it is worth mentioning that "validity is an abstraction" because validity cannot be directly seen more than we directly see the knowledge of a student we are assessing (Oosterhof, 2003, p. 34). When assessing learners, the assessment process produces data such as learners' answers to questions, which the educator interprets to draw conclusions about whether the learner really understood whatever the question was testing (Killen. 2007, p. 325).

Validity covers a wide range of possibilities but, because this article focuses only on a single summative test, I will explore a few relevant points. First of all, the test did not match as closely as possible the objectives of the teaching it was assessing (Gipps, 1990, p. 20). The main goal of the lesson unit was to equip learners with elements of visual grammar, to introduce them to critical language, and to give them an experience of designing. The scope of this test was limited to camera angle, colour, stereotyping and language. Also, some questions did not help learners to understand and analyse the advertisement because they did not relate specifically to it.

The following questions on race and class were too difficult and confusing for the learners.

> 3.1.   How many racial groups are represented in this advertisement?
> 3.2.   List these racial groups.
> 3.2.   What do you think was the reason to include all these racial groups in this advertisement?
> 9:   Which group of children is not represented or included in this advertisement if one looks at South African society?
> 10:   In three sentences state how you could redesign this advertisement so that everybody regardless of class is included in this advertisement.
> 11:   The advertisement does address stereotyping in a way. How has this been addressed?

These questions should be replaced with one question that addresses the complex issue of racial inclusivity and the enduring legacies of apartheid.

In terms of the Bloom's cognitive levels of understanding, the test did not have an appropriate distribution of questions as shown in Table 2.
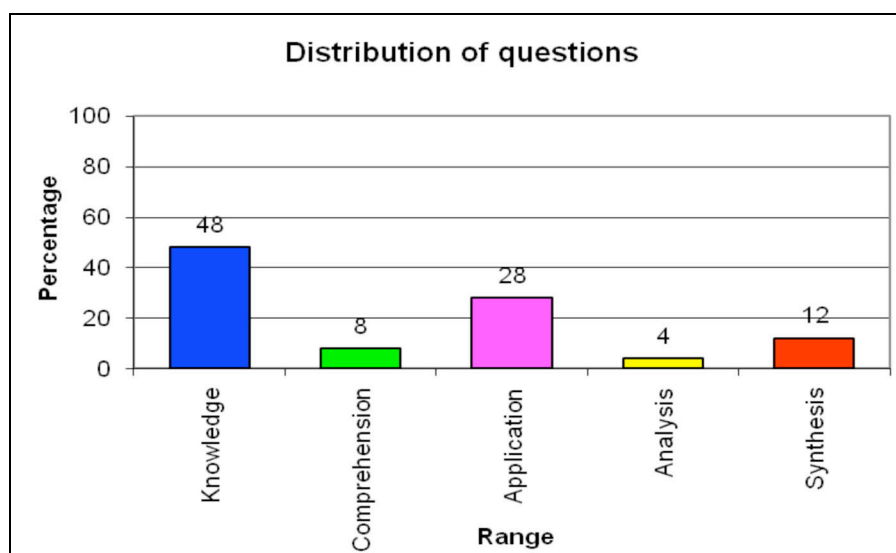

Table 2: Distribution of questions by cognitive levels

Forty-eight percent of questions in this test required retrieval of knowledge from the text, while few addressed comprehension, application and analysis. This distribution of questions shocked me. I realised that I had low expectations of the capabilities of Grade 10 learners. Current South African research has associated learners' poor performance with teachers' low expectations of their learners. It is "suggested that many teachers simply do not set learning tasks that are demanding cognitively, and that many teachers tend to teach to the slowest or weakest children in the class" (Fleisch 2007, p. 130). The distribution of the test questions linked up with my low expectation on what the learners could achieve.

RELIABILITY OF THE TEST

Reliability refers to "the degree to which the test scores are free from errors of measurement (Killen, 2007, p. 323). The following are the main points to consider in developing a reliable test: First of all, question wording should not be confusing or missing out information. As an illustration, the first question wording (How many children do you see in this advertisement?) was confusing without giving learners enough information, and as a result, five or six were accepted as a correct answer. When setting this question I though the learners would be able to identify that the sixth child in the cropped photograph is one of the five children seated at the table because their facial appearance was the same and also wearing the same T-shirt. If my question had additional information to guide the learners to what was being asked about the children it would have been more reliable.

Secondly, questions must be neither too easy nor too difficulty. Question 2 (what are they doing? Response 2) was too easy and should be made more challenging by linking what the children are doing to the message of the advertisement and the product advertised (although there is psychological value in having easy questions to begin a test). It could be rephrased as: How do the pictorial material, words and product contribute to the message of the advertisement? Also, question 4 (At what angle has this photograph been taken?) was too difficult for my learners as shown in response 8 of Table 1. This question did not specify camera angle or give guidance about where the camera is positioned in relation to the children and other items in the photograph. The majority of learners responded by giving examples of camera shots such as close up shot.

