Literacy Versus Language: Exploring their Similarities and Differences

by

Sitwe Benson Mkandawire
The University of Zambia
School of Education
Email: bmsitwe@gmail.com

Abstract

This article discusses the concepts of Literacy and Language and then state their similarities and differences in general and in relation to education. The two terminologies (literacy and language) sound familiar and highly talked about by nearly everybody yet, confounding to comprehend and to distinguish. While basic or conventional literacy is lightly understood as reading and writing skills, its conventional premises are technically profound in Language. Language on the other hand is many times viewed as means of communicating and sharing ideas. If these ideas are disseminated or communicated in writing, literacy skills are implied. These land marking similarities are crucial to pinpoint in such an article. In other words, it is immaterial to argue about the importance of language in communicating ideas, emotions and feelings in a human society because language is a tool for disseminating information in different modes. Similarly, it is irrelevant to question the importance of literacy skills in people's lives as it helps in; getting them employed, develop individually, operate in more meaningful ways and contribute more

effectively in a society. Practically, there are some members of different communities around the world who knows and can speak a language fluently, but they may be unable to read and write it. Such earmarking distinctions and similarities are the focus of this paper. In terms of differences, literacy from a broader sense, where it is defined as being knowledgeable or competent in a specific area, impinges on all domains of the society. In other words, there is no such a thing or a person as literate or illiterate without putting them into context as everybody in a broader sense is literate and illiterate in some area. While basic literacy of reading and writing skills associated with language can be a shared background among five people, their knowledge or area of expertise as professionals might be different. Hence, the need to explain some similarities and differences between literacy and language. .

Introduction

This article explores the concepts of Literacy and Language from different perspectives with a view of identifying their similarities and differences. Scholarly insights and definitions of literacy and language are provided from different sources and then compared in ways they are perceived and applied in a society. In other words, the article discusses the similarities and differences between literacy and language in general and in relation to education.

Defining Literacy and Language

In modern days, the concept of literacy has become more and more difficulty to define due to multiple meanings, interpretations and perceptions associated with it. "It is common today to pick up a newspaper or news magazine and read about literacy levels or a number of illiterate people in the country" (Smith, 1977:135). The complex nature of literacy was also observed by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2006), where it was indicated that literacy as a concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways. Due to its multiplicity of meanings, several definitions of literacy exist. Roberts (1995:412) noted that, "In the past fifty years, hundreds of definitions of 'literacy' have been advanced by scholars, adult literacy workers, and programme planner". These definitions have had different orientations but with similar focus. Most of these definitions focus on conventional form of literacy that is associated with technical skills of reading and writing which is associated with the school and academic progression, (Edwards and Potts, 2008). This view agreed with UNESCO (2006:149) where it was indicated that "the most common understanding of literacy is that it is a set of tangible skills, particularly the cognitive skills of reading and writing".

Miller (1973) subdivided literacy into three categories; Basic literacy, Comprehension and functional or practical literacy. Basic literacy, according to Miller, means the ability to use correspondences of visual shapes, to spoken sounds, in order to decode written materials, and to translate them into oral language. Miller (1973: 3) noted that "comprehension literacy means having ability to understand the meaning of verbal materials. Functional or practical literacy means ability to read

(decode and comprehend) materials needed to perform everyday vocational tasks". Miller's views and definitions are all centered on conventional skills of reading and writing. While conventional literacy is used to measure academic success in a school set up, its definitions in most cases, excludes literacy as knowledge, competence or expertise in a specialised area. It is important to note that the definitions cited in this article were merely to situate and substantiate the context of the paper.

Language on the other hand, has also evolved in meaning and definition. Several scholars such as Bloch and Trager (1942) and Crystal (1987) defined language from a narrow perspective limiting it to human oral language. Lyon (1990) argues that language is a broader concept as it is not restricted to the oral version only as alleged by early scholars. While there are several ways of defining a language, much of the definitions are centered on human language as a tool for communication. Similarly, although most definitions of literacy are centered around reading and writing skills, there is no universal standard definition of good and effective literacy fluency (Lawton and Gordon, 1996: 138).

What is Literacy?

The meaning of Literacy become clearer when used with other terms such as conventional or basic literacy, functional literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, legal literacy, computer literacy, medical literacy and information literacy because there is a context to clarify it. In other words, defining literacy without putting it into context might be challenging.

