

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Strategies for Enhancing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global Literacy with Zimbabwe in Mind

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## Abstract

Global literacy rankings are based on basic literacy, which refers to the ability to read, write and understand in a local language. This traditional basic definition of literacy is in itself a deterrent from exploring and creating a wider literacy definition that also takes cognisance of functional and higher proficiency literacy levels within a wider curriculum context. Secondary research through a critical literature analysis has uncovered findings on the state of traditional basic literacy rates, on the global literacy ranking map. Relationships between traditional basic literacy rates and the economic development of a country have also been examined. Additionally, the secondary research findings also reveal strategies that enhance literacy levels such as e-learning, traditional reading, home schooling, business start up programme, youth national service, on-line tertiary study programme, summer camps, entrepreneurship training, volunteer programmes and communication for development based research. To further enhance literacy, the article recommends extensive use of connectivity platforms facilitating e-learning and e-teaching, developing expanded home schooling and supporting communication for development based research.

**Keywords:** Basic literacy, Functional literacy, Literacy proficiency, Illiteracy, National economic development.

## Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the two regions, with the least literacy rate, the other being South and West Asia as shown in Table 1. Zimbabwe, as part of Sub-Saharan Africa with a falling literacy rate, from an estimated 97.2% in 2002 to 83.6% in 2011 can be used as a case study to help demonstrate factors contributing towards reduced literacy rates [4]. Secondary research clearly shows challenges to the enrichment of the literacy scope and depth in Zimbabwe including reduced school enrolment, increased school dropouts, diminished employment, arrested wealth creation, reduced earnings, slowed growth of the informal sector and economic insecurity.

However, a study of the literacy scope and depth enhancing strategies in countries with high literacy rates should assist Zimbabwe and other developing countries design progressive literacy intervention strategies that address 21<sup>st</sup> century demands.

As stated in the CIA World Fact book (2013), seventy five (75%) of 775 million illiterates are in

ten countries four of which are on the African continent.

Table 1: Adult literacy rates by region

EFA region	1990 (1985-1994 census decade)	2000 (1995-2004 census decade)	2011 (2005-2014 census decade)
Arab States	55%	68%	77%
Central and Eastern Europe	96%	97%	99%
Central Asia	98%	99%	100%
East Asia and the Pacific	82%	92%	95%
Latin America and the Caribbean	86%	90%	92%
South and West Asia	47%	59%	63%
Sub-Saharan Africa	53%	57%	59%

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2013) [4]

In descending order of literacy rates, the countries include India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Brazil, Indonesia and Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Women constitute two thirds of the illiterates in the global village. South and West Asia as well as

sub-Saharan Africa are two regions with the least literacy rates. Although Zimbabwe used to have the highest literacy rates in Sub-Saharan Africa, the country now experiences a downward trend from 97.2% (2002) to 83.6% (2011) [3].

Evidently, worldwide there is an emphasis on the need to excel in the traditional basic literacy.

The objectives of this article therefore are to:

- Identify basic literacy rates
- Establish the causes of reduced literacy rates
- Design contemporary literacy enhancing strategies for developing countries

## Review of Literature

A critical analysis of literature through secondary research has uncovered findings on the definition of traditional literacy, the literacy rates of countries in the global village, challenges to literacy, intervention strategies enhancing literacy scope and depth in developing countries.

The most common definition of literacy is basically the ability to read and write at a specified age. (UNESCO) posits a widely used definition of literacy expressing literacy as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts".

With many countries conventionally, literacy is understood to include the ability to read and write with understanding, a short simple statement about one's everyday life [3]. There are statistics on adult literacy rates for 15 year olds and above, though in some countries, the criterion with respect to age is below 15 years.

### Literacy Measurement

The attainment of literacy can be measured through reading development which involves a progression of skills starting with the ability to understand the spoken word and decode the written word, culminating in a deep understanding of text.

To be able to understand the spoken word and decode the written word, reading development also involves a range of language underpinnings such as: an awareness of the speech sounds-*phonology*, identification of spelling patterns-*orthography*, deciphering word meanings-*semantics*, observing and understanding patterns of words formation-*morphology*, all of

which provide the necessary platform for comprehension and reading fluency.

The global literacy rate index is a mixture of data collected by the CIA World Fact Book and national self-reported data. Where data were not available, older data were used. In the case of highly developed/high income countries where data were unavailable, a rate of 99% was assumed. It is no surprise that some statistics are out of date compromising accuracy hence disputes arising over them.

