Towards a Literate Society: the Place of Reading in Rwanda Today

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Abstract

Lack of a reading culture in Rwanda is a widely talked about issue. The government of Rwanda has literary "taken the bull by the horns" in a bid to tame this widespread national malaise. There are a number of efforts ongoing to promote a culture of reading among Rwanda, a society that has hitherto been described as oral. The country's historical disposition has always favoured the spoken word over the written word. Compounded by the traditional and cultural realities, reading has always been kept at the periphery. Inspired by the need for economic development and national stability, Rwanda has put in place a blueprint for promoting literacy skills across the country. Notwithstanding her tumultuous past that culminated with the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, considerable milestones have been achieved in reading. However, there is still more to be done for this to be a reality. This paper argues that Rwanda a monolingual country has the potential to harness Kinyarwanda and transform it into a launching pad for promoting literacy. While acknowledging a myriad challenges that the nation grapples with, the country is in a pole position by taking advantage of technology to digitize reading. Better still teachers are charged with the mandate to explore explicit comprehension techniques to teach reading. Suggestions on the common strategies for teaching comprehension are outlined according to Adler (2001).

Keywords: Literacy Skills, Rwanda, comprehension strategies, reading culture.

Introduction

The current paper is anchored on the premise that there is still a lack of reading culture in Rwanda. (Ruterana, 2012). There has been, and there is still a growing concern among key educational stakeholders about the lack of reading culture in Rwanda. This trend cuts across the board, from primary schools to higher institutions of learning. It is also a problem not uniquely confined in the academic circles, but also one that transcends to the community in its entirety. Suffice it to say that reading is widely seen as a catalyst to economic growth. This resonates with the fact Rwanda is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Kelechi's (2010) conquers that a poor reading culture is counterproductive to a country's national growth. Additionally, he asserts that a sustained campaign to cultivate and promote a reading culture especially among the youth in tertiary institutions is a *sine qua no*n for academic excellence and in retrospect, contributes to the growth prospects of a given country.

The contemporary state of affairs in regards to reading in Rwanda is better understood from a historical perspective. In pre-colonial Rwanda, just as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, education was largely informal. Adenkule, (2007) notes that before the introduction of Western education by Christian missionaries, education in Rwanda was largely traditional and pragmatic in nature. While fathers provided vocational education such as farming to their sons, girls were trained on how to go about domestic chores by their mothers. It means therefore that Rwanda was predominantly an oral society. Education was used a vehicle by which a people's culture and customs were transmitted. Reading was introduced in Rwanda by the Christian missionaries. The formal education introduced by the missionaries added more value to the traditional educational structures through the introduction of reading and writing.

Many an African scholar have equally voiced their concerns in regards to the lack of a reading culture in Rwanda. (Rosenberg, 2003; Magara & Batambuze, 2005; Commeyras & Mazile, 2011). It is against this backdrop that the government of National Unity adopted a policy called Education for All Action Plan in 2003 as part of its Poverty Reduction Strategy. (MINEDUC, 2005). Then, the Rwandan government had envisioned to achieve an 80% literacy levels across the country by 2010. In July, 2012, Rwanda Education Board launched a reading initiative towards promotion of the reading culture in the country called Rwanda Reads Initiative. The mantra that informs this initiative is "A reader today is a leader tomorrow". At the helm of the initiative is a two-pronged objective. First, is to build a strong culture of reading across the country while improving literacy skills. Secondly, it is to increase the number and accessibility of quality reading materials. (REB, 2013).

In the recent years, the Rwandan government has put in place a sustained campaign of promoting reading in the country. A major milestone towards revamping and redevelopment of the Rwanda's education sector was achieved in the wake of the publication of "Education for All" Plan of Action. Basic Education development projection for the period 2003 to 2015 was enshrined in it, based on the internationally established targets and indicators, such as The Dakar Framework for Action (2000). It is on the basis of the tenets enshrined in such a framework that the Rwandan Action Plan was declaratively perceived. One of the goals envisioned by 2015 is that "Levels of Adult Illiteracy would be halved and learning opportunities for youth and adults would be greatly increased".

