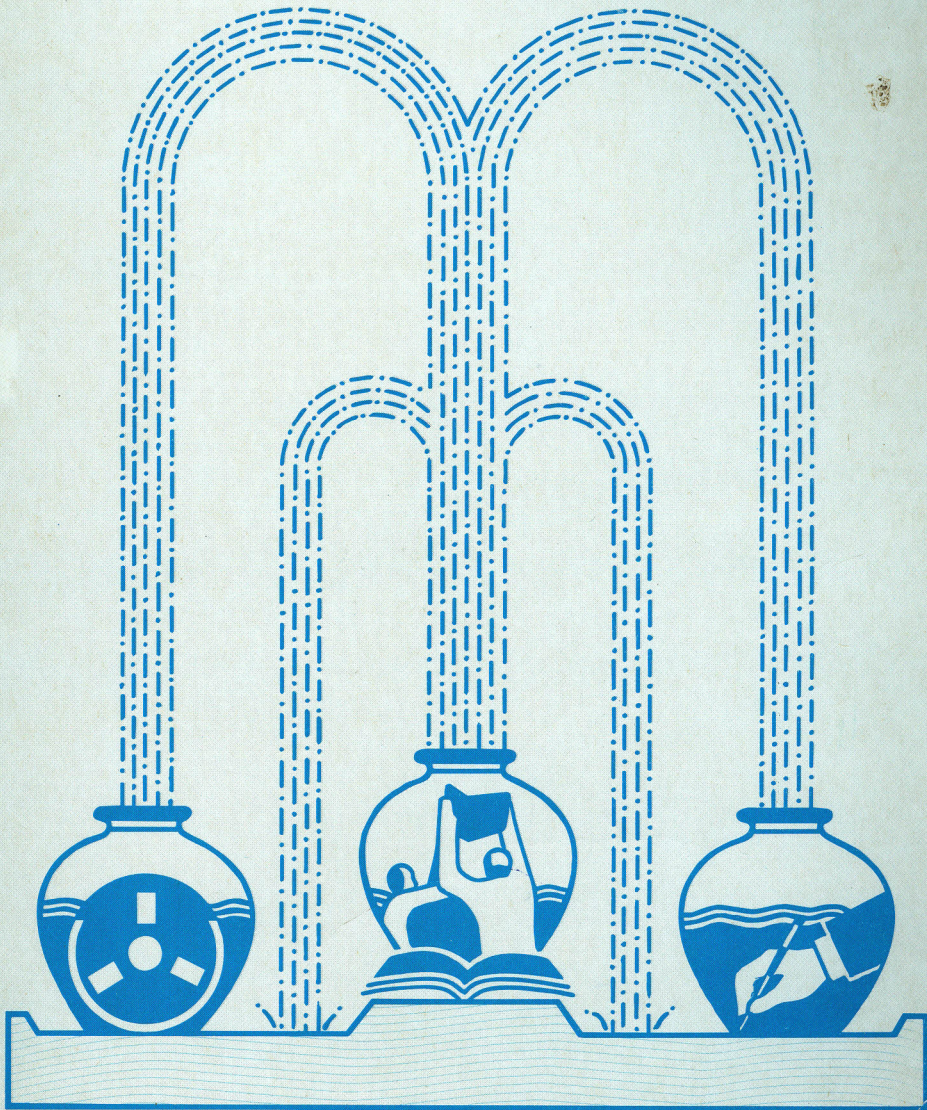


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READING AND WRITING : THE CONNECTION TO PERSONAL , SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Historically the focus of teaching reading and writing skills has dwelt on the preparation of children for school education, that is, the ability to read and understand subjects across the curriculum and the taking of examinations. Such a focus has left many people with the idea that reading and writing are important only as far as formal schooling is concerned, at the expense of developing interest and motivation to continue reading and writing in post school years. However, in the 21st, century, such a restrictive focus should be revisited to demonstrate, that such skills are for a life time and their benefits are immense in adult life. It must be apparent that these skills are necessary if an individual has to be involved in the process of fact finding, dissemination of information and communication of technology, economic and social development. In this paper therefore, I highlight a few scholars who have attempted to formulate models of reading that will cope with the demands of modern life. This is intended to help students to cultivate motivation and develop a readership culture through to their adulthood. The paper also discusses different benefits that an individual can gain from reading and writing skills, and which directly relate to his/her personal, social and economic development. The role of the government in the effort to cultivate interest for reading in adult life has been discussed briefly too. For their importance, reading and writing as skills can be chronicled as the gateway to world thought and modernity through the different print media, and particularly the Internet.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st. century, reading and writing feature as survival tools, in the wake of globalisation. There is much material and new information being generated daily through the electronic media. Such increased information has decreased the distinctiveness of the cultures of different races and communities. By reading such information, people get their world view expanded, and they conceive their natural environment and social world. The electronic and print media are in fact not only markers and stores of information and knowledge, they provide the actualisation of beliefs, and dissemination and sharing of various forms of peoples' culture and traditions. Yet, the benefits of reading and writing have not yet been realised by many people. Majority of people have not learnt in their adult life the fulfilment of being engaged in fact finding through reading for leisure, and for enhancing one's occupation. Sometimes such reading could be for just equipping oneself with the latest developments within one's environment through books, magazines, journals or the Internet. Other people may not have learnt the benefits of reading and writing throughout life, having had the idea that the significance of such skills was mainly for going through the school curriculum and for passing examinations. The basis of this idea can be found in the methodologies used in schools for teaching reading and writing, where often concentration is on literacy and not the cultivation of general readership. Teaching , reading and writing in schools has to have a continuum where schooling is not going to be discontinuous with the world of pre- school and post - school. (Anderson. 1992.). Teaching and learning approaches ensure that at the end of that continuum, there is a greater involvement with employers and industry. This paper attempts to highlight the benefit of reading and writing as the two skills, which initiate an