Literacy can be defined narrowly or broadly. In a broad sense, literacy refer to a form of knowledge, competence and skills in a particular field or area. This view was supported by Barton (2007) and Mkandawire, Simooya-Mudenda & Cheelo (2017) who noted

that literacy in modern days may refer to knowledge. In addition, Mkandawire and Daka (2018:140) noted that "there are two major senses in which the world perceives the concept of literacy: The first one is conventional literacy that has to do with reading and writing skills while the second one, is a body of knowledge and skills in a field". In more definitive fields of study, this knowledge and skills must be accredited by the specialist community and approved by general populace as consensual truth that can help in the advancement and welfare of the society. Another way of defining literacy broadly is to say that literacy refer to knowledge and specialised skills in certain areas where one can demonstrate and apply unique abilities to perform tasks in a proficient manner as accredited by tradition, accepted by a specified community as expressing truth and genuine information for the field.

In the narrow sense, literacy refer only to technical abilities of decoding and composing symbols on paper (the ability to read and write). This is what is known as Conventional literacy and it is the most popular type of literacy as known in different parts of the world. Other scholars defined literacy in a different way. Luebke (1966:37) noted that "a person is literate who has learned to read and write, and who lives in a community which is developed to the extent which enables him to use his skill to his own and his community's advantage". This way of looking at literacy is supported by United Nations Economic and Social Council (1963:39) where it was acknowledged that UNESCO called for a meeting of Experts on Literacy, in June, 1962, where they arrived at the statement that:

> a person is uterate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community,

and whose attainments in reading and writing and
arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use
these skills towards his own and the community's
development and for active participation in the life of
his country.

Another definition of literacy was provided by The Zambian
Government National Literacy Framework (2013: vii) where
literacy was defined as "the ability to read and write". The same
publication above states on page 1, that "literacy is key to successful
learning at school and is an element for active participation in
social, economic, cultural and political life". This definition is
similar to the UK's National Literacy Trust (2012) which stated
that, "Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen well. A
literate person is able to communicate effectively with others and to
understand written information." Furthermore, Blake and Hanley
(1995: 89) noted that "literacy is the ability to read and write to an
appropriate level of fluency". These definitions perceived literacy
as ability to read and write at an appropriate level. These views
were echoed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation
and Development (OECD, 2000) which defined literacy as "the
ability to understand and employ printed information in daily
activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve
one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." A
similar definition is provided by Alberta, Literacy First – A Plan
for Action (2010) where literacy was defined in this way: 'Literacy
is acquiring, creating, connecting and communicating meaning in
a wide variety of contexts.' All these definitions are similar but
unique in some way. Most of these definitions are incomplete,
vague and misleading. One would wonder, reading and writing
what? Is it arrows for road signage or traffic control? Is it reading
and writing Chinese characters such as 如何什么样字 or written text in

Tumbuka Language? If one is not able to read and write in one language, are they illiterate in that language? It is important to note that definitions of literacy are important as they can be used as a basis for comparing the two terms under consideration in this article. Although some of them might be limited to the extent of excluding other aspects of literacy embraced by the same term. Although most definitions of literacy are narrow, they are useful in some contexts, as they provide a basis for comparing them to language in this article.

What is Language?

Like Literacy, Language is another polysemous term with multiple meanings. It can also be defined from a narrow and broader perspective. In the narrow sense, language refers to articulated human language where vocal sounds and its written substitute are used to express emotions, feelings and general communication. In a broader sense, Language refer to any system that uses systematic codes, symbols or signs by both humans and non-humans for purposes of communication and interaction. Crystal (1987) defined language as "a human vocal noise or the graphic representation of this noise, used systematically and conventionally by a community for the purposes of communication. This definition is more applicable to humans and in language classes, it can be a topic for debate. One would wonder whether a human vocal language is noise as alleged by Crystal. Another scholar (one of the earliest) that have attempted to define language is Sapir (1921: 8) who indicated that "Language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols". This definition might also raise debatable questions on whether language is purely human or not. If its purely human,

how do computers respond to the command symbols that we key in on a keyboard? One would wonder. This is another form of language for computer programming and other software. Bloch and Trager (1942:5) defined language as "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates." Similarly, one would wonder whether language is meant for social groups cooperating only.

