International Review of Education (2019) 65:427–442
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-019-09780-7

ORIGINAL PAPER

Reading in the classroom and society: An examination of "reading culture" in African contexts

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Published online: 2 May 2019
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Abstract

In the education context of sub-Saharan Africa, reading has received substantial attention in recent years. Reading skills and habits have been identified as a marker of success in formal education, particularly with the current international focus on reading achievement as a measure of learning. Meanwhile, adult literacy continues to be seen as an important feature of human development, and reading skills are carefully tracked in reporting on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This attention given to reading by major international agencies, and by the partners whom they influence, has contributed to a general belief that progress of all kinds can be linked to the ability to read and understand written text. Literacy and reading certainly feature prominently in many aspects of lifelong learning. However, the current interest in establishing so-called *reading cultures* is handicapped by a significant mismatch in assumptions about the utility and functions of literacy.

Keywords reading · literacy · orality · language medium · sub-Saharan Africa

Résumé

Apprentissage de la lecture et société : « culture de la lecture » en contextes africains – Dans le contexte éducatif de l'Afrique subsaharienne, la lecture retient depuis ces dernières années une attention particulière. Les compétences et les habitudes de lecture sont jugées marqueurs de réussite dans l'enseignement formel, sur fond de priorité accordée aujourd'hui mondialement aux résultats en lecture comme outil de mesure de l'apprentissage. L'alphabétisme des adultes est toujours considéré comme indice central du développement humain, et les compétences de lecture font l'objet d'un suivi minutieux en vue des rapports sur l'atteinte des Objectifs de développement durable des Nations Unies. Cette attention portée sur la lecture par les grandes organisations internationales et par les partenaires qu'elles influencent a contribué à la conviction généralisée que toutes les formes de progrès peuvent être reliées à la capacité de lire et de comprendre les textes écrits. L'alphabétisme et la lecture

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occupent certainement une place prépondérante dans de nombreux domaines de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. Mais l'intérêt actuel à instaurer des cultures de la lecture est fortement entravé par un décalage flagrant entre les divers postulats sur l'utilité et les fonctions de l'alphabétisme.

Introduction

In the education context of sub-Saharan Africa, reading has received substantial attention in recent years. Reading skills and habits have been identified as a marker of success in formal education, particularly with the current international focus on reading achievement as a measure of learning.[1] Meanwhile, adult literacy continues to be seen as an important feature of human development (UNDP 2016, pp. 29–30); UNESCO is providing ongoing leadership in this field, including through the Global Alliance for Literacy[2] and the *Conférences Internationales sur l'Éducation des Adultes* (International Conferences on Adult Education/CONFINTEA) (for a concept note, see UIL 2017), and reading skills are carefully tracked in the reporting on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN DESA 2017).

The attention devoted to reading by major international agencies, and by the partners whom they influence, has contributed to a general belief that progress of all kinds can be linked to the ability to read and understand written text. One perspective in particular holds that developing what is being called a "culture of reading" will catalyse learning and development among populations which have not traditionally given much attention to written forms of communication. Though definitions of the features and outcomes of this "reading culture" are ambiguous, its development is nevertheless assumed to be a necessary step for societies that have been targeted by international development efforts (Smars 2013; Nalusiba 2010; Mwandayi 2009).

One of the challenges in understanding issues related to reading, literacy and reading culture is the variety of meanings assigned to these terms. *Reading* is variously construed to mean pronouncing written letters and words, pronouncing written text at a specific rate of speed, gaining some level of understanding of the content of written text, and/or absorbing textual meaning and applying it to one's daily life.

Literacy has a broader range of meanings, related to reading fluency, text comprehension, writing, and the uses made of written text in social settings. Even more broadly, the term *literacy* can refer to competence in a particular domain. The 2017/18 Global Education Monitoring Report, entitled *Accountability in education: Meeting our commitments* (UNESCO 2017), uses the term "literacy" with eight different modifiers: "functional", "digital", "information", "ICT", "scientific", "data", "assessment" and "reading"; where no modifier is used, the term *literacy* refers to reading and writing skills.

[1] One example is the widely-used Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), see https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/bk-0007-1109-wetterberg.pdf [accessed 30 November 2017].

