

LITERACY VIS-A-VIS THE MEANS OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This article aims to explain Literacy Vis-a-vis the Means of Social Communication in Africa by reviewing current research and providing examples of various social communication forms. Understanding literacy and social communication from a cultural perspective are necessary when supporting language and literacy development. However, Africa as a continent has different languages, which may be anywhere between 1000 and 2000 languages; Africa is home to approximately one-third of the world's languages. Their populations evidence the diversity of Africa's languages. Therefore, the only means of communication can now be attributed to mainly English and French. Limited research on this topic is available in the existing literature. Therefore, scholars, professionals and educators utilize an approach to these literacy and social communication forms to support language and literacy development and devise appropriate and effective language and literacy assessment and intervention when needed. This paper first presents a brief overview of literacy. Then it continues with the empirical and theoretical insights contributing to the conception and development of literacy and social communication. In light of this discussion, it will be argued that the increasing ubiquity of social media presents a new opportunity for studying the transformations of literary culture and traditional print literacy.

Keywords: *Literacy, social media and Communication.*

1. Introduction

If it were possible to define generally the mission of education, one could say that its fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life. Literacy pedagogy is expected to play an essential role in fulfilling this mission. Nwankwo and Obiakor (2020) viewed Literacy as the ability to read, write,

speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world. Literacy is often considered a keystone of education that empowers people to participate in economic, social and cultural life (Onyali, 2021). However, what does it mean—to be literate? Educational researchers, policy-makers and teachers often feel tempted to present literacy as a fixed and universal set of skills, knowledge and attitudes (Akubuilu & Obiozor, 2018). This conceptualization facilitates the construction of tests, benchmarks and teaching materials. However, scholars have demonstrated that literacy is not fixed or universal but is always situated in a social and cultural context (Obi, 2017). Based on this insight, they have questioned the dominant—skills and benchmarks approach in education, which conceives literacy as neutral, colossal and measurable. Scholars within New Literacy Studies have convincingly argued for an alternative approach to literacy in research, theory and education.

Literacy is the capacity to communicate using inscribed, printed, or electronic signs or symbols for representing language. Literacy is customarily contrasted with orality (oral tradition), which encompasses a broad set of strategies for communicating through oral and aural media. In real-world situations, however, literate and oral modes of communication coexist and interact, not only within the same culture but also within the very same individual (Onyali, 2021). Literacy is an essential human right. A good quality and basic education equips pupils with literacy skills for life and further learning. Literate parents are likelier to keep their children healthy and send them to school. Literate people can access other education and employment opportunities better; collectively, literate societies are better geared to meet development challenges.

According to UNESCO's 1958 definition, 'literacy' refers to the ability of an individual to read and write with understanding a simple short statement related to his/her everyday life'. The concept has since evolved to embrace multiple skill domains, each conceived on a scale of mastery levels and serving different purposes. Many today view literacy as the ability to identify, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials in various contexts. Literacy is a process of learning that enables individuals to achieve personal goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and participate fully in the community and broader society (2008: 392). In addition, a 2004 Experts' Meeting convened by UNESCO to consider literacy assessment and related definitions of the underlying concept (UNESCO, 2004a) notes that no search for a single definition of literacy is likely to be successful, in part because the word has both an

individually determined and a socially conditioned meaning. Any close examination of it reveals multiple facets. The report of the Experts' Meeting distinguishes prose, document and quantitative applications of the concept (2004a: 20). It enumerates both 'interior' dimensions of its application (e.g. cultural literacy and construction of individual or social identity) and 'external' ones (e.g. objective knowledge, instrumental learning and 'know-how') (2004a: 18).

It is imperative to know that lacking vital literacy skills holds a person back at every stage in life. As a child, he/she would not be able to succeed at school. As a young adult, he/she will be locked out of the job market, and as a parent, he/she will not be able to support his/her child's learning. This intergenerational cycle makes social mobility and a fairer society more difficult. People with low literacy skills may not be able to read a book or newspaper, understand road signs or price labels, make sense of a bus or train timetable, fill out a form, read instructions on medicines or use the internet.

2. Social Media

The field of social media covers a vast array of platforms and practices: from documenting one's life on Facebook to editing videos on YouTube, sharing music on Sound Cloud, reviewing books on Goodreads, and much more. Obiakor (2021) define *social media* as —a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the Web and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content. Despite what the term suggests, Web 2.0 is not used to refer to structural changes in the World Wide Web but is instead primarily used to denote a series of functionalities that have been crucial for the development and increasing ubiquity of social media (Obi, 2017). This includes features such as mobile and cross-platform access made possible through wireless internet, tablets and smartphones. These functions have contributed significantly to integrating digital media practices into people's everyday life. (Ononye, 2019). Through their handheld and pocket-size devices, people are always connected to the network, ready to access, share and create content at any moment, anywhere, and with anyone.

3. Literacy and Social Media

Studying people's engagement with literacy in social media environments will allow me to analyze how literary communication practices are transformed

and new understandings of literacy are formulated. In order to allow such an analysis, the practices must first be carefully documented and described. This will create room for people to upload and download anything they want. This brings about digital literacy. Digital literacy is one of the fundamental building blocks for promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, especially in Africa, which includes a substantial increase in the number of youth and adults with relevant communication skills.