Thirdly, the test environment should not hinder learners' ability to display their learning ability. The response cluster 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 (see Table 1) is a typical example of a test environment that hindered learners' ability because there was only one colour copy in the classroom, which was circulated in the classroom whilst individual copies were black and white. Setting a question based on colour whilst learners did not have colour copies of the text rendered my test unreliable.

Having reflected on the learners' responses and on the test itself it is clear that some of my test questions lacked validity and reliability. These questions did not test what they were supposed to test and were full of errors. The test was typically a traditional summative test in which learners were tested at the end of a unit for the purposes of having the marks recorded.

USE OF A RUBRIC

At the end of the lesson unit on visual literacy, learners worked in groups to design an advertisement for their school, which could be used to attract Grade 9 learners to come to this high school the following year. The purpose of designing a school advertisement was to grant learners an opportunity to demonstrate and apply their newly acquired knowledge in an authentic context. An example of a rubric, which I extracted from an NCS Grade 10 textbook, for the assessment of a school poster was adapted for the school advertisement (see Appendix 2). The rubric was to be used as a check-list by designers, and to promote peer and teacher assessment of the finished product.

	Not achieved	Marginal	Adequate	Good	Outstanding
Marks	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Is the advertisement neat with well-defined borders?			3		
Is the texture and lighting used appropriately?		2			
Are elements of the advertisement chosen carefully and well placed or clumsy?			3		
Is colour used well and perfectly balanced?				4	
Is the motto/logo/slogan/name of the school clearly visible?				4	
Is the advertisement designed to appeal to target group's desires for?					
• Quality education			3		
• Sport/music or other				4	
• Discipline			3		
Is the language used simple and free of errors?		2			
Is the advertisement free of stereotyping?			3		
Total	**35/50**				

Table 3. Assessment rubric for a designed advertisement

As designing was new to my students and to me as a teacher, the textbook rubric was never used and the designed advertisement was not assessed. The rubric (see Appendix 2) became invalid and unreliable because, first of all, the six criteria listed on it did not match very well with content learned and the outcomes of the lesson unit. Also, next to each criterion, there

are six performance levels with vague and confusing words. Learners found it difficult to apply this rubric either as check-list or for peer assessment, and I also found it unhelpful for assessing the advertisements my learners produced. To remedy this situation, I designed my own rubric (see Table 3).

Secondly, it became difficult to award marks or percentage using this rubric. Therefore, I designed my rubric so that for each criterion I would be able to assign marks and total them out of fifty. Using my own designed rubric, I could award marks per level of performance out of a total of fifty.

Lastly, my own designed rubric is best suited to my learners as its wording matches the elements of visual literacy learned in the lesson unit. The learners could therefore use the rubric as a checklist or for peer assessment. A teacher-designed assessment rubric could be easily modified to suit what the learners have produced. I could also provide constructive feedback to learners (Dreyer, 2008, p. 98).

PROVISION OF FEEDBACK

Feedback is defined as a "means of providing information how and why the child understands and misunderstands, and what directions the student must take to improve" (Hattie, 1999, p. 9). In his research Hattie found that "the single most powerful factor that enhances achievement is feedback on their learning provided to students" (as cited in Mason, 2005, p. 5). Feedback is vital in language learning. Feedback as an assessment strategy relies mostly on observation, which the teacher uses to evaluate learners' daily activities, discussions in cooperative learning, and during oral presentations. The teacher uses observations to assess learners in an ongoing manner to determine whether the intended outcomes are being achieved or not and then proactively acts immediately by providing feedback.

Evidence from the designed advertisements points to consistent repetition of the same errors made by the learners. The teacher (myself) did not provide any formative feedback to let learners know "…when they are communicating well and when they are making errors or fail to communicate" (Murray, 2006, p. 1). As an illustration, it is evident from the learners' designs that I should have given more guidance about spatial composition while they were working with the photographs that they had cut from magazines.

Even though the focus of the lesson unit was not on learners' use of language, the fact that the unit was part of English (FAL) suggests that immediate feedback should have been given in relation to spelling commonly confusing words such as "carting" instead of "cutting", and "short" in the place of "shot". Time should also have been allocated to the editing of their work. The advertisements were not as well designed as I had anticipated. I had high expectations that learners would produce advertisements similar to the commercial ones we had dealt with. For example, I expected them to place elements in the foreground, thus hiding the white paper they had used as their base, but in all the advertisements there were white blank spaces that could have been covered in colour (see Appendices 3 and 4). These white spaces detracted from the message of the advertisement. I am not being blind to the lack of

resources encountered in designing the advertisements, but the little learners had should have made a difference. As an illustration, learners drew a boy holding a ball to indicate that sport is promoted in the school, but the image was placed on a white background instead of the green or brown of a soccer pitch.