[2] For more information about the Global Alliance for Literacy, visit http://uil.unesco.org/literacy/global-alliance [accessed 28 January 2018].

Given this variety of understandings of reading and literacy, the lack of universal agreement on the nature of a *reading culture* is understandable. This term is variously used to describe school-based pupil behaviours, the leisure behaviour of adults, the structures and systems that make written text available in a given context, and the habits of both adults and children in relation to written text. The term is used freely in contexts of text production and literacy learning, without specifying parameters or conditions.

This article explores the notion of a reading culture in relation to the discourse on education in Africa. Before embarking on this exploration, a preliminary discussion of literacy, reading, schooling and language is useful, as these phenomena play out in African social and education contexts.

Literacy, reading and culture

As a social practice and a skill set, literacy is rooted in language and culture. The nature of literacy as a cultural phenomenon is well established (St. Clair 2010, p. 86; Langer 1987; Wagner 2010, p. 162). As a feature of language, itself an essentially sociocultural phenomenon, literacy is about making meaning from, and with, written language. Literacy extends the communicative reach of language, facilitating the archiving and transmission of human thought and culture beyond what is possible with spoken language.

Writing systems themselves are also rooted in both language and culture. Linguist Mark Sebba notes:

> Orthography is par excellence a matter of language and culture. It is a matter of linguistics too, of course, but one where the classic principles of sociolinguistics come into play: the signs carry not only linguistic meaning, but also social meaning at the same time (Sebba 2007, p. 7).

Even familiar concepts about spoken language, such as that of a "word", have their origin in written language (Coulmas 2013, p. 99). This intimate connection between language, culture and literacy leads Daniel Wagner to argue that "the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being" (Wagner 2010, p. 167). Whether in its non-instrumental uses (e.g. religious literacy, private literacies) or its instrumental uses (e.g. functional adult literacy, school-based literacy), literacy is shaped by the linguistic and sociocultural environments in which it is practised.

It has also been argued that literacy has an impact on both culture and cognition. The most famous proponent of this view of literacy, Walter Ong (1982), argued that literacy changes the thinking patterns of entire cultures. However, a contemporary study by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole among the Vai people of Liberia (Scribner and Cole 1981) led them to question the notion that literacy, cognitive development and schooling are inseparable. In fact, evidence indicates that cognitive differences associated with oral and written language are more

likely to be the result of the conditions under which one learned to be literate: schooling, non-formal education programmes or informal contexts (Kelder 1996).

Indeed, the appropriateness of characterising a given society as “oral” or “literate” is questionable. No set criteria exist to categorise a culture as “oral” or “literate”, and where the citizens of a given society know how to read but frequently choose not to, choice and agency are at least as relevant to societal “literateness” as are reading competencies.

Perceptions of literacy

Claims made for literacy, particularly in development circles, are wide-ranging. Ralf St. Clair challenges “the inflation of the claims about the benefits of literacy education”, including enhanced national economic growth, increased individual income, better health and smarter children (St. Clair 2010, p. 2). Literacy is described as a moral imperative (Powell 1999), and a matter of human rights, especially for women (Silawal-Giri 2003). Literacy is claimed to “liberate” – in an astounding variety of ways.

The logic of some of these claims is doubtful. For example, Uta Papen (2001) describes the deficit discourse embedded in the National Literacy Programme in Namibia,[3] in which literacy was linked with political wisdom and the ability to identify illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Regarding claims about literacy and economic well-being, several prominent scholars have argued that the existence of a relationship between the two does not necessarily imply a causal link (Wagner 2010, p. 167; St. Clair 2010, p. 175).

What is certain is that claims regarding the benefits of literacy to personal and national well-being are generally founded on the role of reading in gaining new ways of thinking about the issues that affect one’s life. This, of course, implies that what is read has been thoroughly understood, which in turn implies that the language of literacy is one that is understood by the learner. The role of language choice in literacy programme development is thus crucial to the accrual of such benefits.