all round development that is designed to cause improved personal, social, economic and national productivity. These skills could be regarded as the gateways to world thought and modernity through the different media, and particularly the Internet.

Changing Perspectives on Reading and Writing

Reading

Approaches to teaching reading have gone through changes throughout the years. In the past 50 years there has been a move towards learning strategies due to the awareness of the increasingly complex literacy demands of modern technological society. (Anderson. 1992). There are changing patterns of employment which means that learning may be seen as a continuum and life long. There are also changing expectations of children, parents, community and central government. These changes signify the importance of the social and cultural setting of any human interaction.

Scholars have been attempting to formulate models for the reading process that will cope with the changing times and correspond to the needs of modern life. From a early age a child has to be taught how to extract information for themselves, and to inculcate the reading culture for adult life, whether it is for general knowledge or for occupational advantage. This is more important now in the 21st century than ever before. Due to the magnitude of information the reliance on a few experts to read and digest then impart knowledge to others can no longer work. For a country to benefit from the fast increasing information, it has to instil in its population readership skills. The ability for each individual to find and extract information for himself from both the print and electronic media will affect development at all levels, whether personal, regional or national.

Regarding the pedagogical approaches, Chapman (1987), and Halliday and Hassan (1980) noted that a model of reading that included a systematic functional description of language as a social semiotic and the notion of cohesion, did provide a useful tool for teachers focused on reading development. This model of the reading process within a systematic-functional, or Hallidayan view (Gerot 1983, Enkvist 1981), recognises the area of cognition and interaction in language, emphasising the importance of textual, interpersonal and functional aspects of language (Anderson. 1992). This model goes beyond the readability notions of matching reader to text, to the more "complex task of matching reader to his or her social and cultural expectations and assumptions about the texts in question and their writers, to the writers and all their social and cultural expectations and assumptions about the texts and their readers" (Anderson. 1992). As a reading model it permits the reciprocity between the writer and the reader within the interpersonal function of language. Guthrie and Seifert (1984) assert that the reading activity, involves an interaction between the reader and the reading material. Niles, (1972) states that insightful reactions to what is read, include ideas and attitudes, and the manner of expression and intellectual judgements and emotional responses. Niles (1972) further states that assimilation by fusing new ideas, understanding or feelings through reading with those already required, causes the occurrence of new insights and thought patterns to the recipient. This is why a continuation of reading skills needed to be from schools to colleges through to post school levels and to permeate all areas of life: political, ideological, occupational and general policy issues.

