

# **NEWSPAPERS AS INSTRUMENTS FOR BUILDING LITERATE COMMUNITIES: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

EMMANUEL TAIWO BABALOLA  
*Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria*

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper recognizes newspapers, the world over, as useful tools for promoting literate communities. Because of their invaluable functions of informing, educating, entertaining and constructively bringing the activities of the government nearer to the people, newspapers are now very popular and common with adults and young alike. Newspapers are veritable tools for promoting literacy through reading, writing and dialogues (among readers and critics), which are the hallmarks of effective and efficient use of language. Newspapers have a built-in capacity to motivate readers. As a result, it is the common practice in most parts of the country to have people congregate around newspapers stands and vendors every morning reading and discussing the contents of the newspapers. Newspapers can thus promote critical thinking, retention of information, problem solving and questioning of information source.

This paper is an account of an on-going study regarding the effectiveness and non-effectiveness of English medium newspapers for facilitating literacy empowerment.

Given the need to exploit the enormous resources of newspapers, as vehicles for facilitating literacy empowerment among literate communities, this paper suggests steps that can be taken by newspaper publishers, members of the Nigerian education orchestra and the Nigerian polity in appropriating the catalytic role of the newspaper as an instrument for promoting literate communities in Nigeria. Our experience in using newspapers to enhance integrative writing and reading in language arts, social studies, science and mathematics in the formal set-ups in our communities will be shared in the paper.

*Keywords: Nigeria, newspapers, literacy*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Newspaper according to Cheyney (1992) is:

the textbook that provides up-to-date information on local, state/provincial national, and world affairs; the most current analysis and criticism on executive and legislative decision-making; the latest in music, theatre, television, and the fine arts and even columns and comics to make people laugh. Newspapers are among the most accessible texts available to the vast majority of people – literate, illiterate, young and old, students, workers, elites and peasants – in any community. This is because every category of reader mentioned above can find something they care about inside the newspaper's pages. Today's newspapers use

design elements – story placement, typeface, and graphics – to make information easily accessible to the reader. Important stories usually are placed at the top of a page. The most important stories have large bold headlines. Graphics appear next to related stories.

The universal format of a newspaper presents information in a predictable way. In a straight news story, the headline gives the reader the main idea of the story. The lead paragraph gives a summary of the story in capsule form, answering the important newspaper questions – who, what, when, where, why and how. The remainder of the news story provides additional details, with the least important information at the end of the story.

Academic American Encyclopaedia (1989: 171) describes newspaper in a broad sense as “an unbound publication issued at regular intervals that seeks to inform, analyze, influence and entertain”. Hynds (1975) provides nine criteria for classifying newspaper. Some of these are frequency of publication (a newspaper can be published at various intervals but usually appears weekly or daily); time of publication; purpose; circulation; geography; method of production and intended audience, etc.

## 1.1 WHAT IS NEWS?

The simple definition of news as given by the ‘Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English’ is “new or fresh information; report(s) of what has most recently happened”. From this definition, we can say that news is any fresh thing reported in the various fields of human endeavour. It ranges from social, political, socio-economic realities and, sometimes religious reporting. Moreover, news is drawn from the life experiences of people who make up a society and between people and the world they experience; there exist systems of signs, which are the products of society. These signs acquire meaning through being structured into codes, the principal code being language. Other codes, though language – like in their structural properties, but more transient and less stable as offered by Roland Barthes, in his book ‘Mythologies’ are in such areas as fashion, architecture, cuisine and sport (Fowler 1991).

News is written basically for the purpose of communication and as a way of disseminating information to a large group of people. In order to be successful in their trade, news writers and editors are always mindful of the use to which language; the medium of news reportage is put. Perhaps this is because communication between people (whether through the written medium or spoken medium) is not the only function of the language code. ‘Language and other codes, most importantly language, have a cognitive role: they provide an organized mental representation for our experience’ (Fowler 1991).

Fowler (1991) again while assessing the importance of language to news says:

News is a representation of the world in language, because language is a semiotic code, it imposes a structure of values, social and economic in origin, on whatever is represented; and so inevitably news, like every discourse, constructively patterns that of which it speaks. News is a representation in this sense of construction; it is not a value-free reflection of facts (Fowler 1991: 4).

Fowler (1991) concludes that each particular form of linguistic expression in a text – wording, syntactic option, etc. – has its reasons.