Cases do exist in which the notion of literacy has little to do with reading skills. Where literacy programmes emphasise social and political goals, reading and writing skills may take a back seat. The Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) approach to adult learning and social change,[4] based on the teaching of Paulo Freire, is one such example. First developed in 1993 by ActionAid, by 1996 REFLECT had been implemented in 20 countries. Evaluating the REFLECT literacy approach to literacy, Maura Duffy, Jude Fransman and Emma Pearce observe that this method is widely considered to be a highly effective force for social change:

[3] The National Literacy Programme in Namibia (NLPN) was launched in 1992. For more information, see UIL (2016).

[4] For more information about REFLECT, visit www.actionaid.org/what-we-do/education/empowerment-through-literacy [accessed 5 January 2018].

> The approach re-conceives literacy, seeing it as a fundamental lens for analysing the relationship between citizens and their governments. Enabling people to deal with the power dynamics around the uses of literacy becomes as important as the development of technical skills (Duffy et al. 2008, p. 7).

Recognition of political reality among marginalised populations led to a greater programme emphasis on facilitating social change, with correspondingly less attention paid to literacy skills acquisition. Abby Riddell notes that by 1998 REFLECT was being described not as a literacy method, but as a participatory learning process that focuses on empowerment (Riddell 2001, p. 39). Action Aid's current description of REFLECT (see footnote 4) is as an approach to adult learning that supports literacy.

The notion that literacy is not necessarily linked to specific reading and writing abilities is argued elsewhere as well. Alemayehu Hailu Gebre, George Openjuru, Alan Rogers and Brian Street observe that non-literate people in Ethiopia engage with texts and numbers in their daily social practices, and that they "do not feel any great need for learning literacy skills for themselves" (Gebre et al. 2009, p. 119).

Reading: skill and practice

Definitions of reading tend to centre on the ability to derive meaning from written symbols. Far more than *literacy*, the notion of *reading* is susceptible to being reduced to a set of skills. In recent years, much attention has been focused on the assessment of reading skills, as large international donors increasingly use reading ability as an indicator of learning achievement. For example, both in its 2011–2015 education strategy and its renewal for 2016–2020, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) cites explicit goals for reading outcomes in recipient countries.[5] The Global Partnership for Education (GPE), a community of the world's largest education donors, has committed itself to improving the teaching and learning experience of children, "in particular in reading and math".[6]

One influential tool currently being applied to education aid is the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) (Gove and Wetterberg 2011). Developed in 2006 by Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International, with funding from USAID, the intention of EGRA is to deliver classroom-based, individual assessment of reading ability among children in early primary grades. By mid-2016, the EGRA assessment tool had been implemented in more than 70 countries, many of them in Africa (RTI International 2016). Results from this testing approach have revealed very low reading achievement in many of the target countries, with up to 90 per cent of primary grade 2 and 3 pupils in some countries unable to read a single word of text (Gove and Cvelich 2010, p. 12). The tool has limitations, particularly where language issues are concerned. Nevertheless, EGRA findings on reading achievement are

[5] For more information about USAID's education strategy, visit https://www.usaid.gov/education [accessed 8 January 2018].

[6] For more information about the GPE's eight areas of focus, visit https://www.globalpartnership.org/focus-areas [accessed 3 January 2018].

important, and in some cases, EGRA-based research is bringing useful language-related evidence to light (e.g. Piper and Miksic 2011).

As a result of donor focus on reading assessment, a number of African states are also turning their attention to reading.[7] In an environment where reading achievement is so closely linked to definitions of development, as well as to international funding, it is no coincidence that the notion of "establishing a reading culture" in nations of the Global South is gaining currency in international discussions.

However, reading practice in society goes far beyond reading skills development at school; indeed, children and adults can and do learn to read and write without the benefit of formal schooling (Wagner 2010, p. 165; Gebre et al. 2009). The nature of reading practices in non-school contexts is determined by personal choice, interest and purpose. For example, Annah Molosiwa describes the results of a literacy survey conducted in Botswana in 1993, indicating that

> 33.9% of the people who could read Setswana never read anything, with females in the majority (76.2%). The majority of those who could read English reported that they were not interested in reading anything in English (Molosiwa 2007, p. 50).

Molosiwa lists the reasons given by Batswana adults for not reading or writing: "nothing to read or write", "lack of time", "lack of interest", "could not read well", "poor eyesight". Such data indicate that attempts to create or bolster a reading environment must be part of a broader focus on how to interest people in reading.

