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OPINION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ON THE ROLE OF LITERACY AND THE MEDIA IN LIFE-LONG LEARNING

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Abstract

The paper is a report of a study aimed at examining how the media can complement literacy in the quest for life-long learning. The methodology adopted was to administer questionnaires to fifty randomly selected newspaper readers in Ahmadu Bello University, Samaru, Zaria. The major findings of the study include the following: (a) Most newspaper readers read because they want to be informed and educated; (b) The frequency of reading pattern was more of a daily affair; (c) Newspapers hardly carry adverts on the advantages of literacy; and (d) Respondents are of the view that the media is not doing enough to promote literacy. The implications of all these are highlighted. The paper makes suggestions on how the media can assist in promoting literacy, and in the long run, life-long learning.

Introduction

The development of literacy efforts in any society is a pointer to a society preparing for, and marching towards, socio-economic, political and technological advancement. The near-absence of such efforts is a cause for great concern for any country, especially Nigeria, where it is said that 47 out of 88 million Nigerians are illiterate (World Bank Report, 1988). This makes us one of the most illiterate nations in the world. Whereas, global institutions such as the UNDP, the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, etc have placed literacy high on their priority list. UNESCO (1988) defines illiteracy as "a gross violation of the basic human right to learn, know and communicate". The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA, 1990:160) insists that: "Literacy programmes are indispensable because literacy is a necessary skill in itself and the foundation of other life skills".

In what he describes as the "power" of literacy, Olaofe (1997:17) argues that: "literacy has power which is both intrinsic and acquired. Intrinsic literacy power is that which makes people prefer or struggle to be literate... it can positively or negatively influence, control and change the various aspects of the life of an individual and a nation". And Aboderin (1999:11) states that "literacy should not stop at being able to read, write, numerate and process documents. It should include ability to make use of reading, writing and manipulation skills for meaningful and productive living".

Omojuwa (1999:211) in a study that examined the Mass Literacy Programme in Kaduna state, emphasizes that literacy is absolutely essential to the individual as it gives people a clearer view of their thoughts and aspirations, sharpens their appetite for knowledge via the written word as well as improves their self-esteem, material status and prospects. Literacy, whether in the Mother Tongue (MT), "Father-tongue" or other tongues is preferred to illiteracy. Indeed, the position of Hopps (2000:3) is that:

No country has emerged from third-world status without educating its citizens. Literacy and numeracy are strongly associated with increased economic productivity, improved health, smaller family size, and education of the next generation of children.

Venezky (1999:19) is of the opinion that literacy requires active, autonomous engagement with print and stresses the role of the individual in generating as well as receiving and assigning independent interpretations to messages. These definitions and descriptions all tally in that they all agree on the need for, and advantages of, literacy as well as the role of the individual and the society in literacy efforts.

Since there are no hard-and-fast rules to the development of literacy, several strategies have been used in this direction. Some of these strategies include the Centre for Adult and Extension Services, (CAEES) of the ABU, which aired radio and television broadcasts in the 80's as well as its Adult Education programme. Then, the National Mass Literacy campaign was launched in 1982. The Agency for Mass Literacy, which is partly funded by the UNDP, remains one of government's most popular efforts in the development of literacy. In addition, government recognises the International Literacy Year, the annual Literacy Day and other related activities. Yet, all these efforts fall short of expectations as illiteracy, which was slated for eradication in 1996, still has to overcome formidable obstacles. Because identified strategies have failed to yield expected results, it is necessary to explore other areas such as the print media. Life-long learning implies learning that goes on throughout one's life. The learner continues to learn as long as he is alive. This learning takes place from birth to death. Once a person is literate, a wide door is opened and there is no limit to the amount of knowledge/learning he can acquire. The only condition for life long learning is that the now literate person does not regress to illiteracy.

The Media

The mass media, in addition to other institutions have the basic functions of informing, educating and entertaining listeners, viewers and readers. They are a major source of information which shape people's views on local, national and global events. The media is usually classified into three viz print, electronic and other media. While the print media (especially newspapers and magazines) is a medium which is restricted only to the literate, the electronic media is accessible to all categories of people, whether literate or not. Since the main concern of this paper is the interaction between literacy and the media, we are thus basically interested in newspapers.