## The 2013 Global Literacy Rate

The global population is an estimated 7.292 billion with a literacy rate of 84.1%, made up of 88.6% for males and 79.7% for females [4]. The global literacy rate index is a mixture of data collected by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Fact Book and national self-reported data. It is no surprise that some statistics are out of date compromising accuracy resulting in disputes arising over them.

As shown in Table 2 below, there is a high concentration of illiterate people in the highlighted ten countries, comprising over 775 million people. This is almost 75% of all illiterate people around the globe. The said countries have been ranked from the highest literacy rate to the lowest rate; Women constitute two thirds of the illiterates in the global village.

**Table 2: Countries with 75% of the world's illiterate, making up about 775 million people**

Country	Literacy Rate	Year of Estimate
1. China	95.1	2010
2. Indonesia	92.7	2011
3. Brazil	90.4	2010
4. Egypt	73.9	2012
5. India	62.8	2006
6. DRC	61.2	2007
7. Bangladesh	57.7	2011
8. Pakistan	54.9	2009
9. Nigeria	51.1	2008
10. Ethiopia	39.0	2007

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2013) [4]

## Gender Parity Index (GPI): The Ratio of Female to Male Literacy Rates

During 2011, two thirds of the 148 countries under review had reached gender parity in youth literacy with a GPI of between 0.97 and 1.03. The biggest disparities were observed in 12 countries in Sub Saharan Africa. In 40 of those countries young women were less likely to read and write than young men.

## The African Literacy Rate

Although Zimbabwe is in Sub-Saharan Africa, one of the two regions with the least literacy rates, this country has enjoyed the highest literacy rate of up to 97.2% in 2002, but is now on a downward trend estimated at 84% in 2011 as shown in Table 3 below thereby occupying position eight in the literacy adult rankings in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Studying causes of this downward trend might also throw light on challenges facing countries with least literacy rates.

Understanding successful literacy strategies in the top literacy rated countries of the world should throw light on possible strategies that Zimbabwe may embark on to check the downward trend and also assist countries with least literacy rates.

**Table 3: Zimbabwe occupies position eight in the adult literacy ranking in Africa**

African Country Ranking	Adult Literacy Rate 2011
1. Equatorial Guinea	94
2. South Africa	93
3. Mauritius	89
4. Gabon	89
5. Swaziland	88
6. Cape Verde	85
7. Botswana	85
8. Zimbabwe	84
9. Tunisia	80
10. Congo Republic	79
11. Comoros	76
12. Angola	70
13. Togo	60
14. Central African Republic	57
15. Guinea-Bissau	55
16. Senegal	52

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2013) [4]

## The Challenged Education System

The Zimbabwe Statistical Agency has indicated that the school going population between ages 3-24, are those who have never been to school, comprising an estimated 12%, whilst 30% dropped out of school and those who stayed in school are 58%.

The reduced attendance and increased school dropouts reflects that more and more children are out of school and this impacts negatively on the percentage of literate individuals in Zimbabwe.

Lack of school fees is the greatest reason for school dropouts. Why is this so?

## Poorly Funded Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM)

The Government Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) has a reduced budget due to the challenged economy. Owing to the global crisis, education partners withdrew BEAM funding. Reduced government funding and withdrawn donor funding contributed in increasing school dropouts.

## Poverty

Alkire et al [1] show that in year 2006, Zimbabwe had 4 974 people in the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index, about 39.7% of the population. Since 2006 companies continued to shut down. Between 2011 and 2014, an estimated 4 600 companies closed down leading to a retrenchment of about 55 000 people [5]. Zimbabwe today has 80 % unemployment in the formal sector. However, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), earnings below US\$ 1.25 per day categorises one into extreme working poor economic class as shown in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: ILO developing world's workforce**

ILO Economic Classes	Earnings in US\$ per day
1. Extreme working poor	< US\$1.25
2. Moderate working poor	US\$1.25- US\$2
3. Near poor	US\$2-US\$4
4. Developing middle class workers	US\$4-US\$13
5. Developed world middle class and above	>US\$13

Source: ILO [6]

It is important to note that one who earns US\$1 25 per day in Zimbabwe can barely survive as the US\$ has been grossly undervalued in Zimbabwe owing to the inertia of the Zimbabwe dollar whose inflation rate reached 231 million percent in January 2009. The Zimbabwe dollar hyperinflation before February 2009, and the undervaluing of the US\$ since February 2009, made it difficult for some parents and guardians to send children to school.