However, language choice is critical in reading practice. E. Mwandayi (2009) observes that in Tanzania, interest is growing among urban youth and adults in reading newspapers and using libraries. She also notes a marked preference for Swahili-language reading material over English-language material. Priscilla Nalusiba observes that in Uganda, children's interest in reading is blunted by their failure to understand the language in which the text is written. She quotes one young child: "I don't like to read because most of the books are written in English and I can't read it easily because I don't understand the words" (Nalusiba 2010, p. 44).

Nalusiba further notes that cultural relevance is key. She quotes a teacher's comment that the materials available to pupils were not culturally relevant, because

> they were written by foreign authors who came from cultures different from those of the pupils and whose writings were based on their cultural backgrounds (ibid., p. 60).

Cultural mismatch between the writer and the reader, taken together with a language mismatch between the text and the reader, indicates the importance of local knowledge to any kind of sustained reading.

[7] Two GPE-sponsored *All Children Reading* workshops, held in Kigali in February and March 2012, drew representatives from 26 African Ministries of Education. For the summary report, see GPE 2012.

Literacy, reading and school

The school is the societal institution that most obviously depends on literacy skills. Florian Coulmas notes that

> It is not just that reading and writing are typically taught at school and that written language is learned language; much of what happens at school presupposes written text and the written mode of communication (Coulmas 2013, p. 98).

Clearly, success in the formal education system depends (among other things) on the ability to engage successfully with written text. The navigation of written text (though not necessarily reading it with understanding) that takes place in many African classroom settings is known as "school literacy" or "school-based literacy",[8] and it carries huge value as a mediator of the social, economic and political potential that success in the formal education system holds. As Kristen Perry notes, in Sudan, school-based literacy practices "tend to focus on purposes of certification and credentialing" (Perry 2007, p. 74). This is because the potential for access to an economically improved life through formal education holds such strong attraction for students and their parents in Africa, that other potential benefits of education (such as the ability to think critically, the development of creative imagination and innovative skills, and so on) tend to be ignored in the drive to gain whatever aptitudes will help the learner score well in school examinations. These aptitudes include the ability to engage with written text somehow, regardless of the quality of learning taking place.

One significant reason for this skewed view of literacy and learning in many African classrooms is the language of instruction (LOI) used. Research has shown that effective learning must take place in a language that the learner controls; learning to read in particular, because of its heavy reliance on comprehension, requires oral mastery of the language of instruction. However, these cognitive and academic realities become largely irrelevant in many African classrooms, where the teacher is trained and expected to use a language of instruction that is not well understood by the students. There is a common belief in Africa that formal education must take place through international languages for the desired benefits to materialise (Trudell 2007, p. 558). Thus, for millions of African students, school-based literacy has little to do with text comprehension and a great deal to do with memorisation, what Issa Diallo (2009, p. 25) calls "deciphering" of written text, and the development of other ways to figure out what is going on in an unfamiliar language.

These two features of school-based literacy, namely the primacy of exam-passing and the language of instruction, form an impregnable wall around the type of learning that goes on in African schools. Little space is left for use of texts that emphasise

[8] The term "school-based literacy" was originally used by Anthony Pellegrini and Lee Galda (1998) to describe the positive effects of social support for the early literacy learner, both at home and in school. Ironically, authors referenced in this article use the term to refer to a limited type of literacy that primarily involves navigating text in the effort to attain formal school credentials.

communication, creativity or cultural expression. Kerryn Dixon and Kelly Lewis's study of the role of South African parents in their children's school literacy reveals the alienating and counterproductive impact of this type of "literacy":

> The findings of this research show that schools wield a large amount of power over parents, and that discourses around school literacy silence alternative home literacy practices. These school literacy practices are in themselves problematic because they are very narrow and do not take cultural knowledge or multimodal practices into account. Parents seem overwhelmed by the authoritarian discourse and are unable to challenge what they are "told" to do. They are also further silenced by the power of English in which they are expected to communicate (Dixon and Lewis 2008, pp. 49–50).

