

Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language Teaching
- Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi -
Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo
- Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali
Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig -
Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi
- Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi
- Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa
Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo -
Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi
- Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig
- Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali
yokuFundisa iLimi -
Ijenali yokuFundisa
iiLwimi - Ibhuku
Lokufundisa Ulimi
- Tšenale ya tša
Go ruta Polelo -
Buka ya Thuto
ya Puo - Jenale
ya Thuto ya Dipuo
Ijenali Yekufundzisa
Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u
Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala
yo
Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig
- Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali
yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi -
Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya
Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya
u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi
- Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali
yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi -
Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa
Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo -
Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig -
Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi
- Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi
- Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa
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Teaching from the heart: exploring beginner teachers' attitudinal knowledge

Abstract

This article provides insight into the knowledge held by Zimbabwean Ordinary Level beginner teachers who teach Literature in English. An extant of research output on ESL focuses on curriculum, subject, learner, and pedagogical content knowledge of linguistic content, with limited, if any, focus on knowledge of Literature in English. To address this gap, this study employed a qualitative single case study design to gather data on the knowledge held by four purposively selected beginner teachers. In the context of this study, beginner teachers were college trained English teachers who had been in the profession for less than four years. The study was underpinned by social constructivism and current literature on experiential teacher knowledge.

The study established as a novel finding that beginner teachers held attitudinal knowledge. Additionally, the findings affirmed that beginner teachers' knowledge was a multiple-sourced construct that was fluid, idiosyncratic, attitudinal, pragmatic, and contextual. The study recommends that teacher preparation institutions consider the findings as basis for student teacher training programmes that foster connections between personal and experiential sources of knowledge construction.

Keywords: attitudinal knowledge; beginner teachers; English Second Language; experiential teacher knowledge; Literature in English

1. Context of the study

The purpose of this article is to describe the knowledge held by Zimbabwean Ordinary Level (O Level) beginner teachers sourced from experiences of teaching Literature in English. The following question was used to guide the study: What knowledge do Zimbabwean O Level beginner teachers possess from experiences of teaching Literature in English? In the context of this study the term “beginner teachers” refers to individuals that had completed the Zimbabwean Literature in English high school teacher training programme and have no more than four years full-time teaching experience. O level refers to a two-year course presented in Zimbabwean high schools. The schooling period in which the course is presented is commonly referred to as Forms 3 and 4. This academic course is usually for learners between 15 and 17 years of age. The course is adopted from the British GCE Ordinary Level (Kanyongo, 2005:68).

In most ESL classrooms, literature texts have been used as sources for the teaching of English language. Literature has maintained this role as it is a rich source of authentic language material, because it comprises two important features, namely language in use and aesthetic presentation of the spoken word, which is the cultural context of language (Paran, 2008:14). Texts such as short stories, novels, poetry, newspapers and magazines are considered important literary sources in enhancing learners’ language acquisition. However, the focus on Literature in English is different from its use as an enhancer for language acquisition (Gordon, 2012:366). Literature in English is a term that refers to a subject offered in the Zimbabwean high school curriculum. It focuses on the reading and analysis of literary works written in English by prominent African, European, and American poets, novelists, and dramatists (The Zimbabwean Literature in English Ordinary Level Syllabus, 2013:4, henceforth ZOLLS). Literature in English at O Level comprises the study of four literary genres: prose, novel, drama, and poetry as well as the writer’s overall worldview and the learners’ interpretation thereof. The emphasis in Literature in English is the study of the story, characters, social background, themes, and values from poetry, prose, and drama (ZOLLS, 2013:4).

2. Problem statement

Zimbabwean English beginner teachers face contextual challenges that are unique to the nature of their teacher training and curricula requirements at secondary school, where they eventually teach. The Zimbabwean English secondary school curricula require of beginner teachers to teach English Language and Literature in English as separate subjects (Department of Teacher Education, 2012:14). The teacher training programmes that the beginner teachers had gone through equipped them with knowledge for the teaching of the subject, English Language, while the teaching of literature was presented as a sub-section of language teaching. This means that the teacher training programme prepared the beginner teachers with an integrative form of teaching knowledge which does not distinguish between English Language and Literature in English as separate subjects, as required by the high school curricula. Current literature indicates that such beginner

teachers face many challenges as they navigate their way into the teaching profession. Trent (2015:1) suggests that beginner teachers face a “reality shock” and that this shock is believed to reflect a mismatch between early career teachers’ expectations and the realities of the classroom. This outcome could account for the frustration, anxiety and self-doubt many early career teachers are thought to experience. Notwithstanding the contextual differences in which beginner teachers operate, studies suggest that their focus is on ensuring instructional effectiveness against a background of limited instructional methods and knowledge (Ulvik, Smith & Helleve, 2009:836).

