

An examination of the difference between the contents of the FAL literacy curriculum/primers used in Uganda and everyday literacy practices in rural community life.

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Abstract.

Adult literacy learning programmes in Uganda and, I believe, in most African countries, are largely driven by national and community development concerns (see Carr-Hill et al., 2001; Fiedrich & Jellema, 2003; Wagner, 1995). These concerns are informed by the dominant theories of literacy. However, how the content of adult literacy learning programmes relates to literacy uses in everyday life is often taken for granted when developing adult learning programmes. In this article, I used the Uganda Functional Adult Literacy [FAL] programme as a case study, to show the difference between the content of the FAL curriculum/primer and what rural people read and write in their everyday life in Uganda's rural community life. I then recommend a social practices or the real literacy approach to adult literacy education as a better alternative that can reconcile literacy learning and literacy use in rural community life, and help the learner to make the connection between what they are learning in the literacy classes and the literacies that goes on outside the classrooms.

Introduction

The question of a relevant and meaningful adult literacy programme has for long been a major preoccupation of literacy practitioners. "Throughout the world, efforts are being made to find new ways of developing more effective adult literacy programmes" (Rogers, 1999, p. 220). This paper attempts to show how some approaches to adult literacy education makes it difficult for the learners to make the connection between what they learn in literacy classes and their everyday reading and writing. This is because the curriculum/primer of the adult literacy learning programme does not closely relate to the everyday literacy practices that are going on in the community from which the literacy learners live their everyday lives.

This comparison reveals that there is very little similarity between the contents of the FAL curriculum/primer and everyday literacy practices in rural community life. The paper argues that basing literacy learning on the learner's everyday literacy practices will help them to make the connection

between what they are learning and the literacies of their everyday lives. This can be achieved either by using what Hamilton, Hillier and Tett (2006, p. 2) calls the "social practice approach" to literacy, or Rogers (1999) "real literacy approach".

The study of rural community literacy practices

This paper is based on an ethnographic study (see Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994) of rural community everyday literacy practices in Bweyale a rural community in Masindi District of Western Uganda. The details of the methods used in this study have already been reported in another publication based on the same study (see Openjuru & Lyster, 2007, pp. 100-102).

Literacy theories

The arguments in this paper are based on two literacy theories classified by Street (1984) as the ideological and autonomous models of literacy. The ideological model, which is also referred to as the social practices theory of literacy or New Literacy Studies [NLS], posits that literacy is best understood within the social and institutional contexts in which they are located (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Street, 1995, 2000). This theory emphasis literacy in use, and argues that to facilitate literacy learning there is need to have an understanding of the social, historical and economic contexts of literacy use in everyday life. This theory is used to critique the FAL curriculum/primers used in Uganda and recommend a social practices or the real literacy approaches as a better alternations for adult literacy education programmes in Uganda and other similar developing countries (see Hamilton et al., 2006; Rogers, Hunters, & Uddin, 2007).

The other theory is the autonomous model, which is also referred to as the "Great Divide theory" of literacy (Street, 1984). This is the dominant theory of literacy that informs FAL in Uganda and most national adult literacy learning programmes in developing countries. According to this theory, literacy is an individual skill with positive consequences for the individual and their societies

(Goody & Watt, 1968). It is a prerequisite for civilisation or modernity (Goody, 1968; Goody & Watt, 1968). Becoming literate means being able to read and write in any context where it is required. This assumes a neutral and autonomous Literacy that is uniform in all contexts of literacy use (see Street, 1984, 1995).

Critics of the autonomous model of literacy argue that the 'model focuses more on the "text" than literacy, and sees it as something that contributes to positive cognitive and large-scale historical, economic and social developments of humans civilisation over the years (see Gee, 1990; Grabill, 2001; Prinsloo, 2005; Street, 1984).

The concept of Functional literacy

Understanding the concept of functional literacy is important because it provides the basis for understanding the FAL programme and the materials used in it. Functional literacy emphasises economic development, modernisation, and individual employability through literacy skill development. It defines literacy as a "set of skills that enables an individual to function better in the socio-economic arena" of their communities (Holme, 2004, p. 21). Becoming literate according to functional literacy means acquiring the basic level of literacy required to perform particular tasks that contribute to the economic development of ones community (Venezky, 1990). According to Gray, a functionally literate person is one who "has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group" (Gray, 1956, p. 24 cited in Levine, 1986, p. 28). Teaching literacy is to be accompanied by learning technical knowledge like in agriculture, health, and income generating activities to facilitate the process of achieving a "fuller participation of adults in economic and civic life" (Hutton, 1992, p. 33).