## Poor Working Conditions for Teachers

Zimbabwe teachers' pay is less than what is given to teachers in the region. Hence there has been an exodus of teachers to Botswana, South Africa and Namibia and go-slows among those who stayed behind until February 2009 when the multi-currency system was introduced. However, because of the poor salaries in the education

sector compounded by undervalued US dollar teachers who have stayed behind cannot Whole heartedly focus on planning and teaching as they have to embark on other income generating activities to make ends meet. This has prejudiced the learner. In addition, the country has been left with a few science teachers as the majority are among those who left the country. Further, teachers who are returning are employed on the basis of yearly contracts a situation that can be demotivating as the career of these returnee teachers lies in the whims of a school head who might feel challenged by a given teacher academically, financially or socially.

### **Short Comings in the Curriculum**

There is great anticipation and excitement that the curriculum review currently underway will usher in subjects that will leave learners with expert knowledge in diverse fields, general knowledge covering cross cutting issues like information communication technology, climate change, media, entrepreneurship, culture, language, gender, negotiation skills, leadership, teamwork, governance, conflict prevention and resolution, When learners are equipped with positive attitudes, academic and technical skills, they manifest competencies, like creativity, innovation and productivity which are the basis for industrial development. Such a curriculum would lead to an increased literacy scope and depth.

### **Micro and Macro-Economic Mismanagement**

In a normal economy, there is local production of consumer and cash crops using locally made or produced inputs and some imported capital goods. Surpluses from consumer crops are sold to the local markets or external markets together with the cash crops. Tourism services, value added agricultural and mining commodities are exported as well. The export revenue is often higher than expenditure on imported goods which include expenditure on capital goods and a few luxuries leading to a balance of payments, a high gross domestic product (GDP) and high earnings per capita.

However, the opposite is true in Zimbabwe today. Instead of increasing production and manufacturing, the country has become a retail market with goods imported by cross-border-traders into the country. The US\$ is firm against neighbouring currencies but undervalued in Zimbabwe. With less production in agriculture and leakages in mining, minimal value addition of agricultural and mining commodities, the total value of goods and services produced in Zimbabwe is greatly reduced, and is less than the value of

imported goods and services leading to a trade deficit. A deficit in the balance of payment deprives a country of revenue, savings, and investment in employment creation. Consequently, companies fold up, and unemployment of over 80% in the formal sector has become the outcome. Under such circumstances when literally parents, guardians or child headed families are struggling to keep body and soul together, school fees takes second place, hence the reduced school attendance and increasing school dropouts are no surprise in Zimbabwe today.

### **Curtailments of Employment and Wealth Creation**

Africa is indeed on the growth path with sub-Saharan Africa as host to some of the fastest growing economies in the world due to, rising commodity prices, a more vibrant private sector supported by an improved business climate, as well as, improvements in governance and economic management. Zimbabwe though in sub-Saharan Africa is one country that has missed the league of fast growing economies in sub-Saharan Africa.

The number of people working in the informal sector thus further increased to over 90% of the Zimbabwe labour market. The indigenisation policy has made it difficult to attract lines of credit or foreign direct investment. As a result the lack of loans for capital incapacitates domestic investors, further retarding the growth of the informal sector in which the majority of Zimbabweans conduct their business operations albeit in a non-supportive business environment.

Without much formalisation of informal sector enterprises, there is no security for enterprises and owners. For employees aspiring to become entrepreneurs, there are a few opportunities with respect to on-the-job training possibilities and entrepreneurship nurturing. Furthermore, informal sector employees earn sporadically thereby increasing the number of those in the multidimensional poverty status, a true reflection of poor macro mismanagement and failed governance policies.

Poverty is now rife in high density areas, peri-urban areas and rural areas. The reduced school attendance, increased school dropouts, failure to pay school fees, inability to buy text books, school equipment and stationery is a manifestation of poor earnings by most parents working in the informal sector. Such financial challenges in education are intensified by the reduced government budget for the Basic Education

Assistance Module and lack of contributions from the donor community due to the global crisis. Without competent entrepreneurs who produce, employ and cause a multiplier effect to employment creation through nurturing future entrepreneurs endowed with that kind of strategic thinking, the economy is moving at a sluggish pace. Remembering that once Zimbabwe was referred to as a jewel of Africa with the highest literacy rate on the continent, such a sluggish pace of the economy could be a reflection of the downward trend of Zimbabwe literacy rates and reveals a lack of literacy scope and depth with respect to micro and macro-economic management of the country's resources.