Rwanda as a country, it should be pointed out, adopted English in 2009 as an official language and as a language of instruction in schools. Previously, French was the main language of instruction in schools. The major shift in the country's language policy came with major implications, especially in the education sector. It meant that teachers who had previously been trained and taught in French had to start teaching in English almost overnight. Teaching in English meant learning to read and write in English. In a nutshell, it meant learning to spontaneously communicate in English language. Rwanda as a government was compelled to adopt the radical change in language policy based on a national, regional, and global agenda. The argument being that English as a medium of instruction would spur economic development given that it is the leading language of science, commerce and economic development. (Samuelson B.L & Warshauer.S. F, 2010).

Coupled with the need for economic development is the question of the regional integration through the East African Community. The country felt that by joining the EAC, better opportunities would arise. English is the language of diplomacy used by the EAC member countries, and the integration to be fully functional, adopting English as a language of communication was preponderant and a move in the right direction. The main challenge of teaching reading means surmounting the first obstacle; that of teaching English to teachers to equip them with requisite knowledge and skills that they will transmit to learners. This can only be achieved in an environment where first reading materials are easily available and accessible. Secondly, there must be proper channels through which teachers will be trained in English either through workshops or by mentors.

Teaching Reading: Empirical findings

Reading is a key language skill, apart from speaking, writing, and listening, that cannot be underestimated. It is therefore a skill that needs to be fully developed and nurtured alongside speaking and writing. Unlike speaking, the uniqueness of reading lies in the power of words as symbols of ideas. Further, unlike speaking which is acquired, reading is learned. There is a deliberate effort and process by language instructors and teachers to teach reading. It all starts with learning the alphabets, demarcating the difference between consonants and vowels, learning sounds, as well as blending of sounds to form words, which are in turn symbols of meaning. Aspect of proper pronunciation, vocabulary-building and acquisition, phonological awareness, comprehension and fluency, all revolve around reading.

Stanford University in partnership with Rwanda Education Board, and the Rwandan Ministry of education carried out a survey on the teaching of reading in the Gicumbi district of Rwanda. The aim of the study was to establish a threshold for the randomized control trial of Literacy Boost, whose inception commenced in January 2004. Literacy Boost is a multipronged program tailored to help children read better. Its implementation is carried in schools through teacher training and support, and out-of-school through community and home activities. (Malik, S.,Gasana, J. et al ,2014).

The study set out to investigate the approaches that teachers use in teaching reading, and how it impacts on Literacy Boost implementation in schools. At the heart of the study were the following variables: teachers' knowledge, attitudes and practice surrounding literacy instruction. A survey was carried out comprising 452 teachers from 102 schools across the 21 sectors of Gicumbi district. Data was also collected through observation method whereby twenty-one schools were randomly selected and two teachers drawn mostly from primary one, and some from primary two classes. A total of 42 Primary 1 and Primary 2 teachers (across 21 schools) were observed teaching a Kinyarwanda lesson. Upon data analysis, the findings revealed that first, teachers demonstrated a good understanding of the importance attached to literacy materials vis à vis non-literacy in the development of reading skills. Given an opportunity, a majority of the teachers indicated that they would rather buy textbooks (77.7%), while 61.2%) and 48.4% indicated that they would rather buy storybooks and flashcards respectively as opposed to buying detractor items such a balls. The findings underscore the importance that teachers attach on reading materials in promoting a reading culture among learners. According to the study, most classrooms were underequipped with the

required reading material to help learners. The predominant print materials present in classes were in Kinyarwanda though.

Secondly, Observation of General Pedagogy revealed mixed results. However, in regards to reading, only 7% of teachers were observed assigning literacy homework, and no teacher was observed explicitly teaching students how to handle books. (Malik, S.,Gasana, J. et al ,2014). Other testable elements in the study including Time spent on Literacy Instruction, Alphabet Knowledge, Phonological Awareness, Vocabulary, Second Language Learners in the Classroom, Literacy Homework, Literacy Assessment, Reading Fluency, and Reading Comprehension. The study made a raft of recommendations including providing reading materials to schools, LB training to focus on training teachers to develop strategies towards effective incorporation of books in classes, LB training to emphasize the importance of print material in junior primary classes, improving teacher knowledge regarding phonemes as well as the importance of phonemic awareness and vocabulary skills to reading success.

Digitization of reading

There is wind of change in the educational sector globally, with the advent of technological advancement and innovation. Many countries, especially in the developed world, have invested a lot of resources towards research in education. Notable progress that has added new impetus to teaching and learning is the integration of technology in the teaching and learning process. It is normal nowadays to see computers in school. On many occasions, teachers are challenged to use technology in class.