From the narration above, it is clear that ESL beginner teachers are “battling with the conflict between their beliefs, their training, the realities of the classroom, the demands of parents and learners, and the requirements to demonstrate immediate attainment” (Paran, 2012:457). From this background it appears that ESL beginner teachers are not always ready to assume teaching responsibilities, as they find that their teacher training has not adequately prepared them for the actual instructional practices. In Zimbabwe, as is the case with most ESL countries, the challenges described above emanate from the nature of the teaching profession which Smith and Ingersoll (2004:682) describe as an occupation that “cannibalizes its ‘young’ and in which the initiation of new teachers is akin to a ‘sink or swim,’ ‘trial by fire,’ or ‘boot camp’ experience”. By no means are we suggesting that, against the background described above, teaching and learning are not taking place; our intention was to explore the knowledge that beginner teachers held for teaching Literature in English sourced from their classroom experiences.

Experiential teacher knowledge is the beginner teachers’ effort to “practicalise” their theoretical knowledge from interpreting their teaching practices and reflection on classroom-based experiences (Cheng, Tang & Cheng, 2012:781). From the review of literature, it is clear that the study of teachers’ experiences in the classroom has been called by different names over time. According to Oleson and Hora (2014:3) exploration into the experiences of professionals is based on “Aristotle’s notion of ‘phronesis’, or the practical wisdom that comes from applying general principles or ideas to specific idiosyncratic situations ...”. Grimmitt and MacKinnon (1992: 395), cited in Russell (2015:1021) state that understanding the practical experiences of teachers is called craft knowledge which “... is essentially the accumulated wisdom derived from teachers’ and practice-oriented researchers’ understanding of the meanings ascribed to the many dilemmas inherent in teaching”. In addition, Connelly and Clandinin (1985:174) state that the examination of teachers’ experiences through narration and reflection leads to an understanding of their personal practical knowledge. Moreover, the term “reflective practices” has been used to explain the teachers’ experiential knowledge. The term “reflective practices” can be traced back to the works of Dewey (1933). Dewey (1933:9) states that reflective practice is an “active, persistent, careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads”. The teachers’ reflective practices focus on professional growth and development through a process of reflecting on their classroom-based activities. The different terms used in literature to refer to teachers’ experiential knowledge indicate that it is context, personal, practical, subject, and classroom bound. It is this type of knowledge that the present study explored in the O Level Literature in English beginner teachers’ classrooms.

By exploring the beginner teachers' knowledge from their classroom experiences, we rejected an imposition of teaching knowledge as universally applicable and embraced a dynamic and situated understanding of teaching. We supported the view that beginner teachers who act routinely by following the curriculum without analysing the needs of the classroom fail to provide and meet learners' needs, but they construct context-dependent knowledge when they continuously reflect and revise their teaching practices. Thus, in our study, beginner teacher's actions and activities in Literature in English were important in revealing what they know. We posit that after reflecting on their teaching experiences, beginner teachers select to incorporate specific actions and activities to make the learning and teaching environment effective. Consequently, the aim of the study was to explore the knowledge held by Zimbabwean O Level beginner teachers for teaching Literature in English sourced from the classroom experiences.

3. Conceptual framework

Notwithstanding findings of researchers who noted that beginner teachers lack adequate knowledge needed for effective teaching, we were of the opinion that even with this minimal knowledge of teaching, they were involved in an elaborate process of constructing knowledge for use in their classrooms from experiences of practice and context. Such knowledge helps beginner teachers to "... learn how to do instruction, not just hear and talk about it" (Ball, Sleep, Boerst & Bass, 2009:459). This means that the Literature in English classroom is the context where beginner teachers practice their profession and acquire experiences that inform their overall teaching acts. From these assumptions, the theoretical constructs that guided this exploration were drawn from social constructivism and research on experiential teacher knowledge. A synthesis of these two constructs provided an exploratory framework against which this study was approached.

The study's understanding of teacher knowledge construction is in line with the social constructivist orientation. Social constructivism is based on an assumption that knowledge is socially constructed from experiential practices (Schwandt, 2007:38). Social constructivism provided us with an argument to use in rejecting the use of only research-based theories in exploring teaching knowledge. We held to John's (2002:324) claim that empirical evidence that was used to support the codification of teacher knowledge is based on a wrong premise, as teaching is a social activity. Against this background we chose to illuminate the beginner teachers' knowledge even though they were teaching Literature in English for the first time. We were aware that they had accrued experiential knowledge from teaching English Language and from their experiences as former Literature in English learners. From this reasoning, we approached our study from an understanding that no one aspect of teaching knowledge should be regarded as more important than the other, but that a symbiotic relationship should be emphasized. By applying social constructivism to our understanding of beginner teachers' knowledge, we illuminated its construction as originating from the interaction with learners, parents, colleagues, school, and community. By embracing social constructivism as our

epistemological trajectory we underpinned the importance of teaching experiences in the construction of teaching knowledge.