## 2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

According to Tosanwumi and Ekwuazi (1994), the history of the Nigerian press dated back to 1859, when in Abeokuta Reverend Henry Townsend released '*Iwe Iroyin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba*' (The Newspaper for the Egbas and Yorubas). The newspaper was the first to be published in what is now known as Nigeria. It was a bilingual newspaper since it was published both in Yoruba and English. This newspaper spearheaded the attack on slavery. In 1863, the second newspaper was published. It was edited by Robert Campbell and was called 'The Anglo African'. It carried both local and national news, while its editorials were dedicated to the appraisal of the problems of the time.

The blossoming of the Nigeria Press started 17 years later in the exigencies of socio-political and economic activities. The first newspaper of this period was by Andrew Thomas, who came out with 'The Lagos Times' on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1880. This bi-monthly newspaper was used to aggregate public opinion on topical issues. Fifteen months after Blackall Benjamin began the publication of **The Lagos Observer**. This was followed closely by **The Eagle**, which made its debut on March 31, 1887 when Adolphous Mark started **The Mirror**.

Nationalistic sentiment and struggle erupted with the establishment in 1906, of the colony and protectorate of Southern Nigeria as well as the reports of the amalgamation of North and South in 1914. This led to the emergence of the new set of Nigerian newspapers. Johnson Brothers started **The Nigerian Chronicle** in 1908, while Kukoyi Ajasa started **The Nigerian Pioneer**. He aroused a lot of criticism because his newspaper was seen as a mouthpiece of Fredrick Lugard's administration. In 1926, the Nigerian Printing and Publishing Company started **Nigerian Daily Times**. The first editor of **Daily Times** was Ernest Okoli whose newspaper, **The African Messenger**, was taken over by the government due to its dwindling financial fortune. **The West African Pilot** of Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe later joined in 1936 and this brought about an increase in nationalistic consciousness. Its news reports were mainly anti-colonialism and it championed nationalist struggles. Chief Obafemi Awolowo established **The Nigerian**

**Tribune** in 1946. The newspaper strengthened the anti-colonialism campaigns through its critical analysis of the problems of the time.

However, in the present day Nigeria, a host of other newspapers are now in circulation. Some of these are: **The Vanguard Newspaper, The National Concord, The Punch, This day, Comet Newspaper, Daily Sketch, The Monitor, Alaroye, The Guardian, The Post Express**, among others.

### 3. NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

Nigeria's newspaper industry is a vibrant one and this is because the press institution in the country has come a long way. Since the introduction of the first indigenous newspaper in 1859, the Nigerian reading public has been inundated with different newspapers, many of which are privately owned. According to Sommerlad (1966):

Nigeria has not only made progress in this important aspect of national growth and development; it has been made to adopt the press as a political tool, for economic development, stimulation of change and for social function (Sommerlad 1966). Another important role of the newspapers in Nigeria is that of serving as a catalyst to literacy development. This role will be further explored in the course of this paper.

Basically, we can categorize Nigerian newspapers into two broad groups. The first group comprises of daily newspapers. Examples are **The Guardian, The Punch, The Nigerian Tribune, The Comet, This Day, The Daily Sketch, The Observer, The New Nigerian**, etc. Still within this group, we have some titles specifically devoted to weekends, evenings or early mornings. Such titles as **The Sunday Punch, The Sunday Guardian, AM and PM News**, etc. can be recognized. The second broad group comprises magazines, which are published weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. We can equally identify two types of magazines in Nigeria. There are those that are devoted to serious or investigative journalism like **Tell, the News, Newswatch**, etc. The other types are those that are called soft-sell magazines, which are essentially devoted to entertainment, celebrities, gossips and the like. Notable among these are **Ovation, National Encomiums, Hints, Hearts**, etc. The main difference between these two broad groups is that while daily newspapers report news on a daily or day-to-day basis, the weekly or monthly magazines report news on weekly or monthly basis, according to which is applicable. The first group claims that they tell the news as it breaks, while the second group claims that they put flesh and meat through their in-depth analysis and investigative activities. Complementing the above groups in news reporting are the few newspapers published in indigenous Nigerian Languages. These ones are regionally based since they are confined to areas where the language of publication is spoken. These newspapers are also good instruments to promote literacy in the indigenous languages. Our observation in this study is that these newspapers enjoy high patronage among

the semi-literates and stark illiterates in the society. The stark illiterates usually depend on their children or friends that are literate at least, in the local languages, who will read the news to them. And since no interpretation is involved, it is very easy to digest the news.