There are several other definitions of language with different meanings that cannot be exhausted in this paper which clearly show that language has multiple meanings, the same way literacy was treated in this article. Much of the discussions on language definitions and critiques on such definitions can also be found in some publications such as one by Lyons (1990: 3 – 8). Furthermore, Lyons' Comment on Sapir's definition was that **(**a) Language is not only used for communication (though communication is the principal language function); (b) Many systems of „voluntarily produced symbols" can only be language in an extended or metaphorical sense, for example the so – called "body language". (c) Whether language is purely human and non-instinctive is an open question. On Bloch and Trager's Definition, Lyon noted that (a) The definition puts all the emphasis on the social function: co-operation. It is therefore only indirectly, by implication of the concept of co-operation, that it makes an appeal to the communicative function of language. (b) The Bloch and Trager definition also differs from Sapir's in that it Brings in the property of arbitrariness and restricts language to spoken Language (such as "vocal symbols" in the definition). These views attest to the issue that Language has multiple meanings.

Similarities between Literacy and Language

It is important to note that the similarities and differences discussed

in this paper are practically and theoretically based on context, history, perception and frequent or everyday use of the terms. Therefore, it is paramount to address such matters accordingly.

The conventional form of Literacy, and Language are closely related to the extent that it is literary impossible to discuss reading and writing literacy skills without implying the existence of language. Practically, literacy (reading and writing) is a symbolic representation of spoken language. Reading and writing skills and language are so intertwined that the former, is embedded in the later and vice versa. For instance, one can only read and write (literacy) meaningfully, in a language that they understand. Similarly, when one discusses written language, literacy is implied. In other words, there is no such a thing as written language without involving literacy. For instance, when learning about any written language such as the alphabetic system, phonetics and phonology, conventional literacy is implied. In language learning, there are topics associated for instance with the sound system of language where we distinguish phoneme /p/ from /b/ and /l/ from /r/. These are the same topics and contents covered when teaching literacy especially in early grade classes. It is literary impossible to conceive of conventional literacy without implying the existence of language and vice versa as both terms are closely related.

In the second place, both literacy and language are necessary assets for a child to successfully succeed and proceed in the conventional education systems of the world. In other words, both oral literacy (oracy) and oral language, together with the written forms of literacy and language are necessary skills for a learner to succeed in conventional education systems. Thus, language and literacy are two exclusive aspects, but they are fundamental requirements for every learner to proceed and succeed in education (Olson, 1977). Furthermore, Scribner and Cole (1978) indicated that in the 1970s, some social psychologists argued that many of

the assumptions about literacy in general were linked to school-based writing.

Another similarity is that both literacy and some languages, especially second, third and forth language that one can use, might be learnt in an artificial environment such as a classroom at a school set up. While first language is acquired naturally from the environment, other languages learnt afterwards may be in an artificial set up such as a class as in second language class and foreign language class. These instances, suggest that, both literacy and language (except for naturally acquired languages) are artificially learnt. Bloomfield (1994) noted that first language, native language, or mother/father/parent tongue is a language that a person has been exposed to from birth and it is usually acquired naturally. The fourth similarity is that, literacy and language can both be transported in written and recorded form respectively. The argument is that anything systematically written is an artifact of literacy because it is the skill associated with writing that produced it. In other words, an artifact of literacy can be about anything in written form with sentimental value (Kalantzis, Bill, and Cloonan, 2010). One can interpret a message from a written text only when they are literate. Any print or written text can be about anything including written language, history, biology, culture and others, (http://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-1/introduction-to-the-concept-of-literacies).

In terms of orality, literacy and language are similar in the sense that, as children's oral literacy (oracy) increases in one language, their knowledge of that language also increases. This parallel increase in oral skills on the two terms makes them unique. Hewitt and Inghilleri (1993: 309) reported that oracy refer to speaking and listening skills. Furthermore, the common argument across research on oracy is that, it is primarily the instrumental role of talk that has been treated as important while little emphasis

has been placed on talking skills as in themselves deserving attention. Ideally, the major emphasis on oracy should be placed on speaking, talking skills as well as listening. The development of these skills highly contributes to language development.

