

THE AFRICAN STORYBOOK (ASb) INITIATIVE: A CATALYST FOR SUPPORTING TIV LITERACY AND THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY

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Abstract

The promotion of literacy in indigenous languages is central to educational development and cultural preservation in multilingual societies like Nigeria. This paper is anchored on Carol/ D./ Lee's (1990) Cultural Modelling Theory. It examines the goals of Nigeria's National Language Policy, which advocates the use of the mother tongue in the early years of lower basic education. However, it has been observed that the level of compliance with Nigeria's new National Language Policy (2022) is uncertain. This is because textbooks in different school subjects appear to be seen more in English language, more than those in the local languages. The paper explores in depth how the African Storybook (ASb) initiative provides openly licensed picture storybooks in African languages to support early literacy. ASb initiative functions not only as a catalyst in supporting Tiv literacy, but also demonstrates how this initiative aligns closely with the policy. It was suggested that curriculum planners should immerse the African Storybooks in Tiv in the syllabus for beginner reading lessons and literature. Government and non-governmental organisations should launch a well-funded research institute to explore current opportunities in teaching practice and translate subject textbooks into indigenous languages. Teacher training institutions should integrate ASb resources into their teacher training programmes.

Keywords: Tiv literacy, National Language Policy, Cultural Modelling Theory, African Storybook (ASb) Initiative

Introduction

Children's literature is a crucial tool for supporting language development, creativity, imagination and adventure. It refers to written and illustrated works created for young readers, typically ranging from infancy to adolescence (Norton & Norton, 2016). These works encompass a wide range of genres, styles and themes, and are designed to engage, educate and entertain children while promoting their cognitive, emotional and social development. These texts often feature engaging narratives, memorable characters and imaginative themes (Avery, 2011). This genre often features simple language, vivid illustrations and themes that align with a child's developmental level, such as friendship, courage, family and morality. While the content may be lighthearted or fantastical, children's literature plays a vital role in helping young readers understand the world around them and build empathy.

Through books, children's reading and writing skills are developed. Sound early literacy lays a solid foundation for life-long learning. It is for the above reasons that even the early man did not relegate literacy to the background. For his existence, he needed to interpret marks on cave walls, rocks and on other surfaces for his survival (Little, 2021). Appearances on celestial bodies needed to be studied to understand the seasons and times to cultivate agricultural produce for consumption (Dankaro, 2012).

Literacy is more than the ability to read, write and calculate to gain knowledge (UNESCO, 2024). It is the ability to identify, recognise, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute to solve life problems. It is a sure means to engage with society. It is a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life. Alberta Education (2024) defines literacy as the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily life. Literacy makes use of language, which is a socially and culturally constructed system of communication. Literacy involves digital skills, media skills and education for sustainable development, global citizenship and job-specific skills (UNESCO, 2024). This

connotes that literacy is the ability to place value judgment on all life endeavours with a determination for progress in life. It also implies that information is essential in society.

Introducing literacy skills of reading and writing to children can be rewarding, as they sail smoothly through it into adulthood for sustainability. According to Abiodun-Ekus (2009), in Vajime, Hanmakyur and Igbe (2016), literacy is what causes children (people) to interact with written text and, in so doing, interact with the local community and society, accounting for complete development in a child. Children need a sound literacy background to fully participate in the global community for their present and future development in all aspects of life. High-quality early education intervention can combat poverty and improve opportunities for children who may be at risk of the negative effects of illiteracy, poor feeding and lack of development. In a world of constant fake news, children need information literacy to make their own judgment to know the truth and to discern what is wrong and right and to distinguish between credible and unworthy news (Sheehan, 2021).

Historical Perspective of Children's Literature in Tiv

At the onset of civilisation, a new form of literacy was born; man began to read and write and make literacy materials that needed to be consumed for overall education and knowledge acquisition (Little, 2021). In Nigeria and many other African countries, it was the advent of the Christian missionaries and colonial administrations that made this possible. In Tivland, the advent of the Dutch Reformed Christian Missionaries (DRCM) came with the desire to bridge the communication gap between the missionaries and the heathens who had no knowledge of God and stood in need of salvation. They also needed to train lower cadre staff (clerks, cooks, gardeners and interpreters) for their operational success (Iyortym, 1999). Dankaro (2018, p. 18) affirms that:

During the missionary stage of literacy, the translation of Christian literature into Tiv language formed a larger part of literacy instruction materials. Bible stories in English were translated into Tiv language, known as Akaa a Bibilo; other books that taught biblical lessons were also translated from English into Tiv by the missionaries. Books like Charles

Willing's Genevieve of Brabant were translated as Genoviva, The Christian Home by Samuel Philips, became Ya u Orkristu and John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress was Zende u Orkristu in Tiv and many other books.

