AVU POLICY BRIEF
AN OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICAN VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY
Research & Practice in Open, Distance & eLearning
Policy Brief Number 2016-29

Early literacy in Africa—the Promise of the Digitization of African Storytelling

Issue at-hand

Africa is the only continent where the languages of instruction in schools are predominantly foreign to the learners and as a result many African children fail to acquire the basic literacy competency that provides the foundation for other competencies such as writing and arithmetic. Policies supporting the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in schools are very difficult to implement in many African countries as political and economic factors have combined to stifle the emergence of a genuine political will to act. The plethora of African languages in one single country and the political balancing act to choose one or a few languages as media of instruction in multiethnic countries have made it almost impossible to have a national consensus on the subject. As a result, Africa continues to spend billions of dollars to procure textbooks and teaching materials from European countries whose languages are being used in schools and official business. This situation has created an economic lobby, nationally and internationally, strong enough to counter any serious move to develop an indigenous book industry using mother tongues. All in all, this situation has made mother-tongue textbooks publishing a cost-ineffective venture due to low demand.

Against this impeding political and economic background, however, there is the pedagogical imperative. Over the last five decades a solid body of research has emerged that shows that learning to read in a language that one is not familiar with is much harder as children are faced with the difficult task of decoding the written word and at the same time making sense of it. Moreover, most of the stories contained in the imported textbooks are more often than not disconnected from the cultures and the immediate social environments of the children as most of the writers, editors and publishers are not Africans.
Another impeding pedagogical factor is the teachers who are required to teach in European languages that few of them master as they are increasingly recruited at post-basic education level or at much lower levels such as graduates of literacy programs, in the worst case scenario. They also lack proper training and very often do not benefit from in-service support. As a result, the 2015 Global Monitoring Report (GMR) indicates that in many African countries, 3rd graders cannot read nor understand basic text in the languages of instruction, including in their own mother tongues (GMR 2015).

**Policy Recommendation: Collecting and Distributing Enough Openly Licensed Digitized Story Books that are Contextually Appropriate to Make It Possible for African Children Aged between 3-10 to Acquire Early Literacy**

This policy recommendation is based on an ongoing project launched by the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide) in 2013/2014 which aims at **developing a comprehensive solution to the lack of affordable access to sufficient storybooks in familiar languages as a contribution to breaking the cycle of illiteracy**. The African Storybook Project (APS), as it is called, is underpinned by the assumption that “**the use of digital technologies and Open Educational Resources (OERs) supported by an extensive partner network can achieve access and use, even in under-resourced African contexts**”. The project is currently being implemented in four African countries (Kenya, Lesotho, Uganda and South Africa) that serve as pilots to test whether this assumption is well-placed or not.

A paper presented at the 2015 AVU’s International Conference by Welch, Wepukhulu and Mhlanga (Open Licencing digital storytelling for multilingual literacy development: implications for teachers) argues that alternatives to conventional publishing and conventional copyright restrictions need to be found and addressed in order to break the cycle of illiteracy that characterizes the African continent. They offered that the APS through the use of a multi-pronged approach consisting of “**digital availability of stories with tools for story creation and versioning, open licensing of stories, and the involvement of a wide range of partners who contribute to and use the website and its stories**” can be a viable solution to the current dearth of reading and teaching materials.

The implementation of APS in the pilot countries consists of the following activities: (i) recruitment of country coordinators to map out existing literacy development initiatives and organizations; (ii) partnership formation with the identified organizations to foster mutual collaboration; and (iii) expanding the partnership to other relevant technical actors in order to create synergy in the development and use of the ASP website and its stories. The partners thus identified are then categorized into the following types: (a) those immediately relevant to the pilot sites such as public primary schools, Early Childhood Development (ECDs), and public and
community libraries, literacy centres and a Primary Teachers’ College; (b) the second category consist of partners involved in literacy development, not only in pilot countries but also internationally. Through MOUs, ASP and the partners identify specific areas for collaboration and which will be the subject of technical work in workshops for maximum impact; (c) the third group of partners are those that are crucial for ensuring the systemic implementation of ASP at the policy level and they comprise of ministries of education or departments, teacher educators such as universities, and libraries. The expectation is that collaboration with these entities would enhance ASP efforts of getting books into schools. The ASP organises and runs workshops with these partners. During these workshops, stories are created, translation of existing stories into local languages is done and student teachers adapt stories on the website for use with their audiences. There is also an attempt to integrate ASP stories in teacher education programmes so as to create capacity and interest in teachers to use stories in developing literacy amongst children.

After three years of implementation, Welch, Wepukhulu and Mhlanga have put forth, and among others, the following results and lessons learned:

1. Against the project expectation that literacy development organisations (LDOs) and educators working in African countries would use the website successfully to find, create, interact with and translate/adapt stories for use in their contexts, the following was documented: (i) the website has generated considerable interest since its launch in June 2014 given that almost 2000 registered users have been contributing, creating or translating stories; (ii) at the pilot sites there is evidence of growing capacity and interest in digital literacy; (iii) However, progress in has been stifled by lack of power and connectivity challenges.

2. With regard to the expectation that literacy development organizations and educators working in African countries would use the stories in a variety of ways (pedagogic and technical) for early literacy in their contexts, it was observed that indeed (i) a diverse pedagogical use of the stories has been made and at Pilot sites the stories from Early Childhood Development through to Primary Three (or Grade 3) and in library settings with older children have been used; (ii) also an active engagement with the stories, children’s excitement with having the stories digitally available and in local languages have been reported. A positive unexpected outcome was the increased planning and collaboration among the ASP educators in terms of how to use the stories with the children and support each other to access as well as create and version stories from the website.

3. Concerning the third expected outcome that there would be a growing recognition that openly licensed stories available for versioning for particular contexts and languages have a significant role to play in supporting early literacy development, particularly of
very young African children, the observation is that there is indeed tacit acknowledgement of the opportunities that open licensing provides from key players such as publishers but they are still reluctant to release their own published books for translation and adaptation.

Recommendations

APS as a project has opened up an avenue for Africa to address one of the key educational challenges in the promotion of early literacy, a key condition for the development of other competencies, through a creative use of ICTs and OERs to produce and disseminate teaching and learning materials on the continent. The recognition by the project designers of the key role of multiple partnerships at the organizational and institutional levels in the implementation of the APS is also a major success factor in achieving the potential offered by ICTs and OERs in African education systems. However, and as indicated by the authors, one of the conditions for APS-type initiatives to impact systemically education policy on the continent is to address the issue of the attitudes towards language in education policy where it exists. The language policy in favor of mother tongues as media of education is one thing but perceptions of parents and teachers of where the real power and opportunities for social mobility lie is another thing. As long as the official language and the one for social mobility is still the foreign language, it would be difficult to expect parents to prefer local languages over English, French or Portuguese. Therefore, the following is recommended to designers of the APS.

• Integrate the project in the current national, sub-regional and regional education policy frameworks for major impact. The African Union, for instance, has just launched a ten-year continental education strategy which recognizes the importance of literacy by making it one of the 12 strategic objectives and is seeking concrete projects to support within the implementation framework.

• Take advantage of the current ICT integration in education processes in many African countries (e.g. Kenya, Senegal, etc.) whereby primary school learners are being given laptops or tablets to replace conventional textbooks to introduce collection of local stories and creation of OERs by teachers and their educators in African universities.

• Advocate for conducive literate environments for mother-tongue users by promoting eBooks, eNewspapers and the digitization of administrative documents in local languages to signal the value and importance attached to African languages.

References


For more information, please visit AVU’s Website: http://www.avu.org/avuweb/en/