

TRADITIONAL LITERACY FOCUS: INCORPORATING VOCATIONAL SKILLS ACQUISITION FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the shift from a traditional literacy focus to the integration of vocational skills acquisition as a strategy for empowering adult learners in Nigeria. It argues that literacy alone is insufficient in addressing the economic realities of learners, and that combining basic education with practical, income-generating skills offers greater opportunities for self-reliance and poverty reduction. The discussion highlights approaches such as curriculum innovation, policy support, community engagement, and facilitator training, while also noting challenges like limited infrastructure and inadequate public awareness. Recommendations include aligning training with labor market needs, strengthening institutional capacity, and fostering partnerships among stakeholders. By transforming adult literacy centers into platforms for both literacy and livelihood development, Nigeria can enhance inclusive growth and align adult education with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: adult literacy, vocational skills, economic empowerment, Nigeria, sustainable development.

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Introduction

For decades, adult literacy programmes in Nigeria have largely focused on teaching participants to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic. While these skills are valuable for personal growth and civic participation, they often fail to address the pressing economic challenges adult learners face. Many beneficiaries of traditional literacy classes are unable to secure sustainable income because the knowledge acquired is not directly linked to employable or entrepreneurial competencies. In other words, literacy alone, without practical application, does not translate into empowerment or improved living conditions (Deekor & Emanerame, 2021; Usman, 2023).

Recent scholarship and policy reviews have drawn attention to this gap. Evidence from Delta State shows that adult learners who received vocational training alongside literacy instruction reported improved self-reliance and reduced poverty levels compared to those who only acquired literacy skills (Deekor & Emanerame, 2021). Similarly, studies of functional and digital literacy argue that literacy becomes truly transformative when it is connected to workplace tasks, small-scale enterprises, or local market demands (Elyakubu, 2024; Ojobanikan, 2024). These findings underscore the need to rethink adult literacy not just as a cognitive achievement but as a foundation for livelihood opportunities.

Policy bodies such as the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) also recognize vocational education and work-related literacy as essential elements of non-formal education in Nigeria. However, implementation is still hampered by challenges such as limited infrastructure, inadequate facilitator training, and insufficient funding (NMEC, 2022; Ojobanikan, 2024). Overcoming these barriers requires curriculum innovation, strong institutional support, and partnerships that connect literacy centres with industries, small businesses, and local communities.

Integrating vocational skills acquisition into adult literacy centres is therefore both timely and necessary. By combining literacy with training in trades, entrepreneurship, or digital skills, adult learners are better positioned to generate income, support their families, and contribute to community development. This dual approach not only enhances empowerment but also aligns with Nigeria's national development priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Conceptual Clarification of Traditional Literacy and Expected Skills Acquisition

Traditional literacy has long been conceived in narrow terms as the ability to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic. Within adult education, these competencies enable learners to navigate essential daily tasks such as reading signs and instructions, completing forms, following written directions, and conducting simple financial transactions. While these capabilities form the basis for civic participation and individual autonomy, they often fall short of producing sustainable livelihoods or economic resilience for adults confronted with unstable labour markets. This limitation is frequently highlighted in contemporary adult education research and policy discussions (Aderinoye & Ojo, 2020; World Bank, 2023).

In recent years, the concept of functional or work-related literacy has gained prominence. Functional literacy reframes reading, writing, and numeracy as tools for solving real-world problems and supporting livelihood activities. For example, reading prescriptions in health awareness programmes, calculating measurements for tailoring, or applying numeracy in market transactions exemplify this approach. When literacy instruction is contextualized around every day economic practices, it becomes more relevant and transferable to occupational and entrepreneurial settings. Nigerian policy analysts and researchers have therefore emphasized this model as a way to make literacy more impactful for adult learners (Eze & Nwosu, 2022; Onwu & Tunde, 2023).

“Skills acquisition” refers to the deliberate learning of practical and technical abilities that enable productive engagement in specific economic activities. Such skills may include traditional trades like tailoring, carpentry, and food processing, as well as modern competencies such as digital literacy, electronic payments, and small-business management.

In Nigeria, policy discourse increasingly promotes the integration of literacy education with vocational training. The National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) advocates a shift towards “functional literacy” that links non-formal education to livelihoods and community development (NMEC, 2022). However, persistent challenges hinder this transition, including inadequate funding, scarcity of relevant instructional materials, and a shortage of skilled facilitators (Ogunleye & Akinyemi, 2024). Bridging this gap between policy and implementation is essential for adult literacy programmes to contribute effectively to economic empowerment and social inclusion.