The distinction between functional and the social practices perspective of literacy is a difficult one because they both make reference to literacy in life's activities. However, according to Hamilton, et al (2006, p. 3), the functional approach "focuses attention on the autonomy of the text and the meanings it carries, it search for universal features of adult literacy, numeracy, and language and other semiotic systems." This means that, although they both emphasis literacy in relation to life, functional literacy takes a standard and uniform view of literacy in all activities, emphasising what people *should do* with literacy in those life's activities and not what they *do* with literacy in the same activities. The functional approach does not recognise other different

ways in which people engage with texts other than what should be. That is why functional literacy is associated with the autonomous model (see Street, 1984).

Functional literacy and poverty eradication in Uganda

In line with the idea of functional literacy above, adult literacy education policies in Uganda emphasises national and community development concerns. The constitution of Uganda acknowledges literacy as important for the development of the country (Sandhaas & Asnake, 2003). The 1992 White paper on education stated that, "Literacy especially as taught to adults should be 'functional' and not just 'basic', and it should be 'permanent' and 'developmental'" (Government of Uganda, 1992; Parry, 2000, p. 59). The overall objective of the National Adult Literacy Strategic Investment Plan [NALSIP] was to achieve a literate, well-informed, and prosperous society. To achieve this vision, the NALSIP was design to supports the five pillars of the Poverty Eradication Action Plan [PEAP]. These pillars¹ are

- rapid and sustainable economic growth
- structural transformation
- good governance and security
- increased ability of the poor to raise their incomes
- enhance quality of life for the poor

Literacy education is seen by the Government of Uganda as a strategy in the fight against rural poverty through individual economic development (see Fiedrich & Jellema, 2003; see Obbo, 2004; Okech, 2006; Openjuru, 2004; Parry, 2000).

This literacy policy is informed by UNESCO's well-known position of promoting functional literacy, which says, "Literacy programmes should be incorporated into, and correlated with, economic and social development plans" of the country (See Levine, 1986, p. 31; UNESCO cited in Lyster, 1992, p. 33).

The contents of the FAL curriculum and primers

In response to the national adult literacy policy, the contents of the FAL curriculum and primers focuses on issues of economic development and poverty eradication through three major content areas. The first area is agriculture, co-operative, marketing and trade, with four themes of improving agricultural

productivity, keeping animals, marketing our produce and products, farming and joining cooperatives, clubs and associations. The second area is health, with themes covering food, water, common diseases, environmental hygiene, sanitation, and HIV/AIDS. The third area is about gender issues, culture and civic consciousness with five themes covering home management, sex education and family planning, social and national responsibilities, rights and laws, and cultures of Uganda (see Acaye & Omara-Akaca, 2003; Department of Community Development, 1993). The primary objective of this curriculum and primers are to impart new knowledge that can help in poverty eradication through teaching reading and writing.

The FAL primers consists of pictures and lessons [see examples in figure 1 and 2 below], which depicts both negative local situations that needs to be changed, and positive ones that needs to be introduced and encouraged. In the Luo primer, for example, out of 21 lessons based on the curriculum content areas discussed above, eight lessons have pictures depicting negative situations that needs to be changed and 13 lessons have pictures depicting positive situations that needs to be introduced or encouraged in the community. The reading/writing and numeracy lessons under the pictures are based on messages designed to inform the learners to live according to the positive depictions associated with many social and economic benefits for them and avoid the negative depictions that brings them problems (Acaye & Omara-Akaca, 2003; Department of Community Development, 1993). Using lessons from the Luo primer I have attempted to show how the focus of the literacy programme is stronger on providing useful new knowledge for the learners than literacy uses in rural community life.

Firstly the primers in the different languages use similar themes. For example, the first picture for the first lesson in the Luo primer [see Figure 1] (Acaye & Omara-Akaca, 2003) depicts a picture that is in the Runyankore primer [see figure 2] (Busingye, 2005; Ministry of Local Government, 1993). The title of this first lesson for which the picture was drawn in the Luo primer is “*cilo kelo peko*” meaning “dirt brings problems” (Acaye & Omara-Akaca, 2003, pp. 1-2). In the Runyankore primer, the first lesson is “*obukene buba bubi*” meaning “poverty is bad” (Busingye, 2005; Ministry of Local Government, 1993). Both lessons are instructive and designed to impart knowledge on the value of proper home hygiene and problem of poverty respectively. It is evidently clear that these primers were deliberately developed to communicate development and health knowledge alongside learning how to read and write. However the question I am raising is that are these supporting

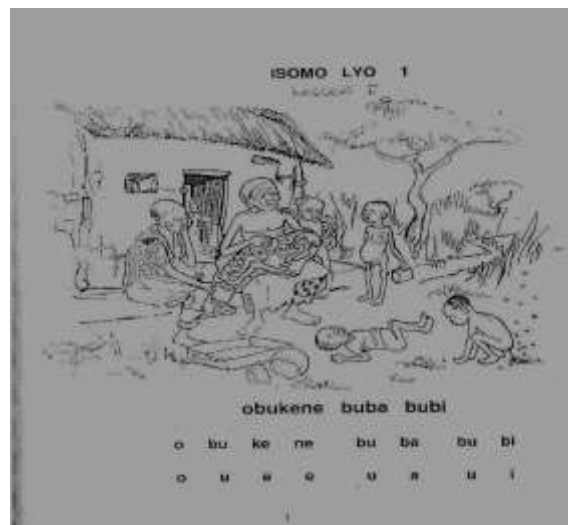
the reading and writing that goes on in the community from which the learners come?

Figure 1: Content of the Luo Primer



Source document: Acaye, A., & Omara-Akaca (2003) *Ryeko aye lonyo: buk me acel* [Luo primer] Kampala: Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development

Figure 2: Content of the Runyankore Primer



Source document: Ministry of Local Government (1993) “*Amagyezi n’eitungo*” Runyankore/Rukiga Primer, Kampala: Government of Uganda

Everyday literacy practices in rural community life

The ethnographic study of rural community literacy practices revealed six overlapping domains of literacy use. These are livelihoods², school, religion,

bureaucracy, family [households], and private personal reading and writing. For religious literacy practices in rural community life (see Openjuru & Lyster, 2007). Two literacy domains livelihood and health related literacies are used as examples to show what rural people read and read as part of their everyday life.

In livelihoods, people read and write as part of their livelihood activities. The readings and writings are in most cases idiosyncratic, that is, they are not uniform for similar activities undertaken by different people. For example, when selling beverages in a bar, a person can record sales in a format and with meanings that are specific to them only. In that case, they create both language and writing to record their bar shop transactions. See figure 3 below:

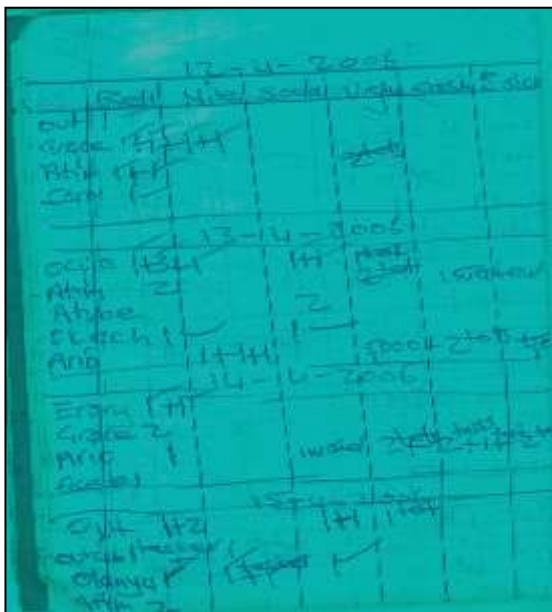


Figure 3: One page of a bar record book

The above page contains sales record of four days in April 2006. These are, the 12th, 13th, 14th, and 15th. On this page, the names of the customer, if known to the seller or their identification markers as specified by the seller if the customer's name is not known, for example, "Out," meaning the customer sitting outside the bar, are written on each rows of this table of sales records. The heading of each column is labelled with the names or abbreviation of the different types of drinks sold in the bar, for example, *Bell*, *Nile*, *Soda*, and *Ug/W*, which stands for Uganda Waragi. The last two columns are labelled *Cash* and *balance*. That is were the seller records those who owe her money for the drinks they have taken.

Every time a customer makes an order, the numbers of beer bottles ordered are entered into the record book under their names or the identification markers assigned to them, for example, 2 under the column of

Bell [see figure 3 above]. The next order is added to the old ones with a plus sign for example 2+1 this goes on until the customer pays for his or her orders. When payment is made the number of bottles of beer paid for is ticked out for example if the customer pays for only two bottles of beers, the number 2 will be ticked off this goes on until the end of the transaction. The transaction record of each customer is kept in one row depending on the type of drinks he or she is ordering. A study of the whole record books reveals that the 'cash' column was not being used, while the 'balance' column is used to record debts taken by the customer, which is what they have not paid for. The reason for this could be that the seller is more concern with unpaid orders.

Figure 4 is one page of a tailor's record of measurement taken from her clients. This information is important for the tailor's work, and you need some knowledge of tailors writing to be able to comprehend what has been written on the page.

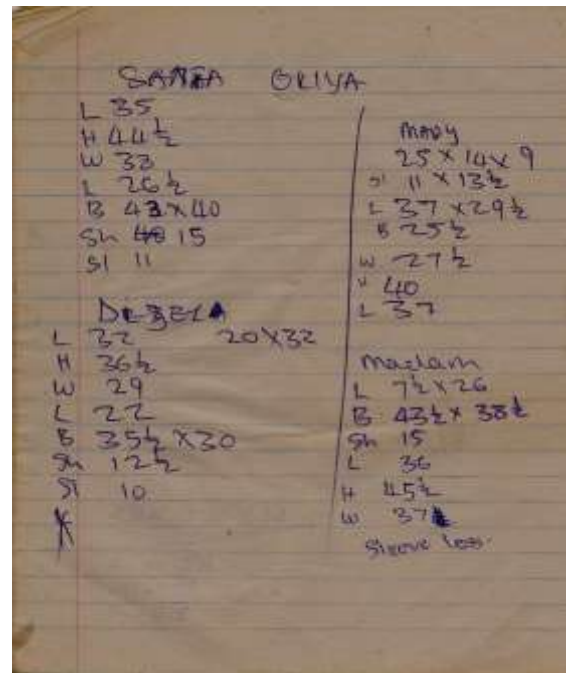


Figure 4: Tailor's Record book

What is common in the above two records is that they both have a combination of numeracy and literacy. In livelihood numeracy tend to dominate, and the use of literacy is meant to facilitate an activity, for example, selling beer in a bar or tailoring and not to learn new information.

In practicing agriculture, rural people encounter texts that are written in English providing information on how to grow cotton. Such information is distributed by the agricultural extension officers, and they are not

in the format and language literacy learners are exposed to in the FAL classes, see figure 5 below and relate it to figure 1 and 2 above.

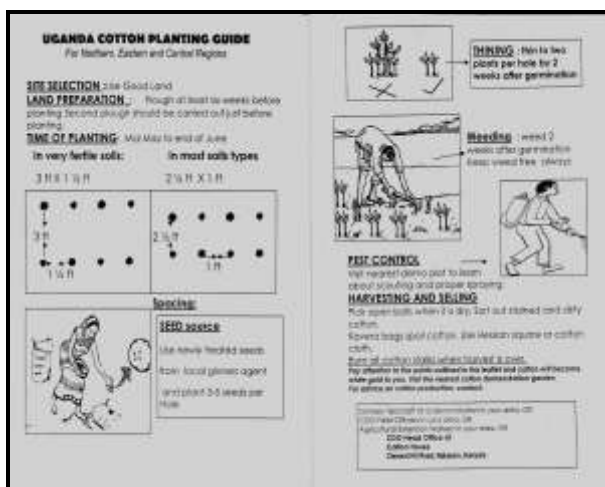


Figure 5: Cotton growing leaflet handed out to farmers

Health related reading usually comes in the form of medical forms and prescriptions, which rural people get when they go to seek medical services in private and public health facilities that are located in their villages. See figure 6 below and relate it with figure 1 above.