The use of technology is believed to make learning more exciting and student-centred. This is a deliberate attempt to shift focus from the hitherto traditional methods of teaching to much more proactive and engaging methods. The use of technology in teaching has been well integrated across the curriculum, especially in western countries. Grand national projects such as the One Lap Top Per Child both in Kenya and Rwanda are efforts in the right direction towards this end. Rwanda in particular lays particular emphasis in the promotion of literacy and ICT skills in her vision 2020 agenda. The Rwandan government aims at transforming the country into a middle income country defined by a free market system. The country therefore seeks to strengthen agriculture, information and communications technology, and ecotourism sectors. One major way identified to achieve this goal is by developing Rwandans as a people furnished with the requisite knowledge, equipped with the right skills and endowed with the right attitudes. Investing in education is therefore at the core of the country's development agenda. It is in light of this that the government is pulling efforts towards accessible, equitable and high-quality education system anchored on the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy, the habits of reading and life-long learning, together with the reasoning and analytical skills. (MINEDUC, 2013)

Technological development means that lessons such as reading which were previously taught through conventional methods will come alive. It is on this basis that a study by Mills-Tettey et al (2009), aimed at exploring the role that technology can play in improving child literacy in

developing communities**.** An initial pilot study was carried out, followed by a four-month controlled field study in Ghana. The study sought to investigate the viability and effectiveness of an automated tutor in helping urban children improve their reading skills in English. Results from quantitative data revealed that automated tutoring can be useful for some students in this setting. In addition to preliminary pilot study carried out in Zambia, these studies provided pertinent qualitative observations. It was observable that the application of technology solutions in promotion of literacy in developing countries is tenable and feasible.

Statistics drawn from Rwanda's Ministry of education (MINEDUC, 2009) decry a poor state of affairs in terms of literacy levels. Illiteracy levels were at 34.7 in the year 2006. Ruterana (2011, 2012) contends that Rwanda is predominantly an oral society. This is largely attributed to the cultural and historical set up of the Rwandan society where the verbal word dominates the written word. Storytelling is identified as the predominant form of literacy in most Rwandan homes, and for generations this has been and is still the case to a large extend. Efforts made by the government of Rwanda are therefore geared towards reversing the status quo with which Rwandan culture is described and identified. How can this be achieved without necessarily hurting a people's socio-cultural dynamics? This is a preponderant question bound to elicit scholarly debate. Meanwhile, the question at hand is what should be done to improve literacy levels in Rwanda? How should be it be done? Is what is being done bearing fruits? If no, what are effective strategies to be adopted in teaching reading?

The Role of Kinyarwanda in promoting Literacy

It has been widely acknowledged that African languages play a central part in promoting literacy and education (Alidou, 2004). In view of this fact, African countries are signatories to several international, regional, national conventions and charters. They are equally committed to implementing several plans actions including the Organization of
African Unity (OAU) Cultural Charter for Africa (1976), the Lagos Plan of Action (1980), the Declaration of the Cultural Aspects of the Lagos Plan of Action (1985), the OAU Language
Plan of Action for Africa (1986), the draft charter for the promotion of African languages in education developed in 1996 in Accra, Ghana, and the Harare Declaration (1997).

One way of promoting reading in Rwanda is by encouraging students to express themselves in their mother tongue, Kinyarwanda, (UNESCO (1975). Since the introduction of English as a language of instruction in schools, there has been a shift of focus in language policy with more emphasis accorded to English. However outside the confines of a classroom, Kinyarwanda dominates almost all other spheres of life. In fact the moment a teacher steps out of class, students resort to speaking in Kinyarwanda. This is a scenario witnessed in many public and private schools save for a few international ones where English dominates both in and out of class. Why, common it is to see lecturers teaching in Kinyarwanda unperturbed, more so in institutions of higher learning. Rwandans generally feel free in using Kinyarwanda other than English. Moreover, Kinyarwanda not only serves as a lingua franca through which ideas are expressed, but it is a unifying language

that helps to propagate the idea of *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (I am Rwandan). The connotation being that Kinyarwanda offers a solid ground for national healing and integration, as well as cultivating the spirit of nationhood and patriotism. It is incumbent upon all Rwandans to express themselves in Kinyarwanda regardless of diverse historical backgrounds. Unless one therefore is a foreigner, speaking in alien language begets an alien feeling of "*not one of us*". When Rwandans first know how to speak and read in Kinyarwanda, they will be motivated to read in English and in other subsequent languages. In this regard therefore, Kinyarwanda serves s a launching pad for promoting literacy agenda across the country.

