

STRENGTHENING LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR ADULT LITERACY AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language education is a vital pillar of adult literacy and lifelong learning, especially in a multilingual nation like Nigeria, where over 400 languages are spoken. This linguistic diversity, while complex, represents a rich cultural asset that can foster inclusive education and mutual understanding when effectively leverage. This paper explores innovative strategies for strengthening languages education for adult learners in Nigeria, identifying key challenges and opportunities for sustainable literacy development. It highlights the critical role of technology, community-driven initiatives and policy reform in enhancing literacy outcomes. Suggestions include the adoption of multi-lingual literacy models, integration of digital learning tools and the promotion of public-private partnership to support inclusive and lifelong learning pathways.

Keywords: *Language Education, Adult Literacy, Lifelong Learning Nigeria.*

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Introduction

No human society exists without language. The effective organization and coordination of human activities rely heavily on the language used for communication and instruction. Language is a structured system of communication that human use to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas. It consists of spoken, written and signed forms, enabling individuals to interact, share knowledge, and build societies. According to Anifowoshe and Onjewu (2001), language serves not only as a medium for expressing thoughts, perceptions, emotions and values that define a community but also as a fundamental marker of social identity. Language is vital reflection of cultural identity and plays a crucial role in adult literacy and lifelong learning. The international community has long acknowledged that

language is central to the structure and delivery of all forms of education. Language is also seen as a factor in developing relevant curriculum, in ensuring quality learning and respecting cultural identities (Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband DVV). Language is not merely a tool for communication. It is the medium through which education occurs and knowledge is transferred. In the context of adult literacy and lifelong learning, language education assumes a critical role in ensuring that learning can access, process and apply new information meaningfully.

Language is fundamental tool for literacy and lifelong learning, enabling individuals to access knowledge, participate in society and improve their quality of life. In Nigeria, where over 400 languages

are spoken, effective language education is essential for enhancing adult learning.

Language education is the teaching and learning of a language which is commonly used with regarding to second language acquisition (Giannikas, 2021). It also encompasses techniques for developing language skills, along with a deeper understanding of pedagogical approaches, competencies and challenges in the language learning process. Language education is vast and essential field focused on teaching and learning of languages. It covers various aspects; including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, speaking, reading, writing and cultural understanding. Gannikas (2021) outlines the key components of language education as;

1. **Language Acquisition:** Language education aims to facilitate the acquisition of new languages or the enhancement of existing language skills. It covers both first language (L1) acquisition and second language (L2) acquisition which is the focus of language learners studying a language other than their native one.

2. **Formal Education:** Language education typically takes place in structured setting such as schools, colleges, and language institutes. It can also be accessed through online courses and self directed learning.

3. **Curriculum Development:** Education and institutions design language curriculum that define learning objectives, institutional contexts, and assessment methods to guide language learners.

4. **Multilingualism:** In today's globalised world, there is a growing focus on multilingualism and the ability to communicate across multiple languages, which is increasingly emphasized in language education programmes.

5. **Digital Technology:** The incorporation of digital tools in language education is becoming more widespread, utilizing language learning apps, online platforms and virtual classrooms to enhance learning experiences.

6. **Cultural Understanding:** Language education often integrates cultural elements, enabling learners to grasp the customs, traditions and social contexts linked to the language they are studying.

7. **Lifelong Learning:** Language education extends beyond formal instruction, emphasizing continuous skill development and adaptation to evolving linguistics demands through life.

The significance of language education cannot be overstated, as it serves as a crucial foundation for both educational advancement and national development. It is a vital tool for imparting knowledge, essential skills, and competences necessary for dynamic society. To enhance language education for adult literacy and lifelong learning in Nigeria, facilitators must ensure that learners recognize the profound impact of language acquisition on society. They should also be responsive to learners' immediate needs and adopt flexible teaching techniques (Ubah, 2024).

This paper is particularly relevant as it advocate for the integration of online language learning apps as a supplementary and effective teaching method. By incorporating digital tools, facilitators can enhance adult learners' competence in language use, making the learning process more accessible and engaging. This paper further contains that strengthening language education is a vital pathway toward improving adult literacy rates and promoting lifelong learning. It argues that adopting inclusive, multilingual and context-sensitive approaches to language instruction will enhance educational outcomes and empower adult learners in Nigeria.

Concept of Adult Literacy

The concept of literacy has been subject of longstanding debate. However, amid ongoing discussions, there is a growing consensus that literacy refer to the ability to acquire foundational skills in reading, writing, and numeracy – whether in a local or foreign language – for the effective and meaningful engagement in everyday activities within

society (Indabawa, as cited in Ubah, 2024). In the context of this paper, literacy refers to an individual's ability to read, write and perform basic calculations and to apply these skills meaningful in socioeconomic, political, cultural and religious activities for effective participation since they are required for effective function in everyday life. Literacy should be seen as a fundamental human right and foundation for lifelong learning. It is the first step for most other forms of learning. Literacy skills become more relevant and impactful when they are tailored to the individual adult learners occupation or trade and are most effective when applied to addressing real-life challenges such as poverty, disease, marginalization, ethnic and tribal conflict banditry and farmers-herders clashes. Therefore, functional literacy serves a powerful tool for advancing the socio-economic development of any nation. It is not only a medium of acquiring information and essential skills but also the foundation for all learning experiences.