So, in many African contexts, the notion of "school literacy" or "school-based literacy" is not only restricted to certain types of skills and assessable knowledge, but is also characterised by a range of memorisation and reproduction strategies which do not depend on comprehension. School-based literacy is not, in fact, leading to a broader habit of reading and writing in African societies.

What is a reading culture?

This discussion of literacy, reading and schooling brings us to the notion of "reading culture". The term is used freely in education, and without a great deal of consistency as to its meaning, as noted above. Broadly, it refers to a context in which people use text readily and habitually in whatever aspects of their lives they find it useful (Magara and Batambuze 2005; Ruterana 2012a, p. 18), though the term of course also has cultural implications.

A variety of activities are said to lead to the establishment of a reading culture. They include:

- school-based reading initiatives that promote reading for pleasure (as distinct from explicit reading instruction);[9]
- the presence of "reading buddies" and print-rich environments (Dowd and Ochoa 2011);
- provision of a choice of books in classrooms (Parry 2000); and
- support for local publishing (Brock-Utne and Alidou 2011).

Just as revealing are statements that a reading culture "does not exist" in a given society, and the explanations for why this is so: illiteracy, the lack of appropriate reading materials in a language that is accessible to many, and the lack of libraries, bookshops and newspapers to provide a reading environment (Ruterana 2012b, p.

[9] For more information about an interactive reading practice programme using a software developed to encourage children to read and to enjoy it, see http://readforpleasure.co.uk/ [accessed 30 December 2017].

43). Nalusiba describes other barriers to reading culture, such as a lack of parental involvement, teacher-related barriers, school-level practices, cultural relevance, and "a national curriculum that does not sufficiently address reading" (Nalusiba 2010, p. 54).

One editorial in Kenya's *Daily Nation* newspaper argued that technology and more options for leisure activities are to blame for the lack of a reading culture in Kenya:

> Our sources of entertainment used to be very few – we were restricted to reading books or attending night parties once a year in December. Books had an edge. Very few people owned TVs and radios. Today, everyone has a TV and radio. Computers and mobile phones are easily available. All these have replaced the book as a source of entertainment (Maruko 2013).

Interestingly, the editorial lists computers and mobile phones as being inimical to a reading culture, when in fact both forms of technology require reading and writing skills. This indicates the sense that a legitimate "reading culture" is based on a non-instrumental (and non-digital?) use of literacy skills.

Reading culture: for children or for society?

Numerous references to reading culture in Africa link it to performance in formal education. For example, Nalusiba's (2010) examination of strategies for developing a reading culture in Uganda focuses on the attitudes and behaviours of school-aged children. Dixon and Lewis (2008, p. 46) observe that South African parents see reading as a school-based practice, and as irrelevant to their own lives. Peter Bakka goes so far as to ask, "if our [Ugandan] schools are not nurturing a culture of reading and writing creatively, what are they here for?" (Bakka 2000, p. 83).

Other authors situate reading culture in a broader social context. Diallo (2009) presents a typology of literacy competencies in Burkinabè society, referencing both formal learning and non-formal literacy acquisition. Lisa Smars describes the reading culture in Nigeria as the aggregate of people who are "passionate about reading" (Smars 2013, p. 2) and spend time reading outside of the necessities of formal education.

In fact, some authors see the linkage between reading and formal education as inimical to the existence of a strong reading culture. Perry (2007) considers that school-based reading practices hinder the development of a reading culture, due to their focus on certification and credentials. Perry notes that the school-based literacies of Sudanese learners do not reflect those literacy practices that exist within their lives in the community. Ruterana agrees, arguing that the language of instruction policy in many schools hinders the development of a reading culture in society:

> The question of which language literacy and a reading culture should be in is actually the basic and most fundamental factor determining the creation and development of literacy and a reading culture. I argue that the native language which seems to be kept marginal as it appears to be outside the official reading and writing culture would be most likely to provide assistance in the children's

> zone of proximal development. In short, the present language policy that only promotes reading and writing in foreign languages at school seems to hamper the development of a reading culture (Ruterana 2012b, p. 54).