From the above discussion therefore reading can broadly be defined as a means of gaining access to the ideas of people who may be inaccessible because of geographical distance, time element or death. It is also a way of accumulating, as well as sharing, past and present knowledge because the written word is more permanent and less obscure than the spoken word.

Writing

Reading and writing are indeed complimentary components of the same form of communication. What is read must have been written and what is written must be read. Scinto (1986) states that writing demands the conscious organisation of ensembles of propositions to achieve its end. He further says that writing is a monologue expressed through the absence in physical terms of the interlocutor and the need for full and explicit linguistic formulation of component utterances. Hence, writing as communication is impersonal. As a written norm, the psychological locus of control is situated within the producer of the text without any shared interpsychological control of topic between the participants. That is, a written text lacks situational and expressive supports.

To write well one must be able to read a lot so as to gain experience of different sentence structures, vocabulary and use of various stylistic features. Thus as Robert (1983) and Ur (1996) state, reading helps to familiarise learners with the conventions governing various kinds of texts and in general improves language use.

However, writing and reading approaches have been subjected to change, with scholars seeking ways of making such skill relevant to life situations. Learning to read in schools has moved from the stage of learning individual words to grammatical relations in clauses or sentences (Brown and Bellugi, 1966); then on to focusing on language learning for increasing competence in the generation of syntactically regular utterances (Anderson, 1992), which in turn, gave way to a recognition of the importance of the development of language use and its relationship to its social and cultural setting (Hymes, 1968; Halliday and Hassan, 1980; Anderson, 1992). Enkvist (1981) had also noted a widening interest to move from syntactically describable cohesion through sentence cohesion to patterns of human interactions. This development in the teaching approaches was partly in response to criticism by philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists, (Chomsky, 1957, and 1965; Anderson, 1992), who drew attention to the complex nature of language and its enormous creative potential.

Written texts have a characteristic of making their authors live through the ages by immortalising them through readership in libraries, archives and Websites. Thus, those whose written word is available for readership, are likely to be considered as the scholars in their subjects. For example, writers such as Shakespeare are remembered more today than the kings who reigned during their times. Likewise, the Kenyan historian Gideon Were, the missionary mathematician, Carey Francis, and the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe are easily remembered because their printed products are being read and shared widely in the English speaking world. Authors of printed materials are not only remembered, but they also contribute to the shaping of events and thought trends which finally form part of the educational, historical and cultural development.

Therefore, the acquisition of writing skill and its utility beyond the classroom is in itself an indication of personal development through psychological and mental maturity. It enhances creativity, a level at which one attains the ability to articulate what he wants to say through language, instead of letting the language guide him on what to say and possibly how to say it. Scinto (1986) says that the factor of psychological contiguity assumes a crucial role in the organisation of written communication. This means that the communicant's choice of an appropriate form for the transmission of her message is governed in no small degree by her ability to utilise the resources a particular language offers her within the limits set by the context of the message and the nature of its intended target.

The concept of writing can thus be summarised as a means of disseminating ideas, and of providing exposure of different world views to people at different places and of different times. Such ideas could be informative, educative, thought-provoking or for leisure. A written text becomes a useful means for clarifying the thinking processes in that it involves conscious operations within

linguistic categories. These operations are able to be carried out at a far slower rate of processing than is possible in oral discourse. From this perspective, both writing and reading feature as complicated psychological processes relating to information processing (Singer, 1990), which is fundamental in decision making at both personal and national levels of development.