Empirical studies in Nigeria support the view that combining literacy and vocational education produces better socio-economic outcomes than literacy alone. Research conducted across Delta, Kaduna, and Kwara States demonstrates that participants in integrated literacy skills programmes particularly women and artisans report higher levels of income, self-confidence, and decision-making power (Okafor, 2023; Bello & Danjuma, 2024). These findings underscore the argument that literacy must be embedded within broader livelihood training if adult education is to drive poverty reduction and inclusive growth.

Globally, this orientation aligns with UNESCO's Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 5), which urges nations to design adult learning systems that respond to learners' socio-economic needs and the demands of changing labour markets (UNESCO, 2022). The report stresses that literacy and vocational education should not be treated as parallel but as interconnected components of lifelong learning.

Consequently, the distinction between literacy and skills acquisition should be understood as complementary rather than separate learning pathways. A practical model for adult literacy centres would embed basic reading, writing, and numeracy instruction directly into vocational modules such as using numeracy for measuring materials in tailoring, or reading comprehension for following recipes in catering. This integrated model shortens the distance between classroom learning and income generation, enhances learner motivation, and enables more holistic assessment of outcomes, where both literacy competence and demonstrable vocational ability are indicators of success.

The Challenges of Modern Existence and the Need to Move beyond Traditional Literacy in Nigeria

The social and economic realities of the twenty-first century have rendered traditional notions of literacy inadequate for adult empowerment. In Nigeria, as in many developing countries, literacy has historically been defined in narrow terms the ability to read, write, and perform basic numeracy. While these skills remain essential, they no longer guarantee social mobility or economic stability. The demands of modern life require a broader set of competences that combine literacy with technical, entrepreneurial, and digital abilities.

One of the most pressing challenges is the persistent problem of unemployment and underemployment. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), a significant proportion of literate adults remain jobless because literacy alone does not equip them with marketable skills. This situation is particularly visible in urban areas, where competition for formal jobs is intense, and in rural settings, where livelihoods are tied to practical trades and agriculture. As a result, individuals who acquire only traditional literacy skills are often unable to translate their learning into improved living standards.

Globalization and technological advancement have further exposed the limitations of conventional literacy. In today's interconnected world, the ability to communicate, innovate, and adapt is closely tied to vocational and digital competences. For instance, small-scale farmers and traders increasingly rely on mobile technologies for market information, financial transactions, and networking. Without exposure to such skills, adult learners risk being excluded from economic participation, thereby widening the poverty gap (Usman, 2023).

In addition, modern economies place a premium on entrepreneurship and self-reliance. Yet many adult literacy programmes in Nigeria remain theoretical in orientation, failing to integrate vocational or entrepreneurial content that can translate literacy into income-generating ventures. This mismatch between literacy provision and labour market needs weakens the impact of adult education on poverty reduction and sustainable development (Olasinde, Sholagberu, & Sanni, 2025).

Furthermore, the rise of digital technology presents new challenges for adults who were not previously exposed to information and communication technology. In a world where banking, business, healthcare, and even agriculture are increasingly digitised, the absence of digital literacy creates a form of exclusion as severe as illiteracy itself (Elyakubu, 2024). Thus, traditional literacy, while necessary, is insufficient for empowering adults to thrive in rapidly changing societies.

The cumulative effect of these challenges underscores the urgent need to move beyond traditional literacy in Nigeria. By embedding vocational and entrepreneurial skills, as well as digital literacy, into adult learning programmes, literacy centres can become platforms not only for academic learning but also for practical empowerment. Such a shift is vital for ensuring that adult learners are not left behind in the pursuit of national development and the Sustainable Development Goals

The Necessity of Incorporating Vocational Skills Acquisition in Literacy Centres in Nigeria

Adult literacy centres in Nigeria have traditionally focused on teaching learners how to read, write, and carry out basic arithmetic. While these foundational skills are important, evidence increasingly shows that literacy, when pursued in isolation, is insufficient to meet the pressing socio-economic needs of adult learners. For literacy to be meaningful and transformative, it must be tied to skills that directly improve livelihood opportunities. This makes the incorporation of vocational skills acquisition in literacy centres not merely an option, but a necessity.

A major reason for this necessity is the persistent challenge of poverty and unemployment. Despite numerous adult literacy initiatives, many graduates of literacy centres remain unable to secure jobs or generate sustainable income. Functional literacy without complementary vocational skills often results in “paper literacy” that does not translate into empowerment (Deekor & Emanerame, 2021). By integrating skills such as tailoring, carpentry, catering, information and communication technology (ICT), and small-scale agriculture, literacy centres can provide learners with competencies that are directly linked to income generation.