Our understanding of experiential knowledge is that it is a strategy "... of organising and re-organising past experiences, it embodies a person's experience, finds expression in practice; and is the perspective from which new experience is taken" (Clandinin, 1986:5). In addition, according to Fenstermacher (1994:11) experiential knowledge is

... the type of knowledge which is bounded by the situation or context in which it arises, and it may or may not be capable of immediate expression in speech or writing. The teachers' experiential knowledge is generally related to how to do things, or the right place and time to do them, or about how to see and interpret events related to one's action.

We deduce from this that experiential teacher knowledge is dialectical and situated in the personal and practical experiences of the teacher. In the context of this study, we assumed that each beginner teacher possesses individualised knowledge that influences their teaching decisions and judgements. Experiential teacher knowledge in this study refers to beginner teachers' practical, personal, and reflective practices.

Traditionally, according to Fenstermacher (1994:11), there has always been a clear demarcation between knowledge held by academics (theoretical knowledge) and by practitioners (experiential knowledge). This implied that teachers possessed experience gained from teaching and as such their knowledge was not considered as scientific and important. This view that teachers' experiential knowledge lacked credence slowly decreased in the early 1980s (Feiman-Nemser, 2001:1014). Academics came to the realisation that experiential practices were important in understanding the teaching knowledge held by classroom teachers. Fenstermacher (1994:7) notes that "... the omission is due in part to the fact that we have not had ways of thinking about this experiential knowledge and in part because we fail to recognise more practically oriented knowledge". Most researchers explore teachers' experiential knowledge from their stories, images, reflection, and narratives about their classroom practices (Farrell, 2012:436). Although we did not follow a narrative design, we embraced the descriptive and storied approach to exploring the beginner teachers' experiential knowledge. This approach allowed us to view beginner teachers as interpreting, reflecting and constructing contextual and idiosyncratic knowledge for teaching Literature in English.

4. Research strategy

4.1 Meta-theoretical paradigm

An interpretivist framework was used as the theoretical lens that frames the argument of our study. The interpretivist paradigm emphasizes meaning and understanding of

participants' activities within their contexts (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:102). The interpretivist paradigm is concerned with descriptive analysis of participants' exploring of their lived experiences within a historical context (Creswell, 2013:35). We favoured the interpretivist paradigm as the study focuses on interpretive understanding of participants' experiences in the context of their classroom, which aligns well with the chosen paradigm.

4.2 Methodological approach

The study followed a qualitative approach in which a single case study design was employed. The selection of the single case study allowed a holistic understanding of knowledges held by beginner teachers as a group of individuals that were new subject teachers (Stake, 2005:99). The study sought to understand the beginner teachers' knowledges constructed from their personal efforts as Literature in English beginner teachers – an endeavour that credited them with the role of teaching-knowledge constructors; an aspect that few studies had investigated.

4.3 Sampling procedures

The sample for the study was drawn from beginner teachers from Bulawayo in Zimbabwe, as we knew that Literature in English was presented as a subject at high schools in that province. We used purposive sampling to select participants. The beginner teachers were selected using the following criteria: holders of high school teacher's Diploma in Education (English); four years' experience as a qualified teacher; teaching high school Literature in English for two years. Four Literature in English beginner teachers met the criteria we set and were selected as participants.

4.4 Data collection and documentation

We planned for, and used research methods that allowed for prolonged field engagement as a way of understanding beginner teacher knowledge nuances when they occurred. We employed three research methods, namely observations, document analysis, and interviews. We used three research methods as we sought for "convergence and collaboration" (Bowen, 2009:28), and we reasoned that multiple methods provided "a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility" (Eisner, 1991:58). We simultaneously collected non-participant observation and document analysis before conducting semi-structured interviews. The practical actions we observed in the classroom observations and plans in scheme books were the basis of our interview questions.

4.4.1 Non-participant classroom observation

Non-participant classroom observation as a research instrument measures behaviour from direct observation in the classroom (Creswell, 2013:167). We conducted two classroom observations as we needed to view the context in which each beginner

teacher worked. Both classroom observations were conducted during a double period session assigned for Literature in English in each school. A double period session is 80 minutes (1 hour and 20 minutes) long, which means that we observed each participant for 160 minutes (2 hours and 40 minutes) in total. In each class, we positioned ourselves where we did not overtly disturb the teaching and learning environment, but which gave us a full view of the class. From the classroom observations, we inductively developed a list of actions and activities that the beginner teachers were involved in, and these actions and activities informed our interview with each participant. The data from non-participant classroom observation were documented using a video recorder, field notes and transcripts.

