

Increasing literacy on a global scale

Research shows that approximately 750 million people over the age of 15 still lack basic reading and writing skills. Two-thirds of these are women, according to the United Nations, with female literacy improving by just 1 per cent since 2000. Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia have the lowest literacy rates, and the poorest and most marginalised are least likely to be able to read and do basic sums.

Literacy is not an educational issue but it is something of importance to the economy because by helping literacy you help crime, poverty, health issues and employment issues. The following are five key takeaways from the development of literacy on a global scale:

1. Remember adult learning

Historically, donor funding for literacy has focused on young school children and has tended to miss adolescent or adult literacy, according to Katy Newell-Jones of the British Association for Literacy in Development. In the past, literacy programs assumed a “trickle-up feeling that if we can educate the next generation of children then literacy problems will be solved, but this has been proved to be wrong.

Instead, a holistic approach to literacy is needed to support adults, especially women, to become literate and also emphasises the role of learning within the family, including intergenerational learning and creating a learning environment in the home.

2. Teach in the mother tongue

In many developing countries, lessons are taught in English or another nonlocal language, such as French, from a young age.

For example, in Pakistan. This has resulted in children learning to read English but with very little comprehension, according to Nadia Naviwala, an adviser to the Citizens Foundation in Pakistan. “Kids in Pakistan do learn to read English; they just have no comprehension of it,” she said. “Is literacy impeded because it’s being done in a language that’s not their own?”

Teachers are also often not proficient in the language they are instructing in, according to Ian Cheffy from the British Association for Literacy in Development, BALID.

Children and adults should be learning to read and write in their local languages. “Parents may be demanding English but let’s not ignore local languages. In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 1,700 languages are still regularly spoken by 750 million people, and of those 1,100 languages are also being written down. We can not marginalise these supposedly marginal languages.

Nal’ibali Trust, a charity that aims to promote a culture of reading in South Africa, has made multilingual storytelling the centre of its work to drive literacy rates among children. It is crucial for both readers and listeners that written stories are available in local languages, so they can understand and enjoy the experience, according to managing director Jade Jacobsohn, who spoke during the summit.

“Most parents work, and in South Africa, they travel a long distance ... so by the time they get home they’re exhausted,” and sitting down to read to their child is “the last thing they want to do,” she said. In response, Nal’ibali aims to make it as easy as possible for parents to “access the resources” they need to read to their children. A key component is that books and other materials are “in a language that the child and the parent understand,” she said.

She also stressed the importance of recognising the role played by grandparents, who tend to have lower literacy rates but can still offer oral storytelling. “How do you make sure that grandparents, know that what they do have is good enough and even if you can’t read you can tell a story... and put value in what they are able to do already,” she said.

Matthew Johnson from Universal Learning Solutions, a U.K based social enterprise working with governments and donors to improve literacy, agreed that young children can be taught to read English without comprehending what they are reading.

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— *Katy Newell-Jones, chair of the British Association for Literacy in Development*

In order to overcome this, ULS has been piloting an oral storytelling project that enables educators to teach in both English and their students’ mother tongue by “creating stories in mother tongue and then adding actions so it becomes universally understandable ... then transferring that into English and developing the two side by side,” he said.

“The main message is that the more that children hear words the more they get to experience stories and tell and share stories than the more language and vocabulary and understanding they will have,” Johnson added.

3. Don't just hand out books: Foster a love of reading

The emphasis on storytelling in local languages is also key to We Love Reading, an NGO started in Jordan that aims to foster a love of reading among children by training local volunteers to read to them. Rana Dajani, the NGO's founder, told Devex that fostering a love of reading is the first step to improving literacy but is something that many development programs fail to appreciate, instead focusing on inputs such as books.

“It's not about giving books; that is secondary and I have seen books sitting on shelves but not being used,” Dajani said. Instead, it is important to “plant the need and the love of books first,” which she says leads to direct literacy, as well as a host of other gains by encouraging a love of school.

A molecular biologist by training, Dajani was at the summit to pick up an award from the World Literacy Council and told Devex that We Love Reading has spread to 36 countries in 10 years with very little donor funding because of its low-cost, “niche” approach to promoting learning through reading and storytelling for pleasure, and its use of volunteers. Last year, the NGO secured funding from UNICEF and has recently begun partnering with international NGOs including Plan International.

4. Embed literacy into other programs

Standalone literacy programs are not necessarily the best approach, according to Newell-Jones from BALID, who argued that literacy and numeracy should instead be embedded into community development projects.

Presenting at the conference, she gave examples of where applying literacy training had led to a “deeper understanding” of the topic being discussed, and thus to better results. For example, she described a program to help women secure land rights in Rwanda by training them as paralegals. The project was much more effective once the NGO in charge of the project changed the type of language it was using from legal jargon to “simplified land right laws” in the mother tongue, “so that the community women could understand.” These changes meant “there was a real understanding of the sensitive topic,” but the program is also an example of increasing literacy levels within a community while not explicitly running literacy classes, Newell-Jones said.

It is something she wants development programmers to do more of, especially for adults.

“Let’s get on with life and pull in literacy as we go, and people will develop literacy as they go,” she said. “They don’t have to learn the skills first and apply them [later].” Instead, developers can take advantage of “hidden literacies” within communities.

5. Use technology but use it carefully

According to a 2016 analysis of the global literacy sector by United States NGO Results for Development, donors focus too much on technology at a time when there is a “significant lack of evidence on what types of technology interventions actually work.” Critics, including Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, also warn that the digitalization of communication could have negative impacts on literacy rates.

“We know reading and writing comes through talking, [but] research shows that in this digital age, through social media, we talk less to each other,” she told Devex.

However, Sun Books Uganda, a project by the World Literacy Foundation, which was presented during the summit, offers an example of how technology can help. It provides low-cost, solar-powered tablets loaded up with “a toolbox of digital books and learning resources to ‘off the grid’ classrooms with no internet and electricity.” Usually, one per classroom, the Sun Books tablets are written in Swahili and English, but Grace Baguma from Uganda’s National Curriculum Development Center, which has recently partnered with the NGO, said the plan is to add more languages so that mother tongue can be used as the mode of instruction, especially for younger years.

Word Scientists also presented its work offering free online resources to improve early reading in Nepal, including lesson guides, teacher tutorials, and books. What is sometimes missed in ed tech interventions, said chief executive Jacob Bronstein, is the need to focus on the content and the software as opposed to the technology itself, since “the tech can’t do it alone.”

Word Scientists has developed materials intended to be engaging and practical, written in local languages so a teacher can read the story to pupils in their mother tongue before reading it in English. The “software” is also free to access and can be downloaded onto a USB or printed out, and so does not rely on internet access.

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