Another reason lies in the growing mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market demands. The Nigerian economy is increasingly driven by practical, entrepreneurial, and digital skills, yet many literacy programmes continue to offer only academic-oriented instruction. As Olasinde, Sholagberu, and Sanni (2025) note, literacy programmes that incorporate entrepreneurship training enable artisans to expand their businesses and improve their economic standing. Without this integration, literacy centres risk producing learners who are literate in theory but economically disempowered in practice.

Vocational training within literacy centres is also necessary for promoting gender equity and social inclusion. Women, in particular, benefit from skills that allow them to start micro-

enterprises, improve household income, and gain decision-making power within their families and communities. Evidence from rural Delta State shows that when women combined literacy with vocational learning, they became more self-reliant and played a stronger role in community development (Deekor & Emanerame, 2021). Thus, vocationally integrated literacy programmes can serve as a powerful tool for addressing gender inequalities and empowering marginalized groups.

Furthermore, the inclusion of vocational skills supports Nigeria's pursuit of sustainable development and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). By equipping adult learners with both literacy and employable skills, Nigeria can strengthen its human capital, reduce dependency on formal employment, and encourage community-based entrepreneurship. This dual approach transforms literacy centres into platforms for inclusive national development rather than narrow educational outlets.

How the Incorporation of Vocational Skills Acquisition Can Help Empower Adult Learners in Literacy Centres in Nigeria

Integrating vocational skills acquisition into literacy centres holds transformative potential for adult learners in Nigeria. While basic literacy provides individuals with essential abilities in reading, writing, and numeracy, true empowerment in today's dynamic society demands more than these foundational competencies. Empowerment encompasses the capacity to engage meaningfully in economic, social, and civic activities.

Economic Empowerment through Livelihood Opportunities

Vocational training empowers adult learners primarily by fostering self-reliance and economic independence. Skills such as tailoring, catering, carpentry, agro-processing, and digital marketing enable learners to establish small-scale businesses or secure employment within their local environments. When entrepreneurship education is incorporated into literacy programmes, learners are not only able to practise these trades but also manage them as viable and sustainable enterprises. According to Olasinde, Sholagberu, and Sanni (2025), functional literacy combined with vocational competencies enhances artisans' earning capacities and contributes significantly to household income.

Social Empowerment and Gender Inclusion

The integration of vocational skills also advances social empowerment, especially for women and other marginalised groups. In many Nigerian communities, women who acquire both literacy and vocational skills gain the confidence and capacity to support their families, participate in community decision-making, and reduce dependence on male breadwinners. A study conducted in Delta State found that women who engaged in dual literacy vocational programmes improved their socio-economic standing, developed greater self-confidence, and became more active contributors to community development (Deekor & Emanerame, 2021). Consequently, literacy centres serve not only as places of academic learning but also as platforms for gender equality and social transformation.

Improved Employability in a Changing Economy

Nigeria's evolving labour market increasingly demands workers with adaptable and market-relevant skills. Basic literacy without vocational training offers limited preparation for such an environment. However, integrating literacy with training in technical trades, information and communication technology (ICT), and entrepreneurship enhances employability and equips learners to navigate emerging opportunities. This approach resonates with the global movement towards lifelong learning, in which individuals continuously acquire new knowledge and skills to remain productive and competitive (Elyakubu, 2024).

Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Empowering adult learners through vocationally oriented literacy centres aligns with Nigeria's commitment to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, it contributes to SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). By producing literate and skilled individuals capable of sustaining their livelihoods, literacy centres help to reduce poverty, promote inclusive economic growth, and strengthen community resilience (Usman, 2023).

Strengthening Community Development

Beyond individual advancement, literacy programmes that incorporate vocational training generate broader community benefits. Graduates frequently share their newly acquired knowledge with others, form cooperative groups, or create employment opportunities within their communities. This ripple effect enhances social cohesion, encourages civic participation, and drives local economic development. Communities with active vocational literacy initiatives tend to experience improved living standards and greater resistance to economic challenges.

Incorporating vocational skills acquisition into literacy centres redefines adult education as a holistic instrument for empowerment and sustainable development. By providing learners with both literacy and practical skills, Nigeria can cultivate a generation of self-reliant citizens who contribute meaningfully to national growth, improve their socio-economic circumstances, and help to eradicate poverty.

Strategies for Incorporating Vocational Skills Acquisition in Adult Literacy Centres in Nigeria

Integrating vocational skills into literacy centres requires a deliberate combination of policy action, curriculum innovation, and strong community participation. While literacy provides adults with the foundation for communication and comprehension, skills acquisition transforms those abilities into practical tools for self-reliance and economic engagement. To achieve this integration effectively in Nigeria, several interrelated strategies can be considered.

