

Unlocking Adult Literacy: Exploring Malawian Facilitators' Insights on Effective Facilitation Methods

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Abstract

This paper explores adult literacy facilitators' insights on facilitation methods for adult learning in Malawi. Facilitators' knowledge of facilitation methods is critical for adult learning. The study used the qualitative research approach and was exploratory. Data collection methods included face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and literacy class observations. The study revealed that very few adult literacy facilitators have some knowledge of facilitation methods for adult learning, hence, facilitation process was mainly facilitator-centred. Overall, it emerged that lecture, and question and answer methods were predominantly used facilitation methods. It further revealed that demonstration, discussion, debate and narration methods were hardly used during facilitation process which deprived adult learners of opportunities to practice different skills. Limited knowledge of effective facilitation methods among facilitators negatively impacts their decision-making. This, in turn, affects the quality of literacy classes and contradicts the principles of andragogy theory. Consequently, limited knowledge of facilitators about effective facilitation methods overall affected the achievement of adult learning outcomes.

Keywords

facilitator,
facilitation methods,
learner-centred,
facilitator-centred,
andragogy

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Introduction

This paper explores adult literacy facilitators' insights on effective facilitation methods for adult learning in Malawi. There is clear evidence from

literature and research studies that adult literacy education has a persistent and positive significance to the development of the nation, community and family (Mjaya, 2022; Titmus, 2014; People's Action Forum, 2009; Literacy for life, 2005). Such evidence generally enlightens the fact that literacy builds and strengthens the capabilities of individuals and enhances their participation in social, economic, cultural and political activities (Mjaya, 2022; People's Action Forum, 2009). Thus, literacy greatly affects people's lives in a number of ways such as empowerment, poverty alleviation, development and improved self-esteem as well as facilitates creativity and critical thinking for the betterment of adult learners' lives (Plan International UK, 2016; Marshall, 2015; Lind, 2008; Abadzi, 2003).

However, the great role played by adult literacy facilitators in the implementation of adult literacy programmes cannot be over-emphasised. Adult literacy facilitators are the main determinants of the overall management efficiency in any adult literacy programme (Murtala & Bala, 2015; Oluoch, Ayode & Enose, 2014), as such their knowledge of facilitation methods for adult learning ensures effective facilitation process in literacy classes (Kapur, 2018; Murtala & Bala, 2015; Kamp, 2011). It is important to note that effective learning depends on the effectiveness of facilitation methods that are engaged by the facilitator during the facilitation process (Dhlamini, 2012). This suggests that facilitators' knowledge about facilitation methods plays a decisive role during adult learning. As Machobane (2010) argues, adult literacy facilitators should ultimately have a well-developed understanding of the knowledge and skills needed for adult learning. This calls for adult literacy facilitators to know about different facilitation methods and techniques suitable for adult learners and how they may be used in literacy classes.

Adult literacy programmes require the use of different facilitation methods and techniques that are specifically suitable for adult learning (TIME Project Partnership, 2016). Facilitators should realise that literacy programmes recommend the use of learner-centred methods because they help enhance the adult learners' ability to learn independently (Kapur, 2018; UNISA, 2015; Kamp,

2011). The examples of learner-centred methods include demonstration, group discussion, role play, debate, drama, songs and dances, buzz group, and visual aids (Kapur, 2018; UNISA, 2015; Kamp, 2011; Archer & Newman, 2003; Archer & Cottingham, 1996). The combination of these methods has proved to be more effective to stimulate the motivation of adult learners (Kapur, 2018; TIME Project Partnership, 2016; UNISA, 2015; Kamp, 2011). In this regard, Kamp (2011) argues that facilitators should use a variety of appropriate facilitation methods to ensure an effective and participatory adult learning process. This knowledge therefore calls for facilitators to seriously consider how best they can use different appropriate facilitation methods during the learning process in order to bring out the desired outcomes. A study on facilitators' professional qualities and learning outcomes in non-formal basic literacy programmes in Nigeria by Alkali (2016) found that facilitation methods used by facilitators relate strongly and positively to adult learners' learning outcomes in basic literacy programmes. Thus, it can be inferred that limited knowledge of facilitators about facilitation methods could affect the overall achievement of learning outcomes.