It is through writing and reading skills that Africa and other developing countries, for example, have had access to knowledge and technology and found business and career opportunities from both European and Western countries, through logging into the Internet and the digital library. Reading and writing have shrunk the world; made world cultures familiar; minimised misconceptions and, prejudice, and the marginalisation of smaller world nations. It is from the foregoing that development is, thus, defined to mean the individuals' or, communities' growth to a mature state, regarding literacy, knowledge acquisition level and thought processes. In other words, development encompasses an individuals' or nations' evolution to the ultimate state in the areas of personal (also mental), social and economic growth.

The Personal Development Component

Personal Exposure

Reading and writing are essential for literate people. It must go beyond the confines of the schools and formal institutions for it to benefit one economically and socially. Reading involves the society and how one can integrate himself within and relate to other societies around him by way of culture in one's society as well as elsewhere. By this, man expands his confines from parochialism to the civilisations beyond. Scholars such as Jacobs, Vite, Spencer, Veatch, McCure and Noel (1974) drew attention to the importance of this when they said, "Reading is a significant cultural and personal tool that does some things for the individual which no other creation of man can do just as well." (pg. 7). In the same vein, it would be difficult to imagine how an individual could benefit from modern information technology and the readily accessible materials on the Internet if that person could not decipher the symbols on the screen or interpret them.

In simple terms then, reading on the one hand broadens a man's knowledge and his horizon for the comprehension of more ideas because the knowledge acquired previously, either through school or otherwise helps him to assess the new knowledge, thereby gaining new insights. In this way reading becomes a means of gaining access to the ideas of people who may be inaccessible because of geographical distance, time element or death. It is also a way of accumulating, as well as sharing, past and present knowledge. Written language on the other hand, has the advantage of permanency and elaboration which give the writer time and scope to examine his own language and ideas, and to fashion them more precisely to his purpose, and the targeted readers.

Hann (1984) explains that if the skill of writing is developed through school to adult life, then one will not only learn well but will enjoy writing and be able to express ideas legibly and meaningfully and idiomatically. This explains to some extent the different stylistic features that distinguish creative writers, an example being the use of defamiliarisation aspects, foregrounding and so forth. This is augmented by Hann (1984), Peacock (1986) and Pearson (1981) in their argument that describes writing as both a productive skill and a productive use of language which comes out of a person.

Demystifying Knowledge

Continued accumulation of digested and carefully sifted knowledge over the years leads in time to the state known as wisdom. Wisdom is the knowledge that is rightly applied. I argue that to be wise portends having intelligence and great knowledge and the ability to synthesise them to solve problems

of the time. Before the introduction of western education, when reading and writing were unknown, wisdom belonged to the old because they had had time to acquire great knowledge and the ability to synthesise it to solve the problems of the time without social disruption. As the cliché goes, "they had seen it all."

Wisdom in pre-literate years was vested with mystical, even arcane qualities. Experience was the fundamental component. This appeared to change when education hastened the acquisition of different experiences through book knowledge, faster than age could attain. The development of reading and writing enabled a diligent scholar of any age group to acquire this knowledge. However, such literate people have failed to be regarded as wise, though in all ways they are recognised as being educated, or even the élite in the society. They are not seen as wise though educated, because they have been unable to synthesise their great learning to solve the problems of their times.

Demystification of knowledge has been realised in the fact that it is available to anyone who would access it. It is no longer the possession of the learned, the schooled and the career experts but in books, magazines, radios and computers. Reading and writing skills then are necessary to create a knowledge public. While early in the last century the acquisition of knowledge was a long, tedious and time consuming task that only a few people had the stamina and determination to pursue, in this century, it is much easier, taking into consideration the degree courses through the Internet, correspondence and satellite, with libraries on CD Rom.

Nevertheless, knowledge is not just the sum total of all one has read and retained in his or her head. It is the extent to which what has been read has been digested and synthesised into something that can be applied to real life situations without disrupting the march of progress in the society. That is why, even today with the availability of all this information, and the many people who have gained great knowledge through formal education, there is yet need for people to find more critical (or even rational) and objective ways concerning the way in which they react to situations and make judgements.