This was the watershed of literacy materials' production in Tiv language which continued until the dedication of the translated Tiv Bible in 1964 and beyond. For some children at this time, these were the available literacy materials in some privileged homes.

The second or post-missionary phase of Tiv written literature witnessed the presence of books written by products of the missionary schools who learnt to read with the aforementioned Christian literature. These were no longer translated Christian literature, as the new authors had the poetic licence to write on any subject matter. The era began with Ruamabera u Hiihii, Usha Uhar and Usha Unyiin. This was followed by Tarhmon u Botwev by Terrumun Humbe and Suemo Chia's Adan Wade Kohol Ga. This was the first time that literacy books would be written by Tiv people themselves, and whose content and themes were wound around issues that reflected the Tiv worldview. At this time too, urbanisation and growth of many commercial towns was witnessed in Tivland at Gboko, Katsina-Ala, Vandeikya, Adikpo, Zaki-Biam and others. Beer parlours, live bands and prostitution went hand in hand, thus providing enough thematic bases for the Tiv stories to thrive and be told.

Regrettably, though these books served their purpose at that time, they were a deviation from the qualities of good storybooks and textbook production, which are: relatable characters, illustrations, engaging storyline, and age-appropriate language, among others (Uniyal, Mandakin & Chamoli, 2021). It is recognised that visual elements in a storybook or textbook make an impression on the minds of children, as they usually pay attention to the illustrations. In addition, children can express feelings and imagination while strengthening creativity and problem-solving skills when they read colourfully illustrated books.

Hladikova (2014) further highlights the imperatives of illustrated story books for children, thus, "High-quality picture books that merge text and illustration together in order to tell a story are eminent for healthy mental and social growth of

children.” Sadly, in between the missionary and post missionary stages of Tiv written literature, many Tiv authors have written storybooks. A careful scrutiny reveals that they are devoid of illustration or are poorly illustrated. Font sizes used are unsuitable and are not grade-specific. It could be observed that some of the literacy materials mentioned above were not subjected to readability level checks, and their content did not fit the age, interests and intellectual capabilities of learners at the basic level. Research has shown that having animal characters, plot, colourful pictures, large fonts, and adventure made story books their favourite. Whereas not having action, being boring, having unsolved problems within the stories, as well as being short or having unknown words and expressions made the storybooks the children’s least favourite (Bayraktar, 2021).

Importance of Tiv Literacy in Education

Literacy contributes to individual progress that leads to societal development. This explains why a nation cannot develop beyond the level of literacy of its citizens. Tiv literacy connotes the study of the Tiv language orthography or writing system. The Tiv language system is phonemic since the written symbols (graphemes) correspond to the spoken sounds (phonemes) (Wikipedia, 2024), making it easy and appropriate for children learning to read and reading to learn. This type of literacy system is likely to be liable in the near future as postulated by the National Language Policy (NERDC, 2022) that all pupils of the primary schools should be taught in their mother tongue while English be taught as a subject and not a medium of instruction to enhance learning at the foundation level.

The Tiv literature has a profound influence on oral language and literacy. It contributes immensely to shaping the worldview of the Tiv children. It is affirmed that children who were taught to read using the Language Experience Approach (LEA) in Tiv made appreciable gains in sight word recognition more than those who were taught in English (Dankaro, 2010). In another study, students taught Mathematics using the Tiv language performed better than the group taught Mathematics using the English language only (Anyagh, 2024).

Tiv literature is an important part of Tiv culture and provides children with the knowledge and oral skills they need. Tiv

speakers, readers and writers need to use the approved orthography in order to promote the standard variety (SV) of the Tiv language. (Wikipedia, 2024). It has become imperative to use the Tiv language to preserve the knowledge of our cultural heritage, spirituality, philosophy, morality and our children's world view as well as improving our education system with literacy skills.

Fostering literacy in Tiv language requires children's exposure to books at the early stage of education. Children who are exposed to literature books early are trained to read constantly and this transforms their personality (Orkaa, 2019). Early exposure of children to books is crucial in achieving a literate society since reading children eventually become reading adults. Literature books provide children with abundant learning experiences that transform their lives to attain right self-esteem.

Literature and culture are interwoven. Therefore, literature books in Tiv language could help children imbibe the cultural values that would shape their lifestyle to adopt basic values of the Tiv society. Orkaa (2019) asserts that availability of culturally relevant materials in indigenous languages could facilitate reading culture in many African countries. This implies that children need to be encouraged and exposed to books at their early stage of life.

Despite the importance of children's exposure to books at the early stage in indigenous languages, such books are inadequate. Orjime (2016) reiterates that after the departure of the Dutch Missionaries, there was a decline in the development of Tiv language due to shortage of literature in the language. Another reason given is that there were no locally trained linguists to continue with the development of the language. Although there are people who write literature books in Tiv language to help the development of the language, the books are still inadequate and suffer from circulation. Texts in Tiv language are not readily available in bookstores. There are children who would have loved reading such books, but cannot have access to them.