Adult literacy programmes emphasise that facilitation of adult learning cannot be effectively accomplished through the conventional teaching style based on facilitator-centred methods (Kamp, 2011). In view of this, Attwood (2008) observes that adult literacy demands for highly skilled facilitators to guide the facilitation process to achieve adult learning goals. According to Kapur (2018), adult learning should be facilitated in such a manner that it achieves the learning goals of every adult learner involved. Of great interest to this research study is an argument put forward by Ogu et al. (2019) that competent facilitators enhance relevant adult literacy programmes and adopt learner-centred methods in literacy classes for adult learners to achieve their learning needs. Tobias (2000) in a study on the boundaries of adult education for active citizenship-institutional and community contexts in New Zealand, stresses that facilitators should strive to facilitate the development of what has variously been termed perspective transformation, critical thinking and the reconstruction of citizenship. This implies that facilitators should equip adult learners with knowledge and skills through effective facilitation

methods to prepare them for lifelong learning. Thus, Kahler et al. (2005) propose that facilitators need to approach the facilitation process as a creation of conducive environment which involves guiding and mediation of learning. In essence, the role of adult literacy facilitators is not to provide adult learners with new knowledge but rather to identify the most feasible knowledge to solve their problems (Addae, 2016).

The role adult literacy facilitators play in the usage of facilitation methods in literacy classes is decisive to adult learning (Ogu et al., 2019; Harod, 2001). In the view of Mac Gregor (2008), it is the responsibility of facilitators to manage literacy classes properly through effective facilitation methods so that adult learners may learn effectively. In this respect, Dhlamini (2012) argues that the effectiveness of facilitation methods entails that adult learners are challenged to examine their previously held values, beliefs and behaviours and be confronted with the ones that they may not want to consider. Dhlamini's argument suggests that facilitators should focus on experiential methods that tap into the experience of adult learners such as group discussion, problem solving, case methods, simulation exercises, games and role play instead of just relying on transmittal methods such as lectures (Kapur, 2018; Kamp, 2011). This is enough evidence as Quan-Baffour (2000) asserts that there are a variety of effective facilitation methods that can be employed by facilitators in literacy classes during the learning process. Dhlamini (2012) posits that when various facilitation methods are used in adult literacy classes, adult learners are more likely to be motivated to learn. In a comparative study of adult education programmes in Ghana and South Africa on methods of teaching adults, Addae (2016) argues that by employing effective facilitation methods, adult literacy facilitators are able to assist adult learners achieve their learning goals.

Several studies have revealed that competent facilitators employ effective facilitation methods for adult learners to achieve their learning goals (Ogu et al., 2019; Bakare, 2011; Fasokin, 2008). In a study that investigates the effectiveness of facilitation methods to motivate adult learners to participate in adult basic education and training (ABET) programmes in the adult centre at Ekurhuleni in

South Africa, Dhlamini (2012) highlights that effective learning depends on the effectiveness of facilitation methods that are engaged by adult literacy facilitators during the facilitation process. This implies that facilitators require a particular range of competencies to be effective; these competencies are based on a defined body of knowledge and skills which include facilitation methods and strategies (Murtala & Bala, 2015). However, Fasokun (2008) while researching on the status of adult education practice in Nigeria noted that most facilitators lack knowledge and skills to facilitate adult learning process in adult education programmes. The findings suggest that limited knowledge of facilitators negatively affect the quality of facilitation process in literacy classes and the achievement of adult learning goals.

Similarly, findings of a study conducted by Bakare (2011) on the adult educator in Nigeria, revealed skill gaps among facilitators in adult education programmes and recommended the use of facilitation methods through the acquisition of the relevant skills to enhance adult learning programmes. This implies that without facilitators' knowledge, it would be difficult for facilitators to employ effective facilitation methods to enhance adult learning in literacy classes. Nevertheless, Murtala and Bala (2015) contend that facilitators' knowledge and skills should be regarded as highly crucial for effective facilitation to enhance adult literacy programmes. In light of this, Harod (2001) postulates that the impact of adult literacy education on learners largely depends on the knowledge of the facilitators and the facilitation methods that are used in literacy classes.

In Malawi, some research studies that have been conducted have established that adult literacy facilitators use primary school methodologies which are not suitable for adult learners (Rogers, 2008; Benediktsson & Kamtengeni, 2004). The findings from research studies have revealed that adult literacy facilitators use teacher-centred methods during facilitation process in literacy classes which affects adult learners' acquisition of literacy skills (Rogers, 2008; Benediktsson & Kamtengeni, 2004). However, the studies did not explain the reasons behind the use of teacher-centred methods by adult literacy facilitators during facilitation

process. Against this background, this research study aimed to explore adult literacy facilitators' insights on facilitation methods for adult learning in Malawi.