The argument here is that developing literacy skills among Rwandan children should be grounded in teaching them to express their ideas in their mother tongue first. The role that mother tongue plays in helping children formulate concepts about themselves and the world they live in cannot be gainsaid. Language and culture are intertwined. The only way children can enhance their perception of themselves and their immediate world is by first learning to express themselves in their mother tongue. This is an arduous task if they were to be exposed to new concepts expressed in an alien language far removed from their linguistic, cultural, and environmental reality. It is against this backdrop that the Rwandan government has fronted the teaching of Kinyarwanda by ensuring that it is integrated in the national curriculum. Kinyarwanda is also taught even in both private schools offering the national curriculum, and private international schools.

Cross-Cutting Issues and Trends in Promoting Literacy

Teaching literacy should not be construed to mean that it is a preserve for children, notably in lower primary school. It is a skill that everyone needs: the young, the developing, the adult, and why not the old? Everyone has the right to acquire education and be enlightened. This assertion resonates well with article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that: "*Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be made compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.*"

The Rwandan constitution also underscores the importance attached to education. Article 15 of the Rwandan constitution states that: every person has the right to physical and mental integrity. The importance attached to education by nations, especially in developing nations, is great. Rwanda has enacted policies towards promotion of adult education and literacy skills.

As noted by Indabawa et al (2000), Africa is in dire need of a vibrant adult and continuing education program to address the myriad problems she is faced with. The issue many an African nation is faced with is how to safeguard the interests of the multilingual groups within nations. A good example is Nigeria with over 400 major language groups. Other challenges border on nation building, as is the case with Rwanda which is still recovering from the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide, militarism, and poverty. The latter challenge in particular is weighty to the developing

nations like Rwanda, a country ranked among the poorest in the world. However, Rwanda has the advantage of being a monolingual society. Education stakeholders should take advantage of this uniqueness to promote literacy skills across the country.

Efforts of promote reading in Rwanda

Various efforts are being made by the government with the support of other agencies to promote a reading culture in Rwanda. The US Embassy in Rwanda is actively involved in an annual campaign to promote a reading culture in the country. The campaign dubbed "Everybody Reads Rwanda", aims at supporting ongoing efforts to create a culture of reading in Rwanda by encouraging as many people as possible to read and discuss the same book. During the one month-long campaign, the embassy holds book discussion forums in different parts of the country. These are normally supplemented by watching a film of the same book. Scholars such as Goatley et al (1995) and Raphael ,& McMahon (1994) underscore the importance of Book Clubs as tool of promoting literature from a social constructivist perspective

 Similarly, the Rwandan Ministry of Education of education launched a reading campaign in July 2012 dubbed 'Rwanda reads' aimed at developing the culture of reading in Rwanda. In his speech at the launch of the campaign, the Minister of Education Vincent Biruta contended that the initiative will enable Rwandans to achieve collective vision for the future of the country.

"We must all be empowered to contribute to the development of our country as described in Vision2020. But achieving this goal cannot happen by reading a book here and a website there. We need, all of us, to develop the habit of reading every day for life-long learning and pleasure,"

Rwanda's efforts efforts to promote literacy resonate with Chisman (1989) who contends that government should be at the forefront in promoting adult literacy. This in turn would lead to a stronger intellectual base for adult literacy and promote innovation in training and technology. The campaign which will sensitize the importance of reading at all levels aims at dismantling literacy barriers and develop a thriving and sustainable culture of reading. In equal measure, the Rwandan government is on a relentless campaign aimed at adult literacy training. Graduands are mandated to carry out adult literacy programmes within their working sites.

Strategies to Improve Teaching Reading

Scholars have identified myriad strategies that teachers can adopt in teaching reading. This paper seeks to explore a few of those strategies in the context of Rwanda. It should be made clear from the onset that a one-size-fits-it-all is a rarity in the teaching realm. Teachers have at their disposal multiple methods from which to base as they teach. Different methods suits different learners and are in tandem with the diverse learner abilities. It is always better advised to integrate different approaches. Besides, each approach is unique in its own way given that it aims at fulfilling specific objectives. The following are seven strategies of teaching comprehension as identified by Adler (2001).

