

# REAPPRAISING ADULT LITERACY AT TERTIARY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL FOR FUNCTIONALITY AND SELF-RELIANCE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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## **Abstract**

Reappraising functional literacy means intensification of efforts for the improvement of literacy for self reliance in tertiary institution. This paper examines the level of adult literacy in the developing world in general and that of Nigeria in particular. It focuses its attention on functional literacy at the tertiary level of education in Nigeria where indications of functional literacy as exhibited by students are x-rayed. To check the trend, the paper recommends an alternative reading programme in the name of content area reading which emphasizes functional content based reading skills as against the literacy-oriented reading programme which seems to be in vogue in many schools in Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

### **Conceptual Construct.**

Literacy as a concept is viewed from various perspectives of value. While some see it as an ability to access and respond to messages and ideas in the printed text (Ihebuzor, 1999). Others see it as the ability to read, write and compute (Okpe, 1998). This latter view of literacy is in consonance with the view of functional literacy as an art and process through which illiterate individuals are liberated from the clutches of ignorance, bondage and backwardness through functional education which endows them with the skills of reading, writing and computing.

In this perspective, Honwana (1999) remarked that the concept of functional literacy was an evolving concept which was embedded in specific contexts and development processes. He therefore, saw the term as something going beyond the acquisition of reading and writing

skills and that it embrace a variety of tools and skills necessary to access information, create knowledge, promote continuing learning and active participation in the society.

## **Reappraising Functional Literacy**

Reappraising functional adult literacy for self reliance indicates an intensification of efforts for the improvement of adult literacy in tertiary institution. Functional literacy helps individuals to deepen the understanding of their origins, roots, traditions and cultures. Above all, it prepares peoples to be contributory members in a world that is better than their birth place(s), (villages or communities.) On the other hand, functional illiteracy brings about incapacitation, isolation and loneliness. One who is unable to functionally read and write is confined to the world that barely goes beyond tradition and is a prisoner of ignorance and above all, a prey to many fears in a world that he does not understand.

World Bank, (1983) put the adult literacy rate in Africa, the middle East and South Asia at 40.5% while South Magazine, (1985) put the adult literacy rate in Nigeria at 34%. The low literacy rate in the developing countries particularly Nigeria is very disheartening. Olaofe, (1991) remarked that more disheartening was the rate of functional literacy which may be pitched far below one-third (1/3) of the 34% adult literacy recorded for Nigeria.

At the international level, Honwana (1999) remarked that 1999 was declared by the United Nations as the International Literacy year. The idea was to encourage governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOS) to get involved or start new initiatives aimed at combating illiteracy with particular emphasis on its root causes. That was after the massive efforts

like the one launched in the 1970s towards eradicating illiteracy in the year 2000 which failed to achieve the desired results. Focus is now shifting to national and regional campaigns with the full commitment of all stakeholders particularly governments and non-governmental organizations in eradicating illiteracy.

In the wider African context, we pay glowing tributes to the “Reading for All; a Pan African voice for literacy” (Manaka, 1999 and Arua, 2003) in the continent for organizing two international conferences on “Reading for all in Africa” first, in Pretoria, South Africa in August, 1999, and second, in Abuja, Nigeria in the year 2001. These two conferences were held under the auspices of the International Reading Association (IRA) all aimed at eradicating illiteracy in Africa.

At the national level, we cannot forget to mention the huge investments on education in Nigeria as evidenced in the annual budgetary allocations to the education sub-sector by governments at all levels in the country. Mention must also be made of the efforts of the Nigerian National Council for Adult Education (NNCAE) (Omelewa, 1991) and the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) in carrying out campaigns aimed at eradicating illiteracy in the country.

Still on the home front, present indications are that in spite of the huge financial investments by Nigeria government in education, attempts at eradicating illiteracy in particular, have been a mirage. Although a good number of Nigeria children learn to read relatively well before entering the tertiary level of schooling, a lot of them enter without being functionally literate. Functional literacy is understood to mean the ability to use reading and writing to widen one’s intellectual and academic horizons well enough to be able to:

- (i) extend and facilitate communication across all social levels and

- (ii) tackle very effectively, many of the socio-economic problems confronting individuals and the country as a whole.

### **Challenges for Functional Illiteracy at the Tertiary Level of Education: An Overview**

Experiences and observations on literacy development in Nigeria continue to indicate absence of functional literacy among Nigerian students at the tertiary level of education. These are literacy problems which centre on academic English as reflected in textbooks and classrooms, as well as English of wider communication.