Self-esteem

In the modern world, knowledge increases rapidly but so does social change. This means that one whose reading habits are fully developed and is diversified in his or her perspective, benefits a lot because of reading in a tangible manifestation of talking, learning and thinking. Therefore continuous use of materials and development of reading and writing competence can result in improved talking, arguments and reasoning skills through good articulation, learning and thinking skills (Melnik and Melnik. 1972; Singer. 1990). The challenge of reading and writing is for the awakening of curiosity; development of proper interests, attitudes and values; building up essential skills for studying and the capacity to think independently, and judge things for oneself. Reading gives an individual the confidence through practice to develop automatic response to materials in print. The confidence thus developed helps and individual in decision making, giving one alternative views which fortify against being swayed easily by unfounded opinions, having developed the ability to analyse, synthesise and debate issues objectively.

In creative writing there are such skills as the development of characters, plots, language and moods, language and movement, and the conventions of actions and the passing of time (Buchbinder. 1991). In all these skills, the development of characters makes the author to look at himself in comparison to his creations. The way a writer perceives himself does influence the way he builds his characters. In the process of character building, a writer can discover the aspects in his character which he would like to work on and change, or the traits which are weak and which he would like to develop further. Such a skill goes towards moulding his personal character .

Social Development Component

Reading can be a powerful instrument for social, economic and cultural transformation necessary for the realisation of personal as well as national goals. This happens if reading is related to the life needs and aspirations of people. Three developmental factors are realised, namely: (1) an inquiring mind (Vygotsky, 1928); (2) the ability to learn from others and, other cultures and technologies, helping one to reject or adopt the learnt knowledge to one's own needs and, (3) knowledge and confidence in the events of the world around (Serageldin and Taboroff, 1992).

All the three factors help individuals to contribute meaningfully to the evolving society, because with time certain norms begin to be inappropriate and wide knowledge through experiences other than one's own, can point to useful courses of action. Personal experiences of an individual may be too specific and prove unsuitable in different places, at different times and under different circumstances as Pinxten (1995) asserted. As a result of such unreliable personal experiences over a period, Anderson (1992) confirms that the acquisition of knowledge in post school years through reading and writing, tends to put personal as well as societal experiences in the right perspective. A literate society will be ready to get new ideas, evaluate them critically from a background of earlier experiences by comparison, before absorbing or assimilating them into their social etiquette (Serageldin and Taboroff, 1992).

Indeed traditionally acquired wisdom permits evaluation, but only at a slow pace. Other times the possession of this wisdom is by only a few people who may not wish to promote change. However, reading and the acquisition of knowledge through the print media, the computer, and other electronic devices can unearth radical but useful practices from other lands and other times. Exposure to the print and electronic media enlightens the society to positive criticism, opens up debate over critical national issues and at the same time, enhances positive attitudes to decisions taken.

Economic Development Component

An Overview

Through writing and reading, individuals as well as nations acquire useful information and contacts concerning marketing and world markets that would otherwise be completely inaccessible. According to the World Bank Report (1998/99), there is a possibility of every individual and nation, to be able to increase the proportion of national income for self improvement through a cultivation of reading culture in our African countries.

Personal economic gain is realised by many writers through their printed materials. This is not only through creative writing but also through consultancies that rely heavily on wide readership. For a nation such as Kenya, writing about the country and its attractions in brochures and other printed media has been an added advantage in the tourism industry which boosts the economy of the country. European romance and detective novels have during the 20th century dominated the world, and have turned their authors into millionaires. Such authors include, Barbara Cartland, Robert Ludlum, Agatha Christie. If we include non-European countries from other continents, the list becomes long.

The Role of the Government

An Overview

In aspects of decision making and in all manner of progress, the public target group-both the publishers and the readers-must view themselves as partners in development with the government (Gutrie and

Seifert. 1994). The government in turn can have policies that are economically viable, mainly for encouraging the culture of creative or wider readership within its population. Wider readership is different from literacy, which most African countries are focusing on at present. The latter is possible and is happening, that is the gaining of the knowledge to read and write. But the impact after that knowledge for example in rural communities is hardly felt because of lack of motivation to read widely in the relevant fields of people's interests. This is aggravated by the unavailability of reading materials. There must be a strategy beyond the basic one in teaching literacy and this may simply be to encourage general readership for information whenever one can get it, and to avail appropriate material which are relevant and interesting to the readers. The call therefore, for the formulating of a publishing policy, that agrees with the government's vision of creating an informed population is a matter of urgency.