Okechukwu (2020) posited that Digital literacy is “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills”. In other words, one can say that digital literacy correlates with digital inclusion, where people use and access information and communication technologies and do administrative procedures online via e-government services, such as making payments and financial services using technology. The global economy, social life, jobs, and leisure activities worldwide are heavily influenced by technology, and the impact of technology will continue to grow. Digital literacy is, therefore, no longer an option but has become a fundamental requirement for people when going about their daily lives, especially in third-world countries.

4. Digital Literacy a Priority in Africa

A global digital revolution is underway: digital literacy is undergoing challenges as digital technology enters every sector of the economy. As many African countries have an agricultural-based economy, farmers increasingly need Aggri-tech to monitor their products, using technology to treat their crops, sell them, or check prices online and in advertisements. We are experiencing a significant change in the nature of work, and the World Bank Group’s World Development Report 2019 on the Changing Nature of Work explores how this “fourth industrial revolution” is shaping the future. Work is constantly reshaped by technological progress. Firms adopt new ways of production, markets expand, and societies evolve. Besides the business part of digital literacy, it is also central to the education sector; now, online resources are more efficient and rich in educational materials than physical libraries. Some of the laboratories and other experiment resources are now available in virtual versions so that they can be accessed worldwide using VRs, which reduces the cost. So, Africans must adapt to digital life to fit into this digital world. In this article, we will explore digital

literacy based on the internet and mobile penetration, internet connectivity access and affordability, and how people are trained to use digital resources and tools (Obiakor, 2021).

These features create —opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, a changed attitude towards intellectual property, the diversification of cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace, and a more empowered conception of citizenship.

While expressing great optimism about these opportunities for reimagining literacy, education and

Participation, Jenkins also cautions against a deterministic interpretation that might lead to unwarranted enthusiasm and new inequalities. He identifies three main issues which policy-makers and educators must address: the participation gap, the transparency problem and the ethics challenge. As a response, Akubilo (2022) states that everyone must work together to ensure that every young person has access to the skills and experiences needed to become a full participant, can articulate their understanding of how media shapes perceptions and has been socialized into the emerging ethical standards that should shape their practices as media makers and participants in online communities.

Social media's complex symbiotic relationship with mainstream media is still evident in powerful ways. For example, Somalia specialist Peter Chonka (2021) argues that blurring public and private boundaries inherent in the country's social media environment can be disruptive. It has resulted in a lack of coherence in political communication by state actors. This further challenges their legitimacy. Tensions between traditional and modern forms of communication are reflected in the online clash of views over “appropriate” online content, moral values and perceived threats to national security. Media scholar Brian Ekdale highlights the debates around “orality” in social media content. He researched a Kenyan government official's attempts to block a local art collective's music video that had been uploaded to YouTube. Ekdale then considers what this shows about the ongoing tensions between global media technology giants and local users and regulators on the continent.

5. Social Communication

Social communication allows individuals to communicate or interact with others within a societal framework. Social communication encompasses social

interaction, cognition, pragmatics, and language processing. Variations in societal norms exist across and within cultures. Social communication analysis considers the norms relevant to an individual in their communication environment(s) instead of imposing a particular set of standard social norms. Clinicians engage in culturally responsive practice to learn more about the individual's communication needs. Cultural variability is balanced by a universal goal of having social communication effectively meet the individual's goals or developmental needs (Obi, 2017). For example, communication across power differences may vary culturally, but the communicator is still either effective or ineffective at fulfilling the purpose of their communication.

Social interaction is communication that occurs between at least two individuals. Rules of social interaction may vary significantly across cultures, communities, and physical environments. According to Malu (2020), the following variations may occur:

- a. in speech style and context;
- b. within and across cultural groups;
- c. in gender communication differences;
- d. in language transfer (influence of one language on another),
- e. in power relationships (e.g., dominance or deference);
- f. in rules for linguistic politeness;
- g. in nonverbal communication (gestures, tone of voice, facial expression, proximity, and body postures).

The necessary abilities to facilitate a successful social interaction include the following:

- i. secure attachment or attunement with a sensitive caregiver;
- ii. emotion understanding and regulation (e.g., effectively regulating one's emotional state and behaviour while focusing attention on salient aspects of the environment and engaging in social interaction);
- iii. code-switching;
- iv. social reasoning;
- v. peer-related social competence;
- vi. social tasks (e.g., accessing peer groups, cooperative play);
- vii. Conflict resolution.

6. Social Understanding

Social understanding involves acquiring social knowledge about one's and others' mental actions (social cognition) and using this knowledge to plan, guide, and flexibly respond (executive function) to social interactions within a cultural or societal context (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006; Lewis & Carpendale, 2014).