This paper is presented in five sections. The first section delves deep into the problem of facilitation methods in adult literacy programmes. The following section discusses the theoretical framework that guided the study, and the research design and methodology. Then, the paper presents and discusses the findings on adult literacy facilitators' knowledge of facilitation methods for adult learning. The next section presents and discusses the findings related to effects of facilitators' knowledge of facilitation methods on adult learning. The final section concludes the discussion.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

This research study was guided by Malcolm Knowles' andragogy theory. Knowles' theory of andragogy is defined as the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1989). The theory recommends learner-centred methods, which is a crucial aspect in terms of facilitation of adult learning process (Knowles, 1989; Knowles, 1984). Knowles identifies six characteristics of adult learners that adult literacy facilitators should consider for effective facilitation. These characteristics are: adults are autonomous and self-directed; adults have accumulated life experiences and knowledge; adults are goal-oriented; adults are relevancy-oriented; adults are practical; and adults need to be shown respect (Kapur, 2018; Kamp, 2011; Rogers, 2008; McCaffery et al., 2007; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005; Lieb, 1991). Bedi (2004) argues that andragogy helps adult literacy facilitators understand adult learners behaviour for effective facilitation.

Andragogy provides guidance to adult literacy facilitators to use learner-centred approach to instructions to enhance knowledge and skills necessary for adult learners' needs (Chan, 2010; Knowles, 1989; Knowles, 1980). According to the theory, the role of the facilitator is not to provide adult learners with new knowledge but rather create opportunities for them to reflect on such knowledge and beliefs and to identify the most feasible knowledge to solve their problems

(Addae, 2016). Thus, using the andragogical principles, adult literacy facilitators can tailor the instruction in literacy classes to meet adult learners' goals for learning by involving them in various learning activities. This also extends to facilitation methods and techniques used in literacy classes and ways in which adult literacy facilitators engage adult learners during the learning process which are the central aspects of the theory.

In terms of research design and methodology, the study was guided by qualitative research approach considering that it was exploratory in nature (Creswell, 2007). This approach was considered to be appropriate bearing in mind that the study aimed at exploring adult literacy facilitators' insights on facilitation methods for adult learning. The study was guided by a case study design. McLeod (2008) states that case studies are often used in exploratory research because they can help generate new ideas that might also be verified by other method. The case study design was appropriate in the sense that it helped in bringing out the details from adult literacy facilitators' view point (Stake, 1995). As such, the research design provided an opportunity for the researcher to explore and have a deeper understanding of adult literacy facilitators' insights on facilitation methods for adult learning. According to Schumacher and McMillan (2006), a case study promotes better understanding of a practice or issue and facilitates informed decision-making. Thus, a case study allowed the researcher to have a deeper understanding of adult literacy facilitators' insights on facilitation methods for adult learning.

The study was conducted in Mulanje district, in the Southern Region of Malawi. Thirty adult literacy facilitators (10 males and 20 females) were purposively selected to provide diverse insights. These facilitators were identified from adult literacy classes that were active during the time of the study. As Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (2002) argue, purposeful sampling is used when the researcher selects a sample using set criterion so that the sample will provide maximum insight and understanding of the study. In this case, the focus was on exploring adult literacy facilitators' insights on facilitation methods for adult learning. Data was generated

through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observations. In total, six in-depth interviews with facilitators and five focus group discussions were conducted. As for observations, six literacy classes were observed and on average, fifteen observations for each literacy class were conducted.

Data that was generated in this study was purely qualitative with less use of numerical data. The interviews together with field notes were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to analyse the generated data. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis as a qualitative analytic method involves “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). The process of analysing data involved making sense of the data through noting patterns, themes, and categories that emerged from the data. Thus, the researcher came up with summaries of all the themes to show how the study has responded to the research questions to form the findings of the study. The findings were presented as narratives.

Participation was entirely voluntary with written permission obtained from the Mulanje District Commissioner. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were briefed on their right to withdraw at any stage. Data confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. In addition, the study participants have been kept anonymous to maintain privacy and confidentiality.