Many of the students are still narrow minded and restricted readers, signs of inability to engage in intensive and extensive reading are noticeable in such seemingly trivial situation as in gaining indepth knowledge of their fields, of specialties. Familiarity with information of national and international importance, and developing knowledge, confidence, initiative and innovation through the world of general and specific literatures. These could generate means of livelihood and solve socio-economic problems. In most cases, literacy fails to develop in the students the self-reliant and fully educated person we expect.

The fact that functional literacy continues to elude many of the tertiary level students in Nigeria is reflected in the failure rate noticeable in semester and final examinations conducted by authorities of such institutions. A case in point is that of College of Education, where there are so many carryover cases recorded in the semester and NCE final examinations in the academic schools of the College. In some cases, the carry over students are more than those who actually pass semester and final examinations and that continue to give headaches to the HODS and Deans of Schools when computing NCE final examination results in particular. That scenario was perhaps one reason that prompted the college administration to be subjecting NCE final year students from the

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2003/2004 academic session who were to go for teaching practice exercise to a literacy interview before they could go for the exercise. Those of them that could not pass the interview were recommended for a remedial literacy training for a few weeks before they could be allowed to go for the teaching practice exercise.

Similarly, Olaofe, (1991) observed that the available data Ahmadu Bello University Wide English and Communication Skills teachers had proved that the assumption was erroneous, that University students who possessed the required credit in 'O' level English language were functionally literate enough to undertake meaningful academic programmes in the University. Also at the Ahmadu Bello University, Olaofe (1991) observed that the high drop out rate of students in course like medicine, Pharmacy, Engineering and Agriculture where in-depth knowledge and application of theoretical facts are of paramount importance, was a pointer to the marginal literacy level of the students. Beyond the English language class, functional literacy fails to be represented in the different domains of many students' lives. In their specific subject areas, they rely mostly on notes, handouts, Model- answer texts and teachers own reasoned -out -facts for academic survival. When demand is imposed on them to use English drawn from their own linguistic and communicative repertoires, they exhibit gross language incompetency. Some publishers contribute to this state of affairs to some extent. They flood the markets with cheap materials which students memorize uncritically. In the leisure life of many students of the tertiary level of education in Nigeria, extensive reading for pleasure and broadening of academic and intellectual horizon becomes an illusion in most cases since many of the students at that level, are not educated beyond the imitative and rote learning level. They are invariably found wanting when tasks which need intensive

reasoning and application of facts to real life situation are demanded.

**Factors Responsible for Low Functional Literacy**

Many factors may have accounted for the low functional literacy rate discussed above. They include:

- i) Non-availability of appropriate print resources.
- ii) Inadequate literacy programmes at the primary and secondary levels of education.
- iii) Inadequate facilities far beyond the school literacy programmes which can provide a continuous and on-going refinement of reading-writing competence required at school.

Another factor is what Quisenberry and Mathias (1989) referred to as the variation between print-oriented and non-print oriented cultures. They opined that in many third world countries, the ability to read was important to the learners only in so far as it was a sign of an educated person. They further held that print served the rituals of the school but not those of the family, village or the community in many developing countries.

One other important factor responsible for the low literacy level at the tertiary level of education in Nigeria was what Major, (1988) referred to as students retaining fossilized grammatical and communicative errors which made them unable to achieve proficiency in the language through out their lives. When fossilization sets in, Major argued, students would be unable to make adequate progress in spite of any form of formal remedial instruction given.

**Effects of the Low Functional Literacy Rate on Students and the Nation.**

The negative effects of the low functional literacy rate highlighted in this paper on students and the nation at large are very laudable. For one thing, it breeds half-baked intellectuals and “educated illiteracy”. It also generates unemployed and unemployable graduates and promotes general inefficiency of systems at all levels. In fact, this functional illiteracy has contributed to many graduates inability to fend for themselves in life. In deed, the education they receive has not widened their intellectual and academic scope enough to generate means of livelihood. The educational system continues to crumble as long as ways are not found to bring the students literacy abilities up to the level that will enable them become functional citizens of the adult community.

**The Way Foreword**

The way forward in eradicating the traces of functional illiteracy highlighted in this paper is to adopt the approach of Content Area Reading instructional programme (Agada, 2004). It would be recalled that in any school curriculum, reading is considered to be the core of the syllabus. It is through reading that learners are exposed to the various curricular offerings. On this, Unoh (1982) saw reading proficiency as the royal road to knowledge and that content area reading programme is organized in the different subject areas of the school curriculum to facilitate learning. It is likened to the concept of English for Academic purpose. Nwoke, (1997) in the well known discipline of English for Specific Purpose (ESP), Agada, (2004) observed that such instruction which was devoid of literacy-oriented reading instruction which was characterized by the reading of poetry, stories, Drama and other forms of literacy.