Alternative descriptors of textual usage

At least two alternative approaches to the concept of "reading culture" exist for describing social and individual habits of using written text. The first one is the notion of the *literate environment*. According to Peter Easton, the term refers to "the contextual conditions and support required – both locally and externally – to make literacy fully sustainable" (Easton 2014, p. 20). Agneta Lind describes it as

> the extent to which there is something interesting and/or necessary to read, or situations that require reading and writing in any form, as well as material and infrastructure available, such as books, newspapers, paper … What kind of information is sought and how it is used in a community, and what documents are available in a certain language, determine the use and need for literacy (Lind 2008, pp. 82–83, quoted in Easton 2014, p. 35).

The focus is on environments in which literacy events, artefacts and activities are found, with the goal of understanding and supporting "contexts that are particularly supportive of the acquisition and use of literate skills" (Easton 2014, p. 36). This approach to enhancing the use of written text in society has a clarity and a practicality that is missing in the discourse on individual or group practices that are seen to need changing if reading is to benefit a society.

The second one is the notion of *literacy practices*. This concept is based on the social view of literacy, in which uses and instances of literacy are seen to occur within social and cultural practices (Street 1993; Edwards 2012). Gebre et al. relate literacy practices to "effectively using reading and writing to improve performance in life's projects" (Gebre et al. 2009, p. 19).

The reasons for the evident pre-eminence of the term "reading culture" over these alternative terms are unclear, but certainly the term has made its way into common parlance in a way that the others have not.

Orality, reading and culture

To the extent that reading culture is a cultural phenomenon, the term requires an understanding of the balance that various societies find between written and oral practices. Rare is the sociocultural environment today that features no text at all, not even in the form of school-related practices or text messaging. However, the current international enthusiasm for reading culture goes far beyond such limited use of text, and local responses to international and national "reading culture" initiatives in Africa need to be understood in terms of local perspectives and preferences.

One very important point here is a cultural preference for oral communication, common in many African communities, and a related distaste for written text.

Molosiwa describes an "absence of print literacy culture and the preference for oral communication" among Batswana community members:

> To announce social events like wedding ceremonies, birth of a child, or death, certainly family members are sent to tell … This practice is such a cultural norm that, even today, some people do not attach value to card invitations or accept them as worthy especially if they are from close relatives. People want formal invitations by word of mouth. Card invitations are regarded as impersonal and associated with Westerners (Molosiwa 2007, p. 50).

Ruterana describes similar perspectives in a survey carried out among Rwandan tertiary students:

> The participants also believe that the prevalence of the storytelling tradition among Rwandan households impacts on the reading culture. This oral tradition was the initial form of literacy through its several different forms of expression – storytelling, poems, proverbs, riddles, tongue twisters, songs, dance, and so on – and was passed on from generation to generation, and the Rwandan society still has links with it. Many people derive more pleasure from the oral modes and performing arts – talking, singing, dancing, and socialising– than from the rather private and individual reading of a book (Ruterana 2012b, p. 43).

Ruterana describes the feelings behind these choices of oral over written:

> It is also customary for Rwandans not to bear silence in their daily activities, while reading is a form of intimate and solitary communication between the text and the reader. The oral culture is considered as a socializing agent while reading is a private and solitary activity. Rwandans like to tease one another and to tell stories and jokes to enliven their soul … That can discourage reading (ibid., p. 54).

Among local communities in Cameroon, similar behaviours have also been described (Trudell 2006, p. 636). One Cameroonian literacy researcher observed:

> Even those who have been to school, they don't read. For example, you have an invitation and you give it to a person. He takes it [holds it to his chest] and says, "Oh, what are you talking about? Tell me. Oh, when is it? Where is it?" When he has it in his hands!

Perry notes the same among South Sudanese interviewees, speaking of their communities:

> The [spoken] word is very important. They don't consider writing a lot. They are still talking, because whatever somebody said, we accept as true, instead of writing (Perry 2007, p. 63–64).

One participant in Perry's study commented that "if somebody talks to me here, we can talk until tomorrow. If you asked me what I'm saying yesterday, I can tell you from the beginning to the end. I don't write it down" (ibid., p. 63). At the

same time, the interviewees valued literacy and education highly, primarily as a means to access economic, social and political power. Literacy in the local language was valued for its role in the preservation of the culture and identity associated with the language.