Fundamental abilities related to social cognition include the following:

- I. Theory of Mind (ToM)
 - Identifying and understanding the mental states that others have (knowledge, forgetfulness, recall, desires, and intentions)—and understanding that they may differ from one's own;
 - ability to connect emotional states to self and others;
 - ability to take the perspective of another and modify social behaviour and language use accordingly;
- II. executive functioning (e.g., organization, planning, attention, problem-solving, self-monitoring, future and goal-directed behaviour);
- III. implicit and explicit memory;
- IV. semantic, episodic, and autobiographical memory;
- V. joint attention (e.g., social orienting, establishing shared attention, monitoring emotional states, and considering another's intentions);
- VI. inference;
- VII. Presupposition.

Please note that ToM is a complex topic, and a complete discussion of ToM is outside the scope of this document. Please see Westby and Robinson (2014) for further information.

7. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is an area of social communication focusing on goal-consistent language use in social contexts (Nelson, 2015). Individuals follow a set of rules when using language in conversation and other social settings. The culturally responsive practice seeks understanding pragmatic norms specific to the student, client, or patient. Pragmatics includes both verbal and nonverbal communication.

8. Verbal Communication

- speech acts (e.g., requests, responses, comments, directives, demands, promises, and other communication functions);
- communicative intentions (communicative acts);
- speech acts (Hoff, 2014);
 - perlocutionary—the intended function of language or utterance;
 - illocutionary—linguistic form of utterance;
 - locutionary—effect of utterance on the listener;
- prosody;
- Grice’s maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975);
 - Quantity—The contribution is as informative as required for the purpose of the exchange;
 - Quality—The contribution is genuine and based on what one believes to be accurate or based on adequate evidence;
 - Relation—The contribution is relevant to the topic at hand;
 - Manner—The contribution should be clear, understandable, orderly, and brief.
- discourse
 - style—conversation, narration, expository, procedural;
 - interaction/transaction;
 - cohesion/coherence;
 - responsiveness/assertiveness;
 - topic maintenance/introduction/responsiveness/shift;
 - social reciprocity (e.g., initiating and responding to bids for interaction, turn-taking);
 - communication breakdown and repair;
 - deictic forms—words related to time, place, or person (e.g., “that,” “here”);
 - Contingency—how much or how well an utterance relates or reflects the content of the utterance(s) that come before it;
 - adjacency—carrying the thread of conversation from one utterance to the next;
 - co-construction of meaning—when two individuals (e.g., a parent and a child) discuss a shared experience, thus constructing a memory together;
 - event knowledge;
 - Scripts.

9. Nonverbal Communication

- body language (posture and positioning);
- gesture;
- facial expression;
- eye contact;
- gaze (gaze shifts);
- proxemics;
- deictic gestures—gestures related to time, place, or person (e.g., pointing, reaching);
- representational or symbolic gestures (e.g., waving “hi” and “bye”);
- Challenging behaviour as a communication.

10. Language Processing

Language processing is an area of social communication that regards the internal generation of language (expressive) as well as understanding and interpretation of language (receptive). It is the transfer of thoughts and feelings into a means of expressive communication (i.e., spoken, written, signed) and the understanding and interpretation of language:

- spoken and written language expression and comprehension;
- morphology (word forms);
- syntax (word order);
- semantics—general and discipline-specific vocabulary (e.g., science, math, social studies);
- phonological skills are for spelling and reading decoding.

11. Conclusion

This methodical review collaborated in the understanding of the construct of literacy and social communication in its definition and the skills that integrate it, being considered an area of emerging research and that its development is essential due to people staying on social media specifically for extended periods in African can connect with each other not minding the language, culture and distance. Social communication and literacy focus on developing different abilities that range from the technical to the socio-emotional. In this sense, social media, by making possible and favouring social communications, bring with their requirements for people to perform adequately on digital platforms, understanding

that there is no separation between the digital plane and the physical plane; therefore, a mutual influence is produced that could affect people's experience by being exposed to the different people on social media without their local language skills to deal with such situations.

On the other hand, the social, economic, cultural, and political context is integrated into the analysis conducted on social media, given that such platforms have product advertising, political announcements, and other situations to which social media users are exposed. At the same time, social media differ from each other, so it is relevant to visualize their characteristics and differences, noting they each have their own culture that is reflected in the language, behaviour, and interactions generated.

In terms of the limitations of this study, it should be noted that there may be articles that were not detected in the systematic search or that were not selected for the analysis, considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this study because the authors used concepts linked to social communication, media and digital literacy to refer to the concept of social media literacy. Furthermore, with respect to the future lines of investigation, studies must be generated considering the construct of social media literacy and its relation to other constructs, such as cyberbullying and cyberaggression, as the dangers of social media are considered, making it possible to observe which competencies that make up social media literacy are those that would mainly protect against these dangers. In addition, it would be interesting to identify the relations with constructs that reflect if social media literacy facilitates the opportunities such platforms offer. Finally, other studies could broaden the inclusion criteria by incorporating articles addressing social media literacy, although the authors have used broader concepts or approaches in their research. This way, future studies could analyze and evaluate.

12. Recommendation

Based on the discussions above, the researchers intend or claim to make literacy culture more social by creating opportunities for equal participation. Based on the discourse, it appears that social media create the foundations for a social system of literacy and social communication that recognizes the multiplicity and complexity of learning and participating in the literary culture of Africa and uniting each other through social media. Therefore, social communication promotes literacy in Africa through social media.

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