On reflection, I realised that learners should have all the pictures cut or drawings ready in one place first. Then, these should be placed provisionally (without sticking them down) on the A3 paper so that the effects of the layout could be discussed with the teacher. Again, learners should be able to give reasons for the placement of each object. If the placement was considered effective, the learners could paste the photographs or drawings onto the sheet advertisement and then think of a colour to fill in the white spaces that would be left so as to give that advertisement an authentic feel. For example, if the learner drew children with a ball, then she/he would put a green colour for grass as in the playground. The important role of feedback in improving instructional design in general, and student performance in particular, has long been recognised by educational researchers (Mory, 1992). In a visual literacy classroom, the teacher should provide constructive feedback that will support learners while working on their designs.

CONCLUSION

Setting questions, using rubrics and providing feedback are central to a teacher's classroom assessment practices, and call for a significant paradigm shift to a learner-centred approach. Teachers' classroom assessment practices should go:

> Beyond the paper and pencil tests of recall (memorization) of knowledge, towards more extended and open ended forms of assessment-assignments, projects and practical activities-in order both validly to assess new curricular goals and to reinforce the pursuit of those goals (Torrance & Pryor, 1998, pp. 2-3).

Asking clearly phrased and challenging questions, using a rubric and giving feedback on visual literacy are difficult tasks facing teachers whose apartheid era schooling and teacher education did not prepare them for these tasks. One way to improve is to learn from your day-to-day teaching experience by becoming a reflective teacher (Killen, 2007, p. 93). All in all, visual literacy and its assessment are exciting aspects of the new curriculum. They require careful thought, planning and critical reflection in order to achieve the quality education that is the main goal of this curriculum.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Appendix 1

English Test   March 2006   40 Marks   50 minutes

Look at the Parmalat Everfresh Milk advertisement below and respond to all these questions:

1. How many children do you see in this advertisement?

2. What are they doing?

3. a.   How many racial groups are represented in this advertisement?
    b.   List those racial groups.
    c.   What do you think was the reason to include all these racial groups in this advertisement?

4. At what angle has this photograph been taken?

5. 5.1.   List three varieties of parmalat everfresh milk that you see.

    5.2.   Of the three, which one is best for children? Support your answer with evidence from the picture (and not in words).

6. What makes these new parmalat cartoons different from the old ones?
    Mention two advantages of the new ones.

7. These three parmalat milk varieties use three common colours.

    List those three colours. What do you think each colour stand for or symbolise?

8. According to the advertisement, why is the children's fun described as healthy?

9. Which group of children are not represented or included in this advertisement if one looks at South African societies?

10. In three sentences, state how can you redesign this advertisement so that everybody regardless of class is included in this advertisement?

11. The advertisement does address stereotyping in a way. How has this been addressed?

Appendix 2: Assessment rubric for a school advertisement

Criteria	Level 6	Level 5	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
Remains on the focus of advertising the school as one which tries to be inclusive	The aim of the advertisement is clearly focused on and covered convincingly and superbly.	The aim is covered very well and is obvious throughout the advertisement.	The aim is covered in a satisfactory way	The aim is covered in an adequate way but it does not give the focus of the advertisement.	The aim is covered poorly. There is only a hint of the aim. Unclear	The aim is not covered at all. The school is not being advertised and there is no mention of inclusivity.
Appeals to target market of prospective high school students and their parents	Appropriate market is targeted cleverly and skilfully. Most convincing.	The correct target market is appealed to successfully.	The market is targeted fairly well.	The market is only partially targeted. Both groups are not appealed to adequately or equally.	The appeal to the target market is poorly achieved. One group has been neglected in favour of the other.	The advertisement does not appeal to correct market. Either too generalised or leaves out one group altogether
Uses images effectively	Images are superb and very exciting.	The images are interesting.	Images are used but they are not very exciting.	Not all the images used are appropriate or only a few are used.	Very few images are used and those used are not working	No images have been used or they make no sense at all.
Considers the placing of material carefully	Placing was superbly planned and attention given to detail.	The placing of material was carefully considered.	The placing of material was satisfactorily done.	The placing was adequate but no real thought had gone into it.	The placing of material was poorly done. Little thought went into it. Items placed haphazardly.	No thought went into the placing. The material was thrown together carelessly.
Uses emotive language and choice of words fully to attract audience	Used emotive language well and chose words to enhance the intended appeal in a skilful way.	The emotive writing and choice of words were very effective.	Used emotive language and paid some attention to choosing words carefully.	Used some emotive language.	Used emotive language poorly or did not use enough of it. The words chosen were not always appropriate.	The use of words was very poor. No thought was given to the words
Shows an understanding of the school's philosophy and potential appeal	Showed excellent understanding of the philosophy and potential appeal	Showed good understanding of the school's philosophy and potential appeal.	Showed a fair understanding of the school's philosophy and potential appeal.	Showed adequate understanding of the school's philosophy and potential appeal.	Showed limited understanding of the school's philosophy and potential appeal.	Showed no understanding of school's philosophy and potential appeal

Appendix 3: Showing a designed advertisement

Appendix 4: Showing a designed school advertisement