In order to acquire language and literacy competencies, one needs a facility in a brain that can accommodate and process the craft of both literacy and language in totality. Such a facility or device is what Chomsky (1965:25) called the language acquisition device (LAD). Chomsky, further noted that the Language Acquisition Device is a hypothetical module in which the human mind is posited to account for children's innate predisposition for language acquisition and in this case, literacy learning.

The other similarity is that while people think of language as a tool for humans to communicate, socialise, interact and cooperate orally with one another, oral literacy (oracy) also saves the same purpose. Communication can also be in written form and this is directly linked to conventional literacy. Furthermore, some people think of literacy in terms of written forms of language. In this case, one can still argue and say that, literacy is a symbolic representation of language in written form and when language is written, it is no longer language but an artifact of literacy. From a narrow perspective, literacy is all about understanding the symbols or alphabets of a language and manipulate it in different ways. It is only after becoming literate that one can communicate in a written manner or through an electronic medium. In other words, literacy, from the narrow perspective, is more on the written language and the ability to comprehend it well.

In terms of application in the society, literacy can be applied in several ways such as reading a Newspaper, Medical Prescription, Bible, Receipt from a shopping mall are all examples on the applications of literacy (Functional Literacy) in the society. Writing or reading anything such as sign post, letter, poem and

others are applications of literacy comes in on communication aspect. Freire (1972) noted that literacy can also be a tool for social transformation and it can easy one's life in handling daily social challenges. At the center of all these, language is used as a tool for communication both orally and in print. These similarities are unique as they are at the center of reading materials in a society.

Differences between Literacy and Language

The first difference is in terms of historical existence, where the article points out that, the concept of *Literacy, including reading and writing matters are more recent than language*. In other words, languages of different kinds have been there with people for as old as humanity. People used to communicate and express feelings in different languages while ideas about reading and writing including other forms of literacies discussed in the world today, are much more recent. In other words, the concept of literacy is much newer to the extent that it does not appear in the dictionaries of 1500s and 1600s (Barton, 2007). What used to be there in the history of humanity was spoken language and this existed in different forms. Kalantzis and Cope (n.d.) but available at (http://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-1/introduction-to-the-concept-of-literacies) reported that the history of writing is less than five thousand years old while that of language is as old as human existence. Kalantzis and Cope further noted that in the past, people used to communicate using a form of language. It may not be the standardised language as it is known today, with dictionaries and pronunciation but, languages of different kinds were there across races and ethnic groups for purposes of communication.

The other difference is that the skills of reading and writing from their inception historically, have always been treated with

much respect as compared to language. For instance, in the times of kings and queens, reading and writing skills were restricted to the elites or a few groups of people that included the royal families, priests and the clergy. In other words, reading and writing skills were associated with the high class groups of people to control written meanings, stories and others, while language was for every member of the community. Furthermore, some members in different communities around the world that time, considered reading and writing skills difficult to acquire. This belief spilled over to most communities around the globe and this belief continued, even after reading and writing skills were considered to be skills for everyone in order to survive. This partly explains why some members of the same community, may know how to speak a language but they may not know how to read or write in that language and such people are called illiterates.

The third difference is in terms of activities and the medium for understanding messages associated with Language and literacy skills. A literate person can decode and understand messages from both oral and written form while an illiterate person can only understand messages in spoken or oral form. It is understood, that language can be known in oral form, written form or both. In other words, a person that knows a spoken language only, is disadvantaged in understanding a print language and therefore, they cannot read messages written on foods, fill in forms at immigration when travelling, read expenses on their receipts, apply for employment and read newspapers. The significance of literate men and women as compared to illiterate ones, were summarised by Gray (1956:12) who observed that a literate person has an advantage over one who is not in the following ways:

In meeting many of the practical needs of daily life,

such as being warned of danger, finding one's way about, keeping posted on current happenings, keeping in touch with one's family". Furthermore, literacy is important in improving standards of living by obtaining valuable printed information relating to health and sanitation, the production, selection and preparation of food, child care, and home management. It also helps in increasing economic status through learning of available jobs, filling in forms and making application in writing, being able to follow written or printed directions while at work, engaging in vocations which require knowledge of reading and writing, learning how to spend and take care of wages.