4.4.2 Document analysis

For this study we analysed the beginner teachers' scheme/plan books to view their planned actions and activities for the present and intended Literature in English lessons. A scheme/plan book is an official document that secondary school beginner teachers are required to keep to plan for their teaching of Literature in English. The analysis of the scheme/plan book was important in tracing the beginner teachers' knowledge in the historical context (Bowen, 2009:29). We were able to trace how the beginner teachers planned for lessons from the evaluation of previous lessons. Such data from the scheme book provided us with a depth of information that we needed to develop a holistic portrait of teacher knowledge. At this level, documents provide access to information that participants have forgotten or are unwilling to share, and for this reason we agree with Bowen (2009:29) that document analysis also serves a collaborative role and, as such, adds to the credibility and verification of the study. The data from document analysis were documented using field notes.

4.4.3 Semi-structured interviews

We interviewed four O Level beginner Literature in English teachers based on their actions in the classroom and plans for teaching Literature in English. We personally conducted all the interviews. The interviews were conducted in English although the participants had the option of using any language they were comfortable with. We conducted four interviews of 30 to 35 minutes with each of the participants, equalling 16 interviews in total. The interview with Participant A was carried out in the school cafeteria, but the interviews with Participants B, C, and D were conducted in their offices. We used what Mason (2002:88) calls an "aide memoire" where we wrote down the questions that guided us for each interview. The data from semi-structured interviews were documented using an audio recorder, field notes, and transcripts.

5. Data analysis

Through the data analysis we intended to understand the participants' constructs of their teaching knowledge interpreted from their contexts. We employed inductive thematic

analysis for its strength as a method that seeks to identify recurring themes from raw data and interpret them to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena without a predetermined theory. We followed Creswell's (2009:247) steps for data analysis. The first step was to organise and prepare the data by transcribing the audio interviews verbatim (Creswell, 2009:247). The second step was to read the data and obtain a general sense of the participants' meaning. Thirdly, we coded the data into segments and colour-coded segments that revealed similar ideas. This process eventually led to the grouping of codes with similar meanings into categories. We further grouped categories into subthemes, which we grouped into major themes. The last step of the data analysis was to interpret the meaning of the data from our role as the primary data instrument, and from literature.

6. Quality criteria

We established trustworthiness by using Lincoln and Guba's (1985:300) measures of trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility was achieved through triangulation, crystallization, prolonged field engagement, peer debriefing, and member checking (Shenton, 2004:64). To attend to the transferability aspect of our study, we provided thick and extensive descriptions of the methodology and context of the study. Using thick descriptions, we captured the cultural context in which the beginner teachers had constructed their teaching knowledge. We used an audit trail as a strategy of enhancing dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:317). To provide for an audit trail of our study, we documented the observation notes and videos, scheme book excerpts, document analysis notes, interview audios, transcripts, and field notes. In our attempt to adhere to the principle of conformability in this study, we acknowledged biases resulting from our beliefs and values as teacher educators.

7. Ethical considerations

We sought the participants' direct consent before beginning the data collection. We invited Literature in English beginner teachers to participate in the study through a letter of invitation. The letter of invitation highlighted that the participants had the right to withdraw from participating in the study at any time. We explained to the participants how we were to collect the data and how much time would be involved. We also informed the participants that participation in the study entailed them being observed and interviewed, and that their scheme books would be analysed. We also indicated that some portions of their interviews would be used for publication. After having explained this, the participants were asked to indicate their consent to participate in the study by signing a consent form. The O Level (Form 4) Literature in English learners were present during classroom observations, but were non-participants in the study. However, we sought their permission for making video recordings as we were

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Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo
- Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali
Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig -
Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi
- Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi
- Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa
Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo -
Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi
- Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig
- Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali
yokuFundisa iLimi -
Ijenali yokuFundisa
iiLwimi - Ibhuku
Lokufundisa Ulimi
- Tšenale ya tša
Go ruta Polelo -
Buka ya Thuto
ya Puo - Jenale
ya Thuto ya Dipuo
Ijenali Yekufundzisa
Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u
Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala
yo
Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig
- Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali
yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi -
Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya
Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya
u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi
- Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali
yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi -
Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa
Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta
Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo -
Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo
- Jenala yo Dyondzisa Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig -
Journal for Language Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi
- Ijenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi
- Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo - Buka ya Thuto ya Puo -
Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi
- Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo - Jenala yo Dyondzisa
Ririmi - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - Ijenali yokuFundisa
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta