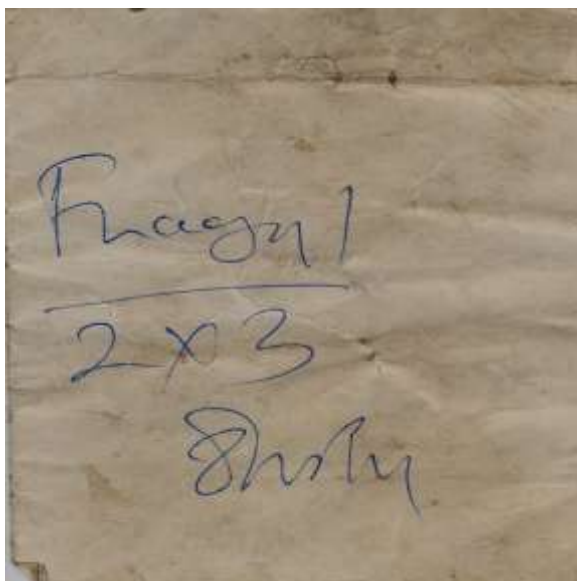


Figure 6: Medical dose on a packet of medication

The writing in figure 5 and 6 are instructions showing a person how to plant cotton and take medication respectively. They are not meant to create awareness about the value of cotton growing or proper medication. Note that the information in figure 5 and 6 are in English and mathematical expression with a different meaning. These are some of the examples of the literacies in rural people's everyday lives.

Discussion, conclusions and recommendation

The contents of the FAL curriculum/primer are emphasising learning new knowledge. It is meant to positively change people's lives. The curriculum/primer is not based on the current literacy practices in the lives of the learners, but on new practices that are assumed to be good for the community and lacking among them. These new conditions are to be introduced through teaching reading and writing.

It is a good idea to base literacy learning on useful other learning geared toward improving the daily lives of the learners. However, as Roger (1999) argues, emphasising literacy learning and not their uses in life has been a major cause of literacy programme failures in developing countries. It is also acceptable to argue that once the learners become literate they should be able to read such informative materials that can change their ways of doing things for the better. This assumes that such materials are available in the community from which the learners are coming and in the format and language that are the same with those that they are exposed to in the FAL classes. However, going by figure 5, the available reading material in agriculture is in English and that relating to health, figure 6, is in a medical expression in which the application of the multiplication symbol is for a different purpose from that which the learners could be learning in their numeracy lessons in the FAL classes (see Acaye & Omara-Akaca, 2003; Ministry of Local Government, 1993). These differences make it difficult for the learner to make the connection between their literacy learning and the literacy that are in their environment.

As shown in figure 3 and 4 rural people are already engaged in poverty eradicating activities that involve literacy in ways that are best known to them and appropriate for managing their livelihood activities. Even the non-literate people in the community encounter such literacy practices, for example, as they interact with a tailor. There are many other activities in which literacy is used in a rural community for example practicing the Christian faith, and dealing with children's education. For all these the learners need to learn specific practices associated with those activities and also learn how to learn new practices that will frequently come up in the course of their everyday lives (see also Openjuru & Lyster, 2007; Rogers et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the literacy learners do not need to be informed about the values of growing cotton, because the fact that they are involved in cotton growing means they already know the importance of growing

cotton. Instead they need to learn how to read the leaflets given to them by the agricultural extension workers and the weighing scale used to weigh their cotton during sales. They do not need to be told to seek medical care but how to be able read the doctors' prescriptions on how to administer a particular medication.

The literacy in everyday life is largely tied to the life activities of the people. The primer on the other hand is design to communicate new and useful development information to the learners in a school like model. The primer is based on the idea of a fixed meaning text uniform in all contexts of literacy use, while the literacy practices that goes on in the community is a flexible, creative, and somewhat idiosyncratic to the different activities and individual involved in those activities. Literacy in that case is under a continuous process of reconstruction and negotiation (see also Rogers et al., 2007). Prinsloo (2005) coined the concept of 'variable literacies' to capture this aspect of variability in literacy practices over time and place. Additionally, the primer is in the local language while most of the written information in the community comes in English. These are two different orientations of situating literacy learning in which one is base on what the learners *need to know and do* with literacy, while the social practices or real literacy approach being recommended in this paper is based on what the learners *do* with literacy.

There is therefore need to reconcile literacy learning with literacy use in everyday life. The literacy learning curriculum should not be made overly prescriptive, and learning how to read and write should support the existing uses of literacy in which the learner are already involved outside the classrooms. The curriculum should therefore be made flexible and easily adaptable to the different contexts of the learners' literacy lives. Literacy programmes should support the work of the health and agricultural extension workers by enabling people to be able to read the kind of information that are being distributed by these community workers. For example they could advice the agricultural extension officer to write their information in a language and format that are accessible to people who are not yet very competent in reading and writing in the second language. Real literacy material could be used in the literacy classes to help the learner make immediately connection between what they are learning and the literacy in their environment.

Notes

1. These pillars have been revised two times in 2001 and 2004. The 2004 version was economic management; production, competitiveness and

income; security, conflict-resolution and disaster management; good governance; and human development

2. This may be referred to as commerce or business

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