Cheyney (1992) posits that newspapers are what adults usually read because the capacity to motivate the reader has already been built into the planning and packaging of that paper. He argues that poor readers are more likely to carry newspapers and read them than read their textbooks. In addition, the newspaper carries up-to-date information about local, state and national affairs, and has the most current information on music, sports, television, politics, health, fashion, science and technology, etc as well as columns, comics and cartoons to make people laugh or cry. Then, it is probably the cheapest form of literature available to the interested reader, compared with books and magazines. Besides, the reader could refer to it at his convenience.

Media scholars such as Dare (1985), Ekwelie (1986) Akinfeleye (1986), rightly observe that the newspaper was the earliest form of mass media in Nigeria. According to Dare (1985:41): Journalism is, after printing, the oldest of the modern occupations in Nigeria.

There were newspapers and newspaper men before there were lawyers, doctors, engineers and educationists, and there were "Nigerian" newspapers before there was an entity called Nigeria.

In 1859, when the first Nigerian newspaper, Iwe Irohin was published, it started with religious publications. Nigeria has come a long way since then. Now, the Nigerian press falls into either the Lagos-Ibadan axis or the Northern press. Why the dichotomy, one may ask? The answer lies in the different sociological and ideological leanings of the two zones. This paper is more interested in the sociological factors.

One of such factors is the literacy level in the North. For years, efforts have been made to bridge the educational (which translates to literacy) gap between the North and the South. This implies that the literacy rate in the South is different from what obtains in the North. Also, it has been observed that the north has a higher concentration of radio listenership of programmes aired by BBC, VOA and other Hausa services, making it easy for them to shelve the more time-consuming and life-long literacy for simple listenership.

Another factor is the attitude of the illiterates themselves. With the present trend of lack of dedication and commitment to whatever one is engaged in in the society, and the craze for acquisition of material things, there is a nonchalant approach to literacy. This is because there is no monetary value attached to it. Thus, the general impression is that they are doing the government, not themselves, a big favour by learning to read and write. For instance, during the rainy season, classes are abandoned for the farms. This is a regular set-back for literacy which is common to both parts of the country.

Then, we have government's laissez-faire attitude to literacy. Government lacks the political will to implement its ideas and policies on literacy. Oyedemi (1997) has even wondered whether government is probably keeping people illiterate and ignorant in order for them to be governed with ease. Since literacy is the basis for educating the electorate in order to have a strong and viable democracy, it could be argued, then, that if people are illiterate, they may not know what is right and if they hardly know what is right, how do they ask or even struggle for it

Research Problem and Methodology

Since it has been established that literacy in whatever language is the bedrock of any form of development, and we have been rated as fifth among the ten most illiterate nations in the world (World Bank, Op.cit), what are we doing to eradicate illiteracy? The crucial role the media play as well as the advantages of the newspaper, provided impetus for the choice in this study.

To find out how the print media can complement literacy in the hope of promoting life-long learning, the researcher picked Ahmadu Bello University, Samaru Zaria, for its proximity. Fifty questionnaires were administered to newspaper readers on the campus. Only 40 were retrieved and the data analysed.

The 16-item questionnaire, in two parts, sought information ranging from sex, age, to what respondents felt about the relationship between literacy and the media and how these two variables could interact with positive results.

The sample, made up of university students who are already literate, is deliberate as this is a preliminary/pilot study in this area. The main study will now use businessmen, traders, market women, labourers etc as sample. The findings from the present study are expected to help guide the researcher in the follow-up study.

Because this study is not only concerned about literacy but about life-long learning too, it is necessary to find out how students hope to maintain the reading culture both in and out of school. The questionnaires were administered to newspaper, magazine and journal readers. The

responses were classified as nominal, ordinal or free response and converted into simple frequencies and percentages.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Sex

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	28	70%
Female	12	30%
Total	40	100%

Table 2: Age of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
20-30	29	72.5%
31 and above	11	27.5%
Total	40	100%

Table 3: Motives for reading Newspapers

Motives	Frequency	Percentage
Information/Education	28	70%
Opinion Formation	5	12.5%
Information/Entertainment	7	17.5%
Total	40	100%

Table 4: Newspaper Reading Pattern

Reading Pattern	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	25	62.5%
Once a week	6	15%
Once a month	5	12.5%
Rarely	4	10%
Total	40	100%

Table 5: Adverts on the advantages of Literacy

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	14	35%
No	7	17.5%
Cannot Remember	19	47.5%
Total	40	100%

Table 6: Can the media help promote literacy and life-long learning?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	37	92.5%
No	1	2.5%
Undecided	2	5%
Total	40	100%