Curriculum Innovation and Flexibility: The existing literacy curriculum should be redesigned to include both theoretical and practical components that reflect learners' socio-economic realities. Instead of focusing solely on reading and writing, centres can introduce modules in tailoring, agriculture, crafts, catering, carpentry, and digital literacy. The flexibility of the curriculum is important so that learners can acquire skills relevant to local economic opportunities. Embedding entrepreneurship training within these modules ensures

that learners can not only perform the skills but also manage them as viable business ventures.

Most literacy facilitators in Nigeria are trained to deliver reading and numeracy but lack Capacity Building for Instructors/expertise in vocational instruction. Continuous professional development and training-of-trainers programmes are therefore crucial. Partnering with technical colleges, polytechnics, and NGOs can provide facilitators with the competence to deliver practical lessons alongside literacy. This ensures that facilitators can guide learners in both cognitive and hands-on skill domains.

Strengthening Policy and Institutional Support: A strong policy framework is necessary to sustain the integration of vocational education in literacy centres. The National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) can mandate a dual-track curriculum that gives equal weight to literacy and skills training. Government agencies should also develop monitoring mechanisms to ensure proper implementation, while allocating specific funding for training materials, tools, and workshop equipment.

Adequate Funding and Resource Provision: Many literacy centres in Nigeria operate with limited or irregular funding, making skill-based training difficult. Sustainable financing can be achieved through a mix of government subventions, donor assistance, and private sector partnerships. Establishing community-based production units within centres can also generate revenue, as learners can produce and sell goods while still undergoing training.

Community and Stakeholder Engagement: Literacy centres thrive best when they are rooted in the needs of the local community. Engaging local leaders, artisans, women's groups, and cooperatives ensures that the skills taught are directly relevant to community demands. Partnerships with industries, small businesses, and professional associations can also create apprenticeship opportunities and pathways for learners to transition from training to employment or entrepreneurship.

Integration of Technology and Digital Skills: In the 21st century, vocational training cannot exclude digital literacy. Even in rural areas, knowledge of mobile phone applications, e-marketing, and digital financial services is critical. Literacy centres should therefore introduce ICT modules to prepare learners for modern business environments, enabling them to market products, manage finances, and access online resources.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Sustainability Mechanisms: Finally, strategies must include clear systems for assessing learner outcomes and the long-term impact of training. Indicators such as employment rates, number of small businesses created, and improvement in household income can be used to evaluate success. Sustainability can be enhanced by creating learner cooperatives, where graduates of literacy centres continue to support one another in skill development and enterprise growth.

By pursuing these strategies, literacy centres in Nigeria can shift from being purely educational platforms to becoming catalysts of economic empowerment. Such a transformation would not only uplift adult learners but also contribute to poverty reduction, local development, and the attainment of national education and development goals.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that while traditional literacy remains fundamental, it is no longer sufficient in addressing the socio-economic realities of adult learners in Nigeria. Literacy that is divorced from practical skills does little to promote empowerment, self-reliance, or poverty reduction. By embedding vocational skills acquisition into literacy

centres, adult learners gain the dual advantage of functional literacy and employable competencies, enabling them to participate more actively in economic, social, and civic life. Evidence from both Nigerian and international contexts underscores that such integration strengthens livelihood opportunities, enhances gender equity, promotes community development, and aligns adult education with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, transforming literacy centres into hubs of both education and livelihood development is not only desirable but essential for sustainable national growth.

Recommendations

Curriculum Reform: The national adult literacy curriculum should be redesigned to integrate vocational and entrepreneurial training with literacy modules. Practical examples such as tailoring, catering, ICT, agro-processing, and digital marketing should be embedded into literacy lessons.

Capacity Building: Facilitators should be trained not only in literacy delivery but also in vocational instruction, entrepreneurship, and the use of digital technologies. Partnerships with polytechnics, technical colleges, and NGOs can strengthen capacity.

Policy and Institutional Support: The National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) should institutionalize a dual-track literacy–vocational model, backed by effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Adequate Funding: Government and development partners should provide sustainable financing for tools, training materials, and workshops. Public private partnerships can be explored to ensure resource availability.

Community Engagement: Local leaders, artisans, women’s groups, and cooperatives should be involved in identifying skills most relevant to their communities to ensure that literacy programmes remain contextually relevant.

Integration of ICT: Digital literacy should be mainstreamed into all literacy and vocational programmes to prepare adult learners for the realities of a technology-driven economy.

Monitoring and Sustainability: Impact assessment should focus not only on literacy proficiency but also on employability, income generation, and social empowerment. Graduates’ cooperatives and production units within literacy centres should be encouraged to sustain outcomes.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can reposition adult literacy centres as transformative platforms that empower individuals, strengthen communities, and drive sustainable development.

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