Isiugo-Abanihe, (1991) remarked that students all over the world faced difficult reading tasks presented by various subject or

discipline text books, Subject teachers often complained that their students could not read prescribed books and as a result, were not learning. What was responsible for that he argued, was the emphasis given to the literacy-oriented reading instruction in schools which many content area teachers had observed that the approach was deficient, as it rarely emphasized the reading study skills for learning in different disciplines.

**Recommendation of Strategies for Enhancing Literacy in Tertiary Institution**

To improve student’s ability in the different content or subject areas, this paper therefore, recommends a reading programme in all subject areas. This is content area reading instructional programme, the purpose of which is to help students locate and comprehend information and to remember to retrieve such information as expressed in different styles of writing. This reading programme advocates a functional content-based instruction in which acquisition of subject content is the main objective. In it broad reading processes are taught as part of teaching the different subjects according to how essential they are in the comprehension of the written text. For example, Hill, (1979) remarked that for all practical purposes, the functional-centred reading instruction seemed to appeal to a good number of school administrators and therefore, recommended it for Nigerian schools.

**Guiding Principles for Content Area Reading Instruction Programme**

Herbert and Nelson-Herbert, (1984) proposed three main feature of content area reading instruction. In examining the features Critically, Agada (2004) opined the features qualified as guiding principles for establishing a meaningful content area reading instructional programme are:-

### **The Development of a Sense of Content**

In any content area reading, the object of learning is to communicate the subject-matter with its inter-related details, concepts and discipline. This implies that teachers in such a discipline need to be pre-occupied with inculcating the substance of their curriculum.

### **The Development of Sense of Process**

Global reading and reasoning process that are generally applicable to textual materials in all subjects are to be highlighted in the instruction. These processes are however to be taught. They are relevant to the organization of the subject areas and applied at increasing levels of sophistication.

### **The Development of a Sense of Structure of Content Area**

Structuring of content area reading lessons is supposed to facilitate students learning. Properly structured instructional strategies which are consistently used, provide a familiar format for students' easier application of reading processes.

### **Merits of Content Area Reading Instructional Programme in Schools**

Organizing content area reading programme in schools has a number of advantages which include:

- It improves students reading ability and reading habits in the different content or subject areas of the school curriculum.
- It helps students to locate and comprehend information in the reading texts of their subject areas.
- It helps students to remember and to retrieve such information in the reading text of their subject areas.
- Content area reading exposes students to the demands of their various disciplines.
- Learners are highly motivated as the information contained in their subject

texts are relevant to the course objectives of their disciplines

- Content area reading foster transfer of learning in students
- It allows for timely curriculum development and the identification of the reading skills necessary for the understanding of materials and concepts
- It leads to positive change in students attitudes to reading and achievement in the various content areas of the school curriculum.

### **Challenges for Planning Effective Content Area Reading Programme**

It is sometimes feared that subject area teachers may be reluctant to teach reading processes in their subject areas. On this, Artley, (1968) expressed the need for subject teachers to effect reading improvement in their subject areas. One challenge is that in the preliminary planning of the content area reading instructional programme, subject teachers need to be made to perceive the potentials of the programme. This is because such teachers may not be aware that there is something they can do in their subject areas in the classroom to improve the reading habits of their students.

Content area teachers need to be shown organizational framework for lessons and instructional strategies that promise good results in order to convince them that functional reading instruction is possible in their classrooms. This is a challenge to reading educators to make available to such teachers empirically investigated improved achievement and which have other practical advantages. This is in the form of curriculum integration or a collaboration between subject area teachers and reading teachers.

The challenge of providing qualified personnel who can organize in-service teaching for subject area teachers and evolving useful instructional options is that of Institute of

Education of Nigerian universities and other curriculum development centres all over the country. Staff development for example is very essential because content area teachers do not normally use content area reading instruction.

To reduce the cost of staff development, there is the need to have local co-ordinators of content area reading instruction. This may involve subject co-ordinators who should have undergone training on how to employ content reading instruction in teaching their subject area. With the direction of subject co-ordinators and perhaps with the help of any reading specialist in individual schools, mini school-level training programmes can be continuously organized for all teachers in the schools.

### **Conclusion**

This paper identified that adult literacy rate in the developing world is at a very low level. This is considered to be very disheartening. More disheartening is the level of functional literacy in our own country Nigeria which under normal circumstance, is of immediate concern to us. This has made stakeholders especially the United Nations to take measures in tackling the menace. In spite of such efforts, the illiteracy rate has not really improved. This battle has now shifted to national and regional campaigns all aimed at eradicating illiteracy.

In eradicating the traces of illiteracy at the tertiary level of schooling in Nigeria, this paper therefore reappraised content area reading instructional programme as a viable option. This done, the traces of illiteracy exhibited by learners at the tertiary level of education in Nigeria will be eradicated or minimized to the barest minimum.

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