Adult literacy facilitators’ knowledge of facilitation methods for adult learning

Research question one explored adult literacy facilitators’ knowledge of facilitation methods for adult learning. As already discussed in the paper, facilitation methods can be considered as a bedrock for effective facilitation process in literacy classes. The study revealed that only few (8 out of 30 representing 27%) adult literacy facilitators had some knowledge of facilitation methods that are supposed to be used in literacy classes. One participant during face-to-face interviews explained this as follows:

I know some of the methods, discussion method or using lecture or discussion method, may be using songs. These are the methods I know that we can use. (**Facilitator Circle Z**)

Discussion, lecture and songs are some of the facilitation methods that a few adult literacy facilitators know. However, the study discovered that most (22 out of 30 representing 73%) adult literacy facilitators had little knowledge of facilitation methods. As some participants explained:

I do not know any teaching methods because we were not taught during our training. I just know the method of writing on the board and asking questions. So, the method we learnt from the training is that one of writing on the board, there is no other method. (**Facilitator Circle V**)

Just as I already said, the topic on methods, we did not learn the topic on the methods mainly because we were not properly trained so that is a challenge. We did not touch on the methods. (**FGD 4**)

Contrary to andragogy theory which advocates that adult literacy facilitators should have adequate knowledge for effective facilitation (Chan, 2010; Bedi, 2004, Knowles, 1989), these findings seem to point to the fact that some facilitators had little knowledge of facilitation methods for adult learning. However, it emerged that this challenge originates from the training that facilitators underwent. It was particularly interesting that although some adult literacy facilitators had limited knowledge of facilitation methods, they were actually still facilitating the adult learning process in literacy classes. It is the researcher's view that limited knowledge on the part of adult literacy facilitators about facilitation methods could negatively affect the overall facilitation process in literacy classes because facilitators do not exploit various facilitation methods and techniques during adult learning appropriate for adult learners.

Commonly used facilitation methods during adult learning

The study established that the lecture, and question and answer methods are predominantly used by adult literacy facilitators in all the literacy classes.

There might be a number of explanations for this situation including the fact that facilitators do not have knowledge on different types of facilitation methods that could be used in literacy classes during facilitation process. Another explanation could be that the facilitators may have knowledge about different methods of facilitation but lack ideas about how such methods can be used in literacy classes during learning process. During FGDs, some participants reported commonly used methods during facilitation process as explained:

For me, the methods that I usually use from time to time are question and answer method and also lecture method. (FGD 5)

The dominance of the lecture, and question and answer methods meant that adult learners were not given much opportunities to be exposed to participatory learning which is against the andragogical principles (Knowles, 1989; Knowles, 1984). The study found that much of the facilitation process in the literacy classes was facilitator-centred. The underlying question is whether adult learners can still acquire literacy skills without being actively involved in the learning process. As Quan-Baffour (2000) argues, no single facilitation method can achieve the outcomes of the facilitation process. This knowledge calls adult literacy facilitators to use different facilitation methods during the learning process. Likewise, the findings of the study by Warigia (2014) on factors affecting the implementation of literacy programmes in adult education in Kenya, recommends literacy facilitators to use several facilitations methods during the facilitation process for effective adult learning.

During visits to six literacy classes involved in the study, the researcher observed that the learning process was facilitator-centred contrary to andragogy theory (Knowles, 1989; Knowles, 1984). As a consequence, much less attention was paid to engaging adult learners in various learning activities necessary for developing literacy skills. It is crucial for adult literacy facilitators to know that the role of the facilitator, according to andragogy theory is not to provide adult learners with new knowledge but rather create opportunities for them to reflect on such knowledge and beliefs and to identify the most feasible knowledge to solve their

problems (Addae, 2016). Actually, andragogy theory reminds facilitators to engage adult learners in the learning process and create conducive participatory learning environments that help them learn their best to achieve their learning goals (Houle, 1996). Failure to engage adult learners in the learning process ultimately deprives them opportunities to share knowledge, skills and experiences through cooperative learning which is against one of the principles of andragogy theory which states that adults are practical (Chan, 2010; Knowles, 1989). Therefore, facilitators must be aware that learning in the literacy classes requires learner-centred methods.

Rarely used facilitation methods during adult learning

While some methods were commonly employed, others despite their potential benefits were notably underutilised. The study findings from observations and interviews revealed that discussion and demonstration methods were rarely used by adult literacy facilitators in literacy classes during facilitation process. Even during the visits to the six literacy classes, the researcher observed that adult literacy facilitators hardly used discussion and demonstration methods in the learning process. This finding also agrees with Machobane (2010) who reports that in South Africa, demonstration methods are rarely used by literacy facilitators during adult learning process. Besides, during visits to all the six literacy classes throughout the whole period of the study, the researcher did not observe any of the adult literacy facilitators using role play, drama, songs, narration and debate methods of facilitation. This highlights that most of the adult literacy facilitators involved in the study did not maximise the use of a variety of different facilitation methods despite having several advantages on adult learning in terms of the development of literacy skills. Contrary to the facilitators' approach, andragogy theory recommends the use of learner-centred methods during adult learning process (Houle, 1996; Knowles, 1989; Knowles, 1984). However, the study established that the training did not prepare them enough to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for effective facilitation. One participant had this to say:

If we look at it properly, the great part of the problem of lack of knowledge on the part of us facilitators originated from the training. The

training was inadequate and imperfect as such we did not get the required knowledge. **(Facilitator Circle V)**

Lack of knowledge by facilitators originates from the fact that the training was inadequate, which has its own implications for the quality of practice, especially the provision of learning experiences in literacy classes. The findings suggest that the training received by adult literacy facilitators in the six literacy classes was not effective. Thus, it is almost certain that the quality of training has huge influence on practice in the literacy classes and the achievement of learning outcomes. Training of facilitators is especially important because it helps them develop knowledge and skills for effective facilitation (Oluoch et al., 2014; Suleyman, 2013; Archer & Cottingham, 1996). In view of this, the researcher opines that proper training of facilitators should be deemed paramount since it prepares them to acquire knowledge and skills suitable for effective facilitation in literacy classes.

Effects of facilitators' knowledge of facilitation methods on adult learning

The last research question focused on the effects of facilitators' knowledge of facilitation methods on adult learning. The study revealed that adult literacy facilitators' knowledge of facilitation methods directly affects the quality of facilitation in literacy classes. However, it emerged that most adult literacy facilitators do not have adequate knowledge on effective facilitation methods for adult learning. As a result, facilitators are incompetent to effectively facilitate adult learning process in literacy classes. Some participants reiterated the following:

Knowing the methods for facilitation greatly helps the facilitator on how he/she can facilitate in the literacy class. But the biggest problem is that most facilitators do not know effective facilitation methods, as a result, it becomes extremely difficult to facilitate effectively. **(FGD 2)**

Since we (facilitators) do not have knowledge on effective methods for facilitation, then we just do what we can do. We don't have a choice. **(Facilitator Circle Z)**

While facilitators' knowledge on facilitation methods for adult learning directly affect the quality of facilitation, lack of knowledge on facilitation methods suitable for adult learning deprive adult literacy facilitators an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills for improved facilitation process in literacy classes. Limited knowledge by adult literacy facilitators means that they do not have adequate knowledge and skills to competently facilitate adult learning process. As a consequence, effective facilitation does not take place in literacy classes which is against andragogy theory (Knowles, 1989; Knowles, 1984).

More crucially, the study further established that the facilitators' incompetence was actually manifested during facilitation process in literacy classes to the extent that they could not understand the critical aspects of facilitation. As a result, facilitators chose which topics to cover during learning process as explained by one participant during face-to-face interviews:

Honestly speaking, due to lack of knowledge on how to facilitate effectively, so, we too just facilitate the topics that we only understand and leave out the rest, should we go and lie? No!! (**Facilitator Circle U**)

The fact that adult literacy facilitators choose to facilitate on topics that are only familiar to them and leave out those topics that are considered difficult has implications on the level of literacy development for adult learners. This has implications particularly on adult learners' acquisition of literacy skills since facilitators do not holistically and systematically exploit various aspects of literacy skills acquisition in literacy classes due to limited knowledge on issues around facilitation of adult learning. This finding is consistent with what Addae's (2016) study found that adult literacy facilitators' incompetence was manifested during facilitation process in literacy classes. A study by Alkali (2016), however, found that facilitators' quality of knowledge and skills positively affects adult learners' learning outcomes in adult basic literacy programmes. Therefore, the study findings suggest

that facilitators' level of knowledge have a considerable bearing on the quality of facilitation in literacy classes and the achievement of adult learning goals.

Conclusion

This paper has explored adult literacy facilitators' insights on facilitation methods for adult learning in Mulanje district in Malawi. The study has revealed that very few adult literacy facilitators have the knowledge of facilitation methods suitable for adult learning, as a result, facilitation process in almost all the literacy classes was primarily facilitator-centred contrary to andragogy theory. Overall, it emerged that lecture, and question and answer methods were the two predominantly used facilitation methods in literacy classes. The study has further revealed that demonstration, discussion, debate and narration methods were rarely used by adult literacy facilitators during facilitation process despite several advantages that these methods have on adult learning, which deprived adult learners of opportunities to practice different skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and literacy. The study has established that, while facilitators' knowledge of facilitation methods for adult learning positively affects the quality of facilitation, most adult literacy facilitators have little knowledge on effective facilitation methods for adult learning which negatively influence their decisions in literacy classes. Thus, limited knowledge of facilitators about facilitation methods appropriate for adult learning ultimately affects the overall achievement of adult learning outcomes.

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