Furthermore, in a modern world, conventional literacy helps in participating in social events on social media such as WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat. A literate person, can take part in many individual and group activities that involve reading and writing skills. Furthermore, conventional literacy facilitates learning about community activities and trends and the forces that make for or retard progress, and studying social problems. Literacy helps a citizen in meeting civic obligations through knowing about and observing regulations, participating in group discussions and in efforts to secure civic improvement, and voting without personal help in the light of all the information available. Literacy helps in understanding world affairs through learning about things and events both near and far, other people and their ways of life, and the natural and social forces that influence life through reading printed or written materials. Literacy helps in having access to and enjoying his literary heritage and in satisfying religious aspirations through reading sacred literature, participating in various religious activities at different levels (Gray 1956).

While these events demand one to read in a written language, the contextual focus is on written and spoken language. The argument is that a literate person with reading and writing skills (conventional literacy), that also knows a spoken language, can function and adapt in more ways in a society that a person that knows a spoken language only. A written language is associated with basic or conventional literacy which is the most popular in the world especially in the education sector.

The forth difference is that literacy, when considered as knowledge and specialised skills in specific areas, is applied in all domains of the society while language is a tool for communication for the globe. While language is available to everyone, specialised skills and knowledge are unique to individuals and needs to be earned with training and experience. In this case, we are all literate and illiterate in some area, some language and in some way. For instance, a literate professor in linguistics may be illiterate in computer science, web designing, cultural awareness, computer programming, sculpture and craft. This suggests that everyone has a role to play in the advancement of a society and specialisation is a natural aspect of this process. It is impossible for a rational being to exclusively fit into any society without implying the existence of literacy. Literacy and knowledge of survival are inseparable as all forms of nature employ literacy to survive: humans, birds, fish, animals and other selected living entities. Literacy as knowledge that people and other entities possesses to survive is an end to itself. These views are similar to circular voices which read; 'a person who can read his or her environment but cannot read a word should not be deemed ignorant and illiterate. To me an illiterate person is he /she who, even with more than enough schooling cannot read his/her environment, identify the wealth it has and protect that wealth, multiply it and enhance his/her own quality of life.

Hence, real illiteracy is about failure or incompetence in reading the wealth of one's environment'.

The other difference and similarity in some aspects is that, first language is naturally acquired from the environment with caregivers, parents and siblings while basic conventional literacy on reading and writing, as technical skills, are artificially learnt in organised settings. There is nothing natural about acquiring convention literacy that is associated with reading and writing skills. In other words, the language that a child speaks first is many time acquired from the environment while reading and writing skills in a language are many times technically learnt. It is important to note that, there are other forms of literacy such as emergent literacy, that is acquired from the environment. In a similar contrasting way, there are some languages, such as second language, third and fourth, that are learnt in artificial environments. In other words, there are some forms of literacy and language that are acquired naturally from the environment while others are learnt in artificial settings such as a classroom. In other words, language acquisition for humans is innate while conventional literacy requires understanding the code and imparting specific reading and writing skills mainly in a home or school set up with other learners.

Lankshear (1999) noted that the objective of basic conventional literacy involves exposing long-standing studies of reading and writing processes. Furthermore, it helps in imparting reading and writing skills in learners so that they can interact with materials in written form. Language and linguistics on the other hand aims at understanding the nature and structure of languages of the world including levels of linguistic analysis.

In terms of usage in the society, written form of language is used less than the spoken form. Spoken language is the most popular mode of communication used by most people and used

for dialogue conversation, in artistic works such as drama, music and film. On a daily basis, people scream, express their emotions, feelings and lament in an oral language. In other words, much of the communication done on a daily basis is more associated with spoken language than written and therefore, the emphatic difference here is that language is widely used for oral communication daily that literacy. Language is more popular than literacy and it is a tool used by almost everyone in the world. Conventional literacy on the other hand is used by a few people. Even those that know how to read and write prefer not to use their skill but opt for spoken language.

Conclusion

The terms literacy and language are intertwined as they are closely related in usage and general application. While literacy is more prestigious in those with the skill as it helps them in getting employment, development individually, respond more effectively to social and civic responsibilities, language is more common and used much more frequent than literacy. Furthermore, Language is important as it is a universal tool used for sharing oral information. In other words, all languages nor matter how huge or small in terms of number of speakers are important because they are used for communication, sharing ideas, self-expression, planning and edutainment. Language is also used as a vehicle for communicating and transmitting culture (Mkandawire, 2015).

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