This underscores the importance of literacy for adults who engage in daily responsibility and make decisions across various aspects of life, thereby highlighting the critical need to prioritize adult literacy.

Adult Literacy and Typologies

Adult literacy refers to the ability of adults to read, write and understand information effectively. It is crucial for personal empowerment and social development. Adult literacy plays a pivotal role in enabling individuals to engage with written context that is integral to daily activities in our modern, text-driven society (Project New York, 2024). Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2024) defines adult literacy as the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written text to participate in society to achieve one's goal and to develop one's knowledge and potential. This definition emphasizes not just reading and writing skills, but also the capacity to apply those skills in real-life activities, contributing to

personal and social development of adults. This show that recent concept of adult literacy emphasized a shift beyond basic reading and writing skills.

Adult literacy encompasses various forms that address the diverse needs of adult learners in different social, economic, and cultural context: key typologies of adult literacy include:

- i. **Basic Literacy:** This involves foundational skills in reading, writing and numeracy, enabling adult to function effectively in daily life.
 - ii. **Functional Literacy:** This refers to the ability to apply literacy skills to real life situations such as reading instructions filling out forms or managing household finances (UNESCO, 2022).
 - iii. **Digital Literacy:** The capacity to access, evaluate and use digital tools and technologies for communication, learning and problem-solving (OECD, 2021)
 - iv. **Health Literacy:** The ability to obtain, understand, and use health-related information to make informed decisions about personal and family well-being (Nutbeam, 2000).
 - v. **Financial Literacy:** Involves understanding and applying financial knowledge for budgeting, saving, investing and making economic decisions.
 - vi. **Civic Literacy:** Enables individuals to engage in societal and political processes, understand civic responsibilities, and participate actively in democratic life.
 - vii. **Environmental Literacy:** The knowledge and skills needed to understand environmental issues and contribute to sustainable practices and solutions.
- The point is that these types are interrelated and essential for promoting lifelong learning and empowering adults to navigate complex, modern societies and make policies, take decisions for future development for better living standard.

The Concept of Lifelong Learning

Although, there is no universally accepted definition of lifelong learning. It is widely recognized as a crucial element of education policy –

particularly in the context of adult education. Lifelong learning refers to a continuous process of acquiring knowledge and skills throughout an individual's life, extending from initial education into ongoing, continuing education. Lifelong learning involves a broad set of knowledge skills, competences and attitudes through which a learner's agency is both recognized and fostered (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation). The framework proposed by Delors, Muftić, Amagi, Carneiro, Chung, Geremek & Nanzhao (1996) in the influential UNESCO report *Learning: The Treasure within* outlines four pillars of education—learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. These pillars remain highly relevant to contemporary adult literacy and language education. Their enduring significance is reflected in more recent UNESCO publications, which continue to emphasize lifelong learning as a foundation for sustainable development and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2022):

i. **Learning to Know:** In the context of language education, this involves equipping adult learners with functional literacy and language skills necessary to engage in lifelong learning. It fosters the ability to learn how to learn, enabling adults to access, understand and critically reflect on information about their world, pressing global and community issues.

ii. **Learning to Do:** Language proficiency empowers adults not only to gain vocational skills but also to communicate effectively in various real-life situations. It enables them to participate meaningfully in the workplace, collaborate in teams, and contribute to solving personal and collective challenges, thereby enhancing their functional literacy and employability.

iii. **Learning to Live Together:** Adult language education promotes intercultural communication, mutual respect and peaceful co-existence. By learning a new language or improving proficiency in a shared language, adults can better understand

and appreciate diversity, and contribute to inclusive communities. It supports values such as pluralism, cooperation and conflict resolution – crucial for democratic participation and global citizenship.

iv. **Learning to be:** through language learning, adults gain greater self-expression, confidence and autonomy. Literacy empowers them to think critically, make informed decisions and take personal and social responsibility. It supports their full development as individuals capable of lifelong personal growth and meaningful participation in society (UNESCO, 2022).