Private entrepreneur can establish newspaper publishing being part of the mass media in Nigeria where the newspaper is owned solely by private individual(s) or companies without any financial help coming from any government. Examples of privately owned newspaper outfits are **The Guardian, The Nigerian Tribune, Punch, This day**, etc. However, in terms of government ownership, the newspaper outfit is solely established, funded and financed by the government that is involved.

In Nigeria today, the vibrancy, fearlessness and steadfastness of a newspaper are usually conditioned by the ownership status of the newspaper. The privately owned newspaper outfits are usually more direct in their reports, they are usually not given to unbridled propaganda and acting as government mouthpiece like the government-owned outfits. They usually tell the story as it is without fear or favour. Perhaps that is why some of them are more vociferous in criticizing the government policies. As a result they get hounded and molested by the agents of the government. Also, privately owned newspaper outfits rarely get advertisements from the government, its agencies or individuals that happen to be pro-government. But government-owned newspapers are usually used as propaganda machinery to popularize government policies and portray them in good light. At least, he who pays the piper dictates the tune.

#### 4. USING NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS AS INSTRUMENTS FOR BUILDING LITERATE COMMUNITIES

Newspapers generally are published in order to disseminate diverse kinds of information that are of interest to the reading public, both young and old. A typical Nigerian newspaper contains varied topics of interest to a broad spectrum of the audience among who are school children, youths in their impressionable years, elites and educated adults, semi-illiterates and stark illiterates, etc. There are different columns in the newspapers devoted to different areas of life. For instance, in Nigerian newspapers there are local news column, sports column, entertainment column, arts column, advice column which can be divided into personal, medical, automobile, household, educational, and so on.

In this paper, we believe very strongly that Nigerian newspapers by their layout, by virtue of what they publish and by the very flexible nature of their publication (there are early morning, evening, weekend, etc. newspapers) can serve as catalysts to literacy development. Nigeria ranks among the countries with the highest illiteracy rate in the world. This however should not be so given the vibrancy and resourcefulness of the country's newspaper industry. Nigerian

newspapers have a built-in capacity to motivate readers. When readers read, they search for the materials relevant to their lives. Literacy facilitators to teach both reading and writing in formal and informal situations can use all the identified columns earlier listed.

## 5. USING NEWSPAPER TO TEACH READING AND WRITING IN FORMAL SITUATIONS

Nigerians, whether young or old love to read the newspaper. This is because the newspaper has got something for every category in the society. To the school children or teenagers, entertainment, sports and arts pages are always of interest to them. But beyond this teachers can effectively use the built-in organizational and design features in the newspapers-head-lines, pictures, graphics, and so on, to aid their teaching. A typical English language lesson in composition, comprehension or summary can start with reading of newspapers. When students read the newspapers they will set goals for reading (they can be led by the teacher), relate their past knowledge to the article, think critically about what they have read, form new concepts and understandings from their reading, etc. What the teacher has to ensure is to select an appropriate newspaper article, one that is right for the grade and skill levels of the students and is likely to interest them. For comprehension, the teacher prepares some questions for the class based on the content of the article. The questions must be grounded in experiences or prior knowledge of the students; if for example, the article is about civil rights violations in another country, the pre-reading questions might be linked to the civil rights movement in the students' own country.

For composition, the teacher may select some short, controversial but simple letters from among those written to the editors, and after having discussed them with the students, commissions them to write replies or what is usually called rejoinders in journalese. In the same way summary exercises can be drawn from the catalogue of articles in the newspapers.

In addition, lexis as well as meaning can be learnt or taught through a typical Nigerian newspaper. According to Cheyney (1992) the acquisition of vocabulary is of great importance in learning to read. If a person doesn't understand the meaning of the words he or she reads, then the skills of decoding, making inferences, understanding story structure, and so on are of little use. In this regard, the teacher can list out new words and then explain their meanings to the students. The students can be introduced to journalese, the language of news writing in a systematic way. Also, Crossword Puzzle in the children entertainment column of Nigerian newspapers has obvious value for developing vocabulary. Newspaper crossword puzzles are often difficult, but with patience and encouragement, the teacher can lead the students to success. Class time can be set aside to check answers in the next day's newspaper.