Table 7: Can Adverts help the development of literacy?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	40	100%
No	-	-
Undecided	-	-
Total	40	100%

From the findings, a large number of the respondents who were between 20-30 years (Table 2) read newspapers primarily to be better informed and educated (Table 3). This may be taken as an index of a better awareness of reading by students. Several studies share the view that reading is hardly part of our culture/ tradition (see, for instance, Emenyonu, 1982; Olaofe, 1988;2000; and Omojuwa, 1997). As such, if 62.5% of these students (Table 4) read newspapers on a daily basis, then, this should be encouraged. First, because research studies have indicated that students who read newspapers:

...have greater knowledge of current events, are more politically aware... have positive attitude towards school, improve their reading skills and attitudes (as measured by standardized tests) and improve in behaviour, motivation and verbal interaction (Cheyney; *op.cit*:ix).

Based on this, it is likely that if these respondents are tested, they would perform better than their counterparts who do not read papers. Then, its user-friendly quality, as well as its affordable price, in addition to the fact that most libraries buy newspapers, provide ready materials on different interesting topics. We are thus not surprised that all the students said they would recommend that people should read newspapers throughout their lives. The significant number (26; 65%) who had never seen and who could not remember seeing adverts on the advantages of literacy (Table 5) is indicative of the media's minimal efforts on literacy development. That they agreed that such adverts would positively contribute to literacy and life-long learning (Tables 6 and 7) is also instructive.

When people read newspapers, they want to see the relevance of the material they are reading to their lives. So, they teach relevance in a subtle way. Also, the newspaper teaches skills of critical thinking, retaining information and transferring same to the realities of their daily lives because readers learn more about reading, writing, speaking, thinking, interpreting, reasoning and ability to form opinions on the pages of newspapers. This is not to say that the newspaper is perfect. Some articles are partisan in their views, while others actually contain grammatical

errors made by the writers. Since readership cuts across all levels of the society, the problem of reading and writing exist.

The implications of the results on literacy efforts by the media are clear. Strong financial and political commitment on the part of government is still lacking. It is, to say the least, disturbing that while other nations are striving to jettison the Third World status and are forging ahead in different areas, we are still struggling with no definite sense of direction, with illiteracy.

Thus, the demystification of literacy must be backed by financial and political commitment if government is to absolve itself of the allegation that it prefers to govern docile illiterates rather than active and enlightened literates.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

The main thrust of this paper was to examine the complementary relationship between literacy, the media and life-long learning. Given the negative attitude of the illiterates as well as the absence of a reading tradition, it is clear that a lot still needs to be done in the area of literacy development which leads to life-long learning. The fact that the media are not doing enough to publicise the enormous advantages of literacy could be traced to government's posture of paying lip-service to literacy development. Then, the illiterates themselves need to be convinced that acquisition of literacy in whatever language, which will lead to life-long learning, is to their advantage rather than the other way round. If students who are already literate stand to gain so much from reading newspapers, one can imagine what the illiterate would be losing from the inability to read in any language, on a daily basis, throughout his life.

Thus, the crucial role the media play in complementing literacy and life-long learning cannot be over-emphasized. It is also clear that illiterates end up on the periphery of meaningful existence as their knowledge of the printed word is derived from other people's interpretation. They then end up being marginalized and cannot achieve their full potential which would have been theirs if they had been literate. What this paper has concentrated on is how to tackle illiteracy, which is an impediment to life-long learning with a new zeal in order to translate our lofty policies into reality.

In the light of all these, a few recommendations are necessary:

- 1 The various avenues available for information dissemination should be used. For instance, respondents suggested that editorials advocating for literacy, cartoons highlighting the importance of literacy, change-of-attitude-towards-literacy articles, personal columns concentrating on the advantages of literacy, etc should be given priority in a newspaper.
- 2 Because adverts are virtually non-existent, billboards, notice boards, advert spaces, newsletters, etc advertising the enormous advantages of literacy should be erected at strategic places where they do not already exist. If these advertisements are free, it would go a long way in the development of literacy, and its goal of life-long learning.
- 3 Stories depicting the disadvantages of illiteracy should be published on a weekly basis to serve as a motivating factor.
- 4 Dramas, street-theatres such as is common in development communication, songs, poems acting out social situations where social problems could be problematized etc could be documented and published in papers/magazines (in any language) so that readers can learn and share these experiences with their less fortunate neighbours.