The strength and significance of this cultural preference for the oral over the written is not simply a matter of "an inadequate reading environment". It is rooted in historical and cultural values and realities, and it must not be dismissed in the rush to saddle every society with what is termed a "reading culture". Indeed, Bakka unwittingly provides a cautionary example of the dismissal of the oral communication preferences of African communities, when he endorses the message of a writer in the *Boston Globe* newspaper regarding how to build a reading culture:

> First, she says, talk less. How much time do you spend in trivial conversation? Couldn't some of that time be spent reading? (Bakka 2000, p. 86)

Whether or not the choice of reading over interpersonal communication is a good idea in Boston, it is surely an insult to African cultures to assume that the practice of regularly engaging with other people is trivial – or that it is unrelated to processes of lifelong learning.

Another crucial point in the discussion of oral and written communication choices in African communities has to do with the language medium. Oral communication is by nature carried out in a language that is intelligible to both speaker and listener; misunderstandings are relatively few, and any problems of clarity can be corrected on the spot. Written text, on the other hand, is not guaranteed to be in a language which the reader has mastered. Certainly in many African contexts, the overwhelming majority of written texts are in international languages that are not well understood locally. So, the content of the text may be processed laboriously or not at all, and in the end the reader is not always certain of the message.

This means that oral/local language is often set in opposition to written/foreign language. Based on research in northwest Cameroon, the author has elsewhere described the situation as follows:

> [P]atterns of oral or written communication are closely related to the languages identified with those two modes of communication … The identification of mother tongue with oral communication and English with written communication is highly influential in shaping people's communication choices (Trudell 2004, p. 26).

This dichotomy helps to explain the lack of enthusiasm for what is called "a reading culture" in many community contexts.

Finally, it is important to interrogate the assumed polar nature of the oral/literate cultural distinction. In very few societies, the choices made about modes of communication are an "either-or" proposition. Rather, these choices are shaped by values, language, purpose and context. The question thus arises: who decides whether a particular society is "literate", or at least literate enough to be seen as

having a reading culture? Furthermore, whose values are being expressed in the assumption that a reading culture is desirable? Certainly reading (and, to a lesser extent, writing) is a crucial component of success in the formal education system; however, respect for and inclusion of the knowledge and cultures of the Global South are notoriously lacking in that system. The many externally driven projects and initiatives aiming to inculcate so-called "reading cultures" must, therefore, be queried.

Literacy and reading certainly feature prominently in many aspects of lifelong learning. However, the current interest in establishing reading cultures is tainted by mismatched assumptions about the utility and functions of literacy. Use of local languages could be of help here. As Loyce Kwikiriza (2000) indicates, building a reading culture based on local language-medium *oral* tradition and practice could bridge the language and culture gap in the minds of potential readers, and enhance the role of reading in their lifelong learning.

Concluding thoughts

Several conclusions may be drawn here. The primary conclusion relates to the close connection between language, reading, and cultural understandings of literacy. Specifically, language medium is a critical point in the uptake or rejection of reading. In much of Africa, the connections that have historically been made between education, literacy and a foreign-language medium of instruction have caused reading to be understood as a largely foreign activity, carried out in the formal school context that has been considered equally foreign to the local community and unrelated to any useful sort of learning.

A related point has to do with the rationale and assumptions behind current efforts to establish reading cultures worldwide. The uses that people make of written text are based on reason and experience, and yet efforts to establish a reading culture often assume an intellectual or a cultural deficit on the part of the target "non-reading" culture. When one culture chooses not to use written text as another culture does, this should not be construed as a deficiency.

Attempts to introduce more extensive use of written text into a given society must, then, be founded on a respectful understanding of what use people are already making of text, and why. It is important to understand what qualifies as reading, and what qualifies as text. Efforts to enhance the number and availability of reading materials must focus on the language (or languages) actually used by the population to communicate. It also should be recognised that increased availability of text alone does not change culture, nor does a flood of culturally or linguistically irrelevant material induce enthusiasm for reading.

In societies across the Global North, reading cultures have developed naturally over centuries. In societies currently categorised as "non-reading cultures", reasons to use written text must similarly develop out of the sociocultural environment.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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