Innovative Strategies, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancing Language Education

Innovative strategies are essential for enhancing language education and improving literacy outcomes among adult learners in Nigeria. Mobile-assisted learning platforms, Short Message Services (SMS) based literacy programs, offer flexible and accessible learning opportunities, particularly in remote areas (Olowu & Udu, 2021). Community-based multilingual literacy centres that employ local facilities and use indigenous languages foster inclusive and culturally relevant learning environments (Oduran, 2020). Additionally, integrating literacy instruction with vocational training enables learners to acquire practical skills alongside language competence, thereby increasing motivation and retention (Akinwale & Oladipo, 2020). Radio and audio visual programmes in local language, as well as peer-led and intergenerational learning models further support literacy by leveraging familiar and trusted communication channels (Yusuf & Falola, 2022). These strategies, when effectively implemented, can significantly strengthen adult literacy and promote lifelong learning in Nigeria's multilingual context.

Despite the innovative strategies and benefits, multiple challenges hinder the effective use of indigenous languages in adult literacy programmes. These include;

- i. **Limited Teaching Materials:** Many indigenous languages lack standardized orthographies, and there is a shortage of textbooks and resources (Abimoade & Abolade, 2019).
- ii. **Inadequate Teacher Training:** Most literacy facilitators are trained to teach in English language and are not equipped to handle multilingual classrooms
- iii. **Sociolinguistics Hierarchy:** English language remains associated with prestige and socio-economic advancement, leading to negative attitude towards languages (Okedara & Aderinoye, 2021). This points to misconception and definition of literacy and educated person by the populace
- iv. **Policy Inconsistency:** Although policies exist to support mother tongue education, implementation is weak and underfunded (FGN, 2014).

These obstacles undermine the goals of adult education (FGN, 2014) by making literacy programmes inaccessible or ineffective for many learners.

Despite these challenges, several opportunities can be leveraged to promote sustainable literacy development. Technological advances especially mobile phone penetration, enable innovation and radio broadcasts in local languages, expanding reach even to remote communities.

Olowu & Odu, (2021) community engagement remain critical; involving local stakeholders in programme design ensures cultural relevance and encourages learner participation (Oduaran, 2020). Mother-tongue-based education is another vital opportunity, as literacy instruction in learners' first languages has been shown to improve comprehension, retention, and motivation (Trudell, 2016). Finally integrating literacy with vocational skills training provides learners with immediate practical benefits which can enhance their motivation and retention (Akinwale & Oladipo, 2020).

The Critical Role of Technology, Community, Initiatives and Policy Reforms in enhancing Literacy

Technology, community-driven initiatives and policy reforms each play a pivotal role in strengthening adult literacy and lifelong learning in Nigeria. Technology particularly, mobile learning, radio broadcasts and digital literacy tools, expands access language education beyond traditional classroom settings, especially in underserved and remote communities (Olowu&Udu, 2021). Community driven initiatives such as local literacy circles, intergenerational learning and culturally grounded programmes, ensure that learning remains relevant, participatory and responsive to the specific needs of adult learners (Oduaran, 2020). Meanwhile, effective policy reforms are essential for scaling up, successful models, allocating adequate resources and institutionalizing mother-tongue instruction within adult education frameworks (UNESCO, 2022). Together, these three pillars – innovation participation and governance offer a sustainable pathway toward improving literacy outcomes and achieving inclusive lifelong learning for all.

Integrate Literacy with Livelihood Skills: Literacy initiatives should be aligned with vocational training to enhance economic empowerment and motivate participation among adult learners.

Ensure Adequate Funding and Monitoring: Sustainable financing and robust monitoring mechanisms must be put in place to support literacy programmes, evaluate their impact, and ensure accountability at all levels.

Conclusion

Language education is central to advancing adult literacy and lifelong learning in Nigeria, especially in a context marked by linguistic diversity and socio-economic disparities. Strengthening language education through innovative, inclusive and context – responsive approaches is essential for achieving national development goals and the sustainable development goals (SDGS). The integration of

indigenous languages, technology-driven learning and community based initiatives and supportive policy reforms can significantly enhance literacy outcomes. However, this requires a coordinated effort among government, educators, communities, and development partners. By investing in multilingual and lifelong learning systems that prioritize accessibility, cultural relevance and meaningful progress toward eradicating illiteracy and building a more inclusive and educated society.

Suggestions

To effectively strengthen language education for adult literacy and lifelong learning in Nigeria, the following suggestions are proposed;

1. **Promote Multilingual Literacy Policies:** Government and stakeholders should prioritize the development and implementation of policies that promote literacy in indigenous languages along side

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English language, ensuring inclusively and cultural relevance.

2. **Invest in Capacity Building for Educators:** Training programmes should be established to equip adult literacy facilitators with skills and multilingual education, inclusive pedagogy, and the use of digital tools enhance teaching and learning outcomes.
3. **Expand Technology – Enabled Learning:** Mobile applications, community radio programmes and other ICT – based platforms should be widely deployed to reach adult learners, particularly in rural underserved areas.
4. **Strengthen Community Participation:** Community based literacy centres should be supported and empowered to co-design and delivery programmes that reflect local needs, values and language, fostering a sense of ownership and sustainability.

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