Books written in Tiv language need to be interesting to attract children to read. Storybooks need to have meaningful illustrations that would help to draw and capture children's attention. This could support the development of reading

comprehension. These illustrations need to be detailed and colourful. The books are also supposed to help children expand their understanding of the world around them; books with teachable lessons that would help them learn life lessons as well as engage them with other people, develop ideas and build new literacy skills.

National Language Policy

Language policy is meant to address the language situation of a nation, especially a multilingual nation like Nigeria. Before and after the colonial era, this is the first time Nigeria has had a core language policy; all it had previously were language provisions and stipulations in either the Nigerian constitution or the National Policy on Education. The Federal Government of the then-President Muhammadu Buhari officially announced and approved a National Language Policy on December 1, 2022. The document declares the existence of about 540 indigenous languages, all of which are considered equal, and these languages coexist with other foreign languages, thereby complicating the linguistic nature of the country. The goal of the policy is to make provisions for language use in domains such as education, the media, Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), legislature, judiciary, the trading and entertainment industry, and many others.

The policy is to cover the entire 36 states of the federation (Federal, State and Local government levels), including the federal capital territory. This will also apply to all three tiers of government. The policy document caters for the language situation of the nation by assigning roles and functions to both indigenous and foreign languages. The provision for the policy in education states that: i. Instruction for basic education shall be in the mother tongue or the Language of the Immediate Community (LIC), while Arabic language shall be used for Islamic schools. The English language shall be used as a school subject. ii. For post-basic education, the medium of instruction for both junior and senior secondary schools shall be the English language; meanwhile, a combination of the mother tongue shall be encouraged. However, students must compulsorily pick a mother tongue as a subject to study. iii. For mass and nomadic education, instruction shall be in the mother tongue or the Language of the Immediate Community (LIC). English shall be

taught as a school subject. iv. The policy encouraged bilingualism for tertiary education; therefore, English shall be used as a medium of instruction, and students will be required to pick as an optional course one Nigerian language.

It could be deduced from the foregoing that the Federal Government of Nigeria is desirous of enhancing qualitative education and has reviewed the Language Policy in the country, which is aimed at promoting quality education. However, one of the criticisms of the new policy in Nigeria was the issue of the dearth of textbooks and their production in the multiplicity of Nigerian languages and the inability of school children to purchase these books for use in schools in the different languages at the moment. Akomolafe (2024) reports that there is low purchasing power and demand for storybooks in Africa, along with the large number of languages; conventional publishing produces relatively few titles in African languages. Thus, there is a dire need for an alternative arrangement, which is the African Storybook initiative.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on Cultural Modelling Theory, which was propounded by Carol/ D./ Lee in 1990. It is part of culturally responsive pedagogy. Lee proposed that learners' everyday cultural repertoires, especially language practices like African American vernacular, serve as rich "cultural data sets" that can scaffold learning in academic contexts, particularly literary interpretation. Rather than viewing vernacular speech as a deficit, Lee designed instructional activities that draw on students' cultural knowledge, translating it into forms that bridge into mainstream texts and analytic genres. The theory situates learning within cultural-historical psychology. The theory emphasises education built on learners' cultural knowledge and everyday experiences. By drawing on students' cultural repertoires as bridges to academic content, Lee shows that literacy is strengthened when it reflects learners' own social and cultural contexts.

Cultural Modelling theory aligns with Nigeria's language policy's goal to promote cultural relevance and national languages in education. ASb in Tiv frequently feature traditional stories, folktales, songs, and local daily life—precisely the type of cultural content Lee advocates. This cultural familiarity

supports meaningful literacy practice, making reading more engaging and cognitively accessible. ASb embodies Cultural Modelling's principle of drawing on learners' linguistic and cultural repertoires. For Tiv-speaking learners, ASb offers culturally relevant narratives in their mother tongue, which can serve as scaffolds for biliteracy development and support the Nigerian National Language Policy's promotion of mother tongue-based education. ASb's participatory model—where teachers and community members co-create storybooks—parallels Lee's cultural modelling framework: it uses cultural knowledge as a pedagogical resource, legitimises vernacular language practices, and positions learners' cultural identities at the centre of literacy instruction.