## *Newspapers As Instruments For Building Literate Communities*

In addition, the newspaper contains much material that young students can read to develop oral expression. The advertisements and comics like cartoons, jokes, stories, poems, and so on are especially useful for developing this skill. Almost every aspect of language arts can be taught with the aid of a newspaper: new words, spelling, acronyms, abbreviations, parts of speech, tense, punctuation, idioms, figures of speech, etc.

Apart from the English language, the newspaper can be used to teach other subjects like mathematics, social studies, science, etc. An inexperienced teacher may quickly question the workability of using the newspaper to teach mathematics for instance. He may think that the newspaper contains little or nothing relating to mathematics; a second look, however, makes one realize how much of the language of mathematics is used in daily life. Hardly can we find a newspaper, which will not contain mathematical expressions such as *first*, *little*, *second*, *how much* (all of which have been used in the present paragraph). Students may be asked to select a page from the local daily newspaper and list all of the mathematical concepts they find. These the teacher may explain at the beginning of any of his mathematics lectures.

There are other ways by which students can be taught mathematical concepts such as quantity through the newspaper. Students can be instructed to circle sets of items in newspaper photographs: cars, people, or animals, for example. Then ask them to count the number of each item in that particular set. Show students two different photographs containing similar items. Ask them to list, count, and compare the items in the selected categories. We can equally use the newspaper to show the students the importance of numbers and helping them develop a sense of numerical sequence. Have students circle all the instances of numbers in a given article or newspaper page. Show them the differences between cardinal numbers (One, two, three, etc.) and ordinals (first, second, third, etc.) and have them put the numbers they found in sequence. When children become familiar with numbers, they can take note of the way they are used – to number the newspaper's pages, to indicate weight or height, to give the value of world currency, to predict the day's temperature, to tell what time an event occurred, and so on.

Furthermore, the newspaper can be satisfactorily used in the teaching of social studies and the sciences. The goals of instruction in social studies and the sciences include helping students live successfully in a changing world, understanding environmental problems, solve problems through critical and creative thinking, and develop individual abilities and interest. The daily newspaper is an excellent and virtually inexhaustible source of information about real-life problems and solutions. Through the daily reading of Nigerian newspaper, Nigerian students keep track of what goes on in their country, politically, economically; in the sporting world; in the entertainments industry, etc. They also keep abreast of scientific discoveries. For instance new drugs to combat HIV and Aids, developments in biotechnology, latest automobiles, and so on. Since Social Studies has a broad nature (including history, geography, political science and economics), the teacher of the subject should be well

informed and approach it's teaching in a systematic way by focusing on different aspects at a particular time. Students can get to know very many countries of the world (Geography) through the newspaper. The newspaper is also full of the famous personalities of the world, their places, time, etc. of birth, death and their achievements (History).

Science or scientific subjects like medicine, health issues may be taught through the newspaper. Students may be asked to collect newspapers for a week or two. And then asked to clip from the newspaper any items that deal with the topic of medicine or health. (Some newspapers have special weekly health pages or sections). Have students classify the items they clip by topic – medical research, advances, and technology – or by disease. This however may be for the teaching of older students.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Our attempt in this paper is to show that Nigerian newspapers, like Newspapers the world over, can be used to promote the teaching of reading and writing, and ultimately build a literate community. This we have tried to do by exploring the in-built facilities of the newspapers to cater for the need of serving as catalysts for literacy development. Our focus has been with the students in formal classroom set-up. And since the study is an on-going activity, further work on how the newspapers can be used in informal situation to promote literacy shall be shown in future.

## REFERENCES

- Academic American Encyclopedia* 1989.  
Grolier Incorporated Danbury, Connecticut, Vol. 14.
- Cheyney, A. B. 1992.  
*Teaching Reading Skills through the Newspaper*. Newark:  
International Reading Association.
- Fowler, R. 1991.  
*Language in News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. London:  
Routledge.
- Hynds, E. C. 1975.  
*American Newspapers in the 1970's*. New York: Hasting House.
- Sommerlad, E. L. 1966.  
*The Press in Developing Countries*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.
- Tosanwumi, J. O. and Ekwuazi, H. O. 1994.  
*Mass Communication: A Basic Text*. Caltop Publications Nigerian  
Ltd.