Publishing Policy

It is important for a country to have directions concerning what materials are to be published with regard to the socio-economic, ideological, personal and other developmental needs. This calls for budget allocations. So far this has been done for mainly school materials in Kenya. Post-school materials have been left to individual publishers. The products have so far not been catering for different interests of the public (such as spreading them out for different professions in the languages that appeal to the people) and in fact, creative work in print for post school readership in Kenya is very limited in scope and, where it is found, it is of a poor quality. Hence the popularity of Western authors.

Readership Policy

Education is a dominant variable in determining reading and writing practices in adult life. The effect of education on time spent on reading does increase with the educational level. But reading and writing do not increase in isolation nor are they solely a consequence of educational advancement. Employment and production of materials are essential too. Melnik and Melnik (1972: 10), are of the view that the exclusive use of reading for instruction does not prepare children in school for their reading needs in adult life where, "... legal necessity, safety and the acquisition of property are all closely linked to the management of these social literacy problems." There should be genuine interest and support of a reading programme across careers, concentrating on the immediate and specific needs for both the individual's personal growth and national development. A policy in this case is very valuable in giving guidelines and direction on how to prioritise creative materials for the general population, and to cater for the levels of literacy after having carried out a needs assessment survey across the population.

Liberalisation and its Effects

The impact of the liberalisation policy and its practice in Kenya has begun to be felt. In the publishing industry, the writers who have had problems getting their works in print can now have them published. This has had two consequences. One consequence is positive in that, due to monopoly of the publishing industry before, it was not the material's quality or value that prompted its choice for publication but the name of the author. It also did help if one associated with the 'right people', or had established one's name in the 'right places'. Such an association gave one a leeway for one's work to be accepted and published without much ado. However, if the reverse was the case, a good piece of creative work would frequently go to many publishing houses before being accepted for publishing.

The second consequence is the positive competition that the big publishing houses have now to face, under the pressure of smaller ones which accept and publish popular creative works, regardless of the name on the cover. Currently this has enabled many budding authors to come up. Also the renowned publishers have to expand their horizon to look for other writers to broaden their spectrum.

However, both consequences have the same shortcoming. Too much restriction as in the first, and too much freedom as in the second, if not well co-ordinated could leave the market with excess books that the public have little interest in. The literacy world of print can learn from the economic liberalisation effects, where all areas get saturated due to lack of control and direction. Moderation and a guiding policy in this regard would be needful, particularly in an African country, where some traditional values are still being upheld, and where the sieving of foreign cultures is still encouraged. This cannot be over-emphasised knowing how printed materials can be a great influence to the readers as already discussed.

Conclusion

It has been shown how both socio-economic and personal development are accelerated to a large extent by reading and writing as avenues of income generating, and means of developing self-esteem and independence in the thinking process. There is, therefore, need for realistic and effective teaching of reading and writing skills in schools to lay a foundation for these activities in post-school years. This is the time when the ability to select or reject reference materials in solving a problem as well as developing creative writing skills is critical. In these days of careers which exert a lot of tension, leisure readers such as novels and other fiction material can be revitalising at a personal level, if works of writers with well thought out topics and good use of language are made available in the market. Also creative and leisure writing in fiction can be very relaxing too if done to get out of tensed situations.

It is therefore important that school approaches to teaching reading and writing should constantly be reviewed and aimed at helping children to develop interest to read widely; and learn to express their opinions through writing while in school, as a foundation for the ability to read widely and acquire writing hobbies in adult life. The role of the government in this has been expressed as being quite central in both planning and policy making. Needless to say, producing critical readers, thinkers, and advancing creative writers to claim their own 'right' in the age of globalisation in the 21st century, is the greatest challenge now faced by African educational systems and governments.

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