African Storybook Literacy Initiative

The African Storybook (ASb) is a literacy initiative that was launched in 2014 by the South African Initiative for Distance Education (SAIDE). It is a digital open license platform hosting multilingual children's storybooks in hundreds of African languages, including Tiv, to support early literacy. Its purpose is to improve literacy and provide accessible storybooks for early reading in African languages. ASb is intended to address the lack of accessible storybooks in African languages. The African Storybook (ASb) Initiative has a website with thousands of open-access or openly licensed picture storybooks in over 200 African languages, including Tiv and Idoma. The website also has tools for creating, translating, and adapting storybooks. The ASb has a Reader App and a Maker App that allow parents and children to read and create storybooks. The apps are available for download from Google Play and the App Store. With over 3,000 stories in more than 200 languages, the platform allows for: creation, translation and adaptation of stories, free online and offline access to storybooks, and community involvement in content development. The initiative has been rolled out in several African countries, including Nigeria, and has had particular success in empowering educators and communities in under-resourced linguistic groups.

The African Storybook (ASb) aligns with Nigeria's National Language Policy on Education advocates for the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction at the primary level. However,

implementation has been inconsistent. The ASb initiative offers practical tools and content that make this policy more implementable at the grassroots level, encourages community ownership of the literacy process and bridges the policy-practice gap by offering digital and print resources that align with curriculum goals.

The ASb has helped to address the shortage of storybooks in African languages, which is a major factor that is contributing to low school literacy rates in many African countries. The initiative addresses the dire shortage of children's storybooks in African languages, crucial for children's literacy development. As of March 2023, the website had 3,800 original titles, 7,266 translations and 236 languages represented (Wikipedia, 2024).

The African Storybook literacy initiative is hoped to boost and support the take-off of the Nigerian Language Policy (2022), with the much-needed grade-specific story books in different Nigerian languages, which some researchers envisaged would be the Achilles heel of the new policy (Owojecho, 2020 & Sanusi, 2024). Many of the ASb storybooks are authored by African authors whose content ranges from traditional folktales, contemporary stories, adventure to poems, traditional games and songs. Wikipedia (2024) asserts that authors are mostly educators – teachers, librarians, academics – who contribute stories to have storybooks for their educational contexts and to promote their language. A total of 5,525 storybooks (as of March 2023) have been “ASb-approved”. This means that the initiative has checked the content and language in the storybooks. All the stories are illustrated, either by professional illustrators in various African countries or by the users themselves. Going by the description of what fancies children in storybooks and the massive benefits of reading colourfully illustrated books, the content of the African Storybook Initiative fits perfectly in what may satisfy children's cravings and spur them to read more. These books are arranged according to children's specific grade levels and are colourfully illustrated. Children find them very interesting and engaging as they are capable of encouraging the achievement of literacy in the Tiv language.

Organisations, educators and communities in developing, publishing, and using storybooks are supported by SAIDE's ASb to have children love and enjoy reading stories. At the moment, individual champions are all over Nigeria and Tivland, including

one of the humble contributing authors of this paper. Children in Benue State are making appreciable gains from ASb use in Vertex International Nursery and Primary School, Nadi Schools and LGEA Primary School, Owner Occupier, all in Makurdi township. Resources (tablets, anthologies and other props) have been supplied for reading activities for pupils to read, retell, role-play, draw and make stories. Advocacy of ASb use has been extended among various stakeholders, including the Centre for Undergraduate Studies/NCE students at the College of Education, Katsina-Ala, the Parent-Teacher Association at UBEC Smart School, and some other primary schools in Makurdi, and is ongoing.

African Storybook is heavily present in the state, as many contributors of the stories in Benue languages (Idoma and Tiv) have created and translated about 150 stories in the Tiv language, and more stories in the language are still being worked on. The stories accompanying colourful pictorial illustrations have been compiled to readability levels for different age grades for their reading pleasure. It is over to the leadership of all the concerned bodies to create spaces where the Tiv language ASb books can be immersed in Tiv language reading lessons in schools and at home for children's reading pleasure.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Literacy is a key to personal and national development. It builds skills and capacity in individuals, which could enable them to live efficiently and contribute to the development of society. This could be more effective if a language policy is in place. However, it has been observed that since the announcement by the Minister in 2022, the Federal Ministry of Education has yet to publish a policy memo or brief that fully captures the details of this national language policy. The African Storybook (ASb) initiative demonstrates how open-access digital resources can transform language education and support the implementation of national policies in multilingual countries. For the Tiv language, ASb is more than just a platform. It is a literacy catalyst, a cultural preserver, and a bridge between local communities and national educational aspirations. To sustain this momentum, collaborative efforts involving governments, NGOs and communities must continue to support and scale such innovations. It was, therefore, suggested that:

- i. Curriculum planners should immerse the African Storybooks in Tiv in the syllabus for beginner reading lessons and literature. Excerpts from them could be used as comprehension passages in Tiv language textbooks.
- ii. Government and non-governmental organisations should launch a well-funded research institute to explore current opportunities in teaching practice to embed decolonial approaches to teaching and to begin translating subject textbooks into indigenous languages, creating assessments in indigenous languages, recruiting teachers, reforming teachers' college curriculum and re-training teachers.
- iii. Teacher training institutions should integrate ASb resources into their teacher training programmes.

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