1. Monitoring Comprehension

Students with the ability to monitor understand can tell when they understand a text and when they do not. They can "fix" problems related to understanding as they arise using certain strategies. Research shows that instruction can help students become better at monitoring their comprehension. Therefore comprehension mentoring instruction is a strategy that teachers can adopt in teaching reading.

2. Metacogonition

Reading comprehension is a, arduous cognitive task that demands absolute attention from the reader. Cognitive skills are involved in the process of thinking. Metacognition can be defined as "thinking about thinking." A good reader uses metacognition strategies to think about what they are reading. This helps them have control over their reading. Prior to reading, they might clarify their purpose for reading and preview the text. In the process of reading, a good reader monitors understanding, adjusting their reading speed to fit the difficulty of the text and "fixing" any comprehension problems. This also involves checking understanding of what is read after reading. Therefore in metacognition, readers have the ability to go forth and back as they seek to clarify meaning of certain words and expressions as they are used by the author. Certain words as used by characters only make meaning in the context of the whole text. Readers may pause to check their understanding by going back or reading ahead.

3. Graphic and semantic organizers

They illustrate concepts and show relationships in a text. They appear in different forms such as maps, webs, graphs, frames, or clusters. Graphic organizers can help students focus on concepts and make connection to establish relationships between concepts. They also aid in understanding textbooks and picture books as well as text structure. With the help of graphic organizers, students can tell the difference between fiction and nonfiction text, for instance.

4. The Question-Answer Relationship strategy (QAR)

A teacher can also give questions to students prior to teaching. Questions help students to stay focused on the text. They also help students establish the purpose of reading the text. Students are actively engaged during reading when guided by questions. This encourages them to monitor their comprehension, review content and relate what they have learned to what they already know. Students may be asked to indicate whether the information they used to answer questions about the text was textually explicit, or directly drawn from the text, textually explicit, (implied form the text), or based entirely from student's own background knowledge. Questions are of different types. The "Right There" questions for example ask students to find one right answer located in one place as a word or a sentence. It depends on the teachers' ingenuity and the type of students in class to ask the right questions according to their ability. Questions can be literal to solicit for direct information from the text or higher-order questions to stimulate critical thinking.

5. Generating questions.

Generating questions helps students become aware of what they are reading. In the process, they are able to ask questions that require them to make connections within the text. For instance, students can ask main idea questions related to important information in the text.

6. Recognizing Story Structure.

Works of fiction are best captured and understood using a story structure. A story map will help students to identify story elements such as characters, setting and the plot. Within the plot, are story events, problem and the resolution. Aspects of the plot such as sequencing and summarizing the main idea are also reinforced.

7. Summarizing.

Summary writing demands that students understand what they are reading. Next, they should interpret what they have read in their own words. Paraphrasing is key in summary-writing. Students also learn to identify the main ideas, connect the main idea, discard unnecessary information, and remember what they have read.

Adler (2001) vouches for explicit teaching techniques for effective comprehension instruction. It is incumbent upon teachers to explain to students why they should use strategies in reading, and clarify on which strategies to apply and how to do it. Direct explanation, teacher modeling, or "thinking aloud", guided practice, and application are a means towards this end.

Conclusion

Imparting Rwandans with the requisite literacy skills is a prime agenda at the heart of Rwanda's vision 2020 The country has set goals to be achieved in this dimension, and is working hard to meet. Research shows that literacy promotes economic development. The evolution and transformation of reading in Rwanda has come of age. The country has initiated programs to promote reading across the country in collaboration with other partners. One major asset the country boasts is Kinyarwanda. Taking advantage of this monolingual to promote literacy is a step towards the right direction. It will not only stimulate interest to learn how to read in English, but also cultivate a sense of belonging among Rwandans. By so doing, literacy skills will be promoted without necessarily sacrificing the traditional and cultural values. Finally, for effective comprehension instruction, teachers are encouraged to read far and wide. If correctly implemented, some of the strategies as highlighted by Adler (2001), can reinvigorate teaching reading among students. They include: monitoring comprehension, metagonition, graphic and semantic organizers, The Question-Answer Relationship strategy (QAR), generating questions, recognizing story structure, and summarizing. However, effective application and implementation of these strategies calls for explicit instructional techniques.

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