### **Governance, Citizenship and Ethical Behaviour**

Evidently participatory approaches that include consultations with the people on policies and legal issues of concern to them are a priority to ensure successful developments. Fanning public-private sector partnerships enhances these approaches. A situation where politics controls business could be a reflection of low leadership literacy or citizenship literacy. High leadership literacy recognises that people look up to leadership at all levels of business or the public sector. Without accepting the obligation of role modelling to the nation, the guiding philosophy of Unhu/Ubuntu falls through the window. The young generation imitate and emulate what they see being done. They would otherwise wonder why they need to go to school, if they can get salaries not commensurate with their efforts.

Sub Saharan Africa countries with low literacy rates need not despair. They can employ strategies that enhance literacy scope, improving on health provision, energy use, levels of water supply and sanitation, relevant infrastructure, viable transport and information communication technologies.

Measures include holding school workshops for technical subjects such as, design technology, technical graphics, building, carpentry, metal work, fashion and fabrics, art and craft, laboratories for science, mathematics, engineering libraries and sport pavilions thereby availing learners and employees appropriate learning environments developing basic, functional and high proficiency literacy in all those fields.

### **Illiteracy**

Zimbabwe's literacy downward trend means a rise in illiteracy. However, countries with high literacy

rates still have levels of illiterate individuals. Even In regions where there is homogeneity ethnically, there is a variation in illiteracy or literacy rates from country to country or region to region. This is a reflection of wealth or urbanization and sometimes the lack of it.

Illiteracy rates range between 40% and 50% in sub-Saharan Africa, Arab States and South Asia, the three regions with the highest illiteracy rates in the world, whilst East Asia and Latin America have illiteracy rates in the 10% to 15% range and developed countries have illiteracy rates as low as 1% or less. The world illiteracy rates is an estimated 16%, [7].

According to the United States Department of Education 2003 [8], based on its National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 14% of American adults could barely read and understand an instruction from a utility bill, and a procedure on a job offer and that, more than half of this 14% had no high school diploma. This 2003 national assessment of Adult Literacy further discovered a decline in college students' literacy between 1992 and 2003. On comparing literacy rates of college students of the two years, those of the 2003 college students had declined with less than one third of all graduates at the highest "proficient" level, and less than half of all graduates with advanced degrees at this highest proficiency level [8]. It is further stated that the Government in the United Kingdom witnessed the prevalence of functionally illiterate residents around seven million because of a total or partial loss of reading and writing skills due to lack of practice. It was argued that in the Arab world lack of education was the cause of lack of basic traditional literacy among more than 25% of men and 50% of women. How then may literacy be enhanced in these regions with high illiteracy rates?

### **E-Learning - Instruction- Character-Animation**

People who are unable to read can be brought to the kindergarten level of literacy by the Early Literacy Software builder. It blends instruction/statement with characters and animation. E-learning programmes can be used.

### **Traditional learning - Image-word- Sound-Child Repeating Sound**

Images like a bucket can be created manually and described using characters. So the child sees the image and written word stating the name of the image and hears sounds as the teacher/adult pronounces the word bucket, which sound, the

child imitates. Therefore each time the image of a bucket is seen; the child blurts out, bucket!

### **Home Schooling**

Home schooling provides learning opportunities to learners who might be ill, living in flooded areas, distant areas, or have parents/guardians who constantly move location for employment reasons.

### **Business Start Up programmes**

Universities can offer business start-up programmes thereby nurturing graduate learners on enterprise formalization and sustainable business operations.

### **Youth National Service**

Youth national service exposes the youth to various forms of literacy through working for organisations operating in a variety of fields in different sectors of the economy thereby expanding learners' literacy scope and nurturing literacy levels. In a lot of developed countries national service is a prerequisite for pursuing tertiary education.

### **On-line Tertiary Study Programme**

Opportunities for those far away from colleges/university of interest, and people interested in studying whilst working utilise on-line degree study programmes. Some universities offer on line degree studies.

### **Summer Camps**

Some countries in the developed world organise summer camps offering sports, language learning and other social economic activities.

### **Entrepreneurship Training**

On the job training is critical as it provides youths with opportunities for hands-on skills training and being nurtured with acceptable job attributes.

### **Volunteer Programmes**

Volunteer programmes constituted by retired professionals would offer theory and practice in technical- entrepreneurial skills training to the unemployed. The trainees would include youths who dropped out early in school and feel diffident to enter the formal or non-formal system of education. These are youths who never went to school and do not want to go to school except to acquire basic literacy, as well as functional literacy in the form of techno-entrepreneurial skills. Volunteer programmes would also incorporate those who have graduated from the education system but still require learning techno-entrepreneurial skills for employment creation or employment.

## **Communication for Development Based Research**

Communication for development based research should be employed in order to identify root causes of failure to successfully implement the proposed literacy intervention strategies.

### **The Link between Literacy and Economic Development**

The EF English Proficiency Index Report indicated a correlation between English Proficiency and Exports per capita, Gross National Income per capita and ease of doing business. However, it should be noted that the size of the investment in English training does not necessarily correspond to the amount of progress made over time [9]. The objective is to establish to what extent a country's literacy rate in the global rankings correlates with the global economic rankings.

In order to compare and calculate the correlation between literacy global ranking and economic global ranking, the two sets of statistics have been taken from the same source UNESCO Institute of Statistics. A general analysis of the statistics shows that countries of Central Asia, North America and Central Europe with high literacy rates of up to 100% fall at the top of the global economic ranking with high Gross Domestic Products. Some of the regions with low literacy rates such as West and South Asia, East Asia and Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa have correspondingly low gross domestic products.

Notwithstanding this criterion, the one thing that is certain is that Zimbabwean literacy rates are on a downward trend where Zimbabwe now occupies position eight in Sub-Saharan Africa. Whilst developing countries refer to literacy as being able to read and write in English, a more expressive definition would extend to the ability to read and write in one's local language. The local language gives each and every individual an opportunity to communicate and participate in consultations making meaningful contributions to decisions on strategies and programmes affecting their lives thereby enhancing implementation of policies and programmes. To cite an example, 'how many politicians from parliament misquoted the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education when he challenged parents who had reservations about distribution of condoms in schools when he said that he would not be associated with giving school heads the mandate

to place condoms in their institutions?' However, the said Minister went on to argue that, parents

who hold different views on this should go ahead and provide their children with condoms themselves and show this by adding the condoms into their children's lunch boxes. Yet he was interpreted to have said children should take condoms to school.

It is imperative that Zimbabweans are able to read and write in their mother tongue/local language first and foremost, then in the other artificially aggregated languages like Shona and Ndebele as well as English. What this means is that professionals when holding business should be able to utilise Shona, Ndebele and English and whenever necessary, ICT based translations should be offered. However, when a professional or politician is addressing a community, he/she should ensure that he uses or provides translation for the local language. As long as the authorities pretend that Zimbabwe's 15 other languages are not important for routine communications, Zimbabwe will find it difficult to reverse the downward trend of literacy.

## Conclusion

Literacy levels required to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global village should not only be basic in the local language, but should be functional as well as being of a high proficient level in order for Zimbabwe to make progress. People can then contribute, participate and send their local representatives in dialogues involving the following issues:

- Constitutional amendments;
- Council bye-laws amendments;
- Taking on board progressive traditional practices;
- Designing a curriculum creating an upright citizen conversant with rights and responsibilities, one who is an analytical critical

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thinker making informed decisions, a producer, an employer and a nurturer of future entrepreneurs;

- Emphasising the importance of the local language/mother tongue, Shona, Ndebele and English as well as the other 13 languages in Zimbabwe and other international languages like French, German, Portuguese and Mandarin to facilitate trade and international relations;
- Highlighting the relevance of traditional administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and
- Resuscitating Unhu for Zimbabwe and the global village.

It is only when each and every Zimbabwean can read, write and understand and communicate effectively, that Zimbabwe can begin to enjoy the fruits of literacy. Now is the time to design and support a literacy enhancing curriculum which underpins basic, functional and high proficiency literacy. To achieve sustainable economic development positively correlating with literacy, Zimbabwe should move beyond the basic definition of literacy.

## Recommendations

- A close working relationship between parents and teachers in the actual learning of the child through home schooling and utilising e-learning strategies is encouraged.
- A developmental youth national service to expose the youth to various forms/dimensions of literacy through working for organisations operating in various fields and holiday camps should be introduced.
- Business start-up programmes should be introduced in the education system.
- On-line Tertiary study programmes should be increased.

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