

## **Revitalizing the Teaching of Reading in Nigerian Schools**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines English language pedagogy in Nigeria in relation to reading culture among students. The main thrust of the paper is the imperatives of reading in the intellectual life of students for social political and economic growth of not only the students but the nation at large. The concept of reading was explored along with its importance especially as it relates to students' continued pursuit of education. Factors affecting effective reading culture were carefully discussed and suggestions were made to improve the reading culture of students. The paper thus, contends that in order to inculcate the habit of reading in the minds of learners certain measures that make demands on the government, parents, the school, teachers, society and students themselves must be readily taken.*

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### **Introduction**

Education is generally believed to be a means of helping the individual to become a useful to himself and to his society. Quality education is the most powerful instrument for social progress and remains the greatest power yet known to man for his development (Njoku, 2005). Every society needs to be literate for social, economic, political and all-round development. To achieve this, each society must reach a stage where reading becomes a totally self-directed pleasurable activity fully internalised as a habit. The importance of this prompted the writers to examine the factors militating against effective reading culture among students in Nigeria with a view to providing possible solutions to tackle them. This is because students nowadays read only on the eve of examinations. It is no longer a part of daily learning or even a hobby to enjoy at leisure time.

## **English Language in Nigeria**

From pre-independence to post-independence and to-date, the English Language plays a vital role in the education of the Nigerian child. The language has gained prominence over and above the often times estimated 400 indigenous languages in the nation. This gave rise to increasing interest in the language which is owing to the fact that English, apart from being a school subject, is the medium of instruction at all levels above the lower basic in the educational system of the country. This throne or position occupied by English Language makes it a pre-requisite for students' continued growth and development education wise. Mastery of the language to a large extent can be a determinant of the academic achievement of Nigerian learners. With this all important and noble role played by the English Language in the country, one would expect that its teaching and learning process would be hitch-free consequent upon the fact that it has links to student's performance in English oriented subjects on the school curriculum. Far from this, the language is still battling with serious challenges too numerous to mention in this discourse. These however, range from funding, scarcity of qualified teachers, inadequate facilities, poor and unstable foundation at the lower level, poor teacher-education programme to insufficient instructional materials among others. These and other related problems are obstacles to gaining proficiency in the language necessary for students to excel not only in the language but also in their different courses/subjects.

The scenario painted of English Language learning in Nigeria leaves so much to be desired that scholars often make comments and observations. (Akere 1995, Eguare, 2008) believed that the situation is quite desperate. Akere (1995: 196) for instance observed that "students have so much difficulty with their communicative skills in English that they cannot function effectively in their academic use of English". Such is the situation of English Language in Nigeria decades after independence.

## **The Nature of Reading**

There are four language skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these four, reading stands out as a basic language skill, the mastery of which enhances other language skills and promotes the acquisition of knowledge. What then is reading? Reading has attracted several definitions from scholars viewing it from various angles. Eguare (2008: 133) views reading to be thinking. Of course reading involves the ability to use thinking skills but there are other skills that involve the use of thinking too. Ahmad (2004: 285), sees reading "as a complex language processing behaviour that entails interpreting or getting meaning from written or printed materials. This has brought closer the concept of reading because reading involves extracting meaning from text. Other scholars have taken

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reading beyond extraction of meaning to include “meaning negotiation, meaning making, meaning construction and meaning reconstruction” (Onukaogu, 2002). From the foregoing, it could be seen that reading is one area that is oftentimes problematic and complex to define not only for the students but also for the teachers themselves. The complexity of reading dwells on the involvement of not only the eyes but the mind too. To crown this, the nature of reading process is still not generally understood in Nigeria. In most Nigerian schools, reading is taught in the context of English Language teaching. This is evidenced by the absence of reading on school general time-table. The common assumption is that children learn to read in the course of schooling. That is to say reading is “caught” and not “taught” (Oyetunde & Muodumogu, 1999: 16). The truth of the matter is that the place of reading in the academic life of the learner makes demands for a befitting position in the academic calendar.

### **Imperatives of Reading among Students**

Reading is imperative for the acquisition and use of knowledge especially in today’s knowledge driven society. Knowledge is said to be power, the key to which is reading. Ahmad (2008: 146) is of the opinion that reading is one of the most important means of expanding the student’s experience of language. Where there is little reading there will be little language learning”. This will in turn have negative effect on students’ academic performance in almost all English language oriented courses thereby slowing down the nation’s growth socially, politically and economically. This is because reading offers the reader more access and use of vast quantity of information to meet with the challenges in the larger society. Okonkwo (2004: 34) supported this assertion and noted that:

...apart from the print medium, which is the most easily readily and widely available source of information, others such as the electronic media, for example, the television and the internet require that the user be literate. This is why competence in the skill of reading is of utmost importance.

The point raised above goes to show that there is no limit to the amount or volume of knowledge an individual can have courtesy of reading. Reading provides one with an unrestricted source of information. The students intellectual horizon is widen through reading. Suffice it to state here that professional competence depends largely on reading culture as it is quite a herculean task to think of any skilled job that does not entails ability to read.

Students at various levels require the skill of reading to excel not only in gaining proficiency in English language but also in other English-driven subjects. Reading improves students' general mental development and is a catalyst for intellectual growth. The skill is required not only for passing examinations at regular intervals but it is a skill that need to be made second nature because on daily basis, consciously or unconsciously we read writings, materials in form of books, journals, magazines, newspapers, letters, notes, text messages, signposts, prescriptions, labels, currency notes, e-mails, bills, etc. In fact, it would not sound outrageous to state that inability to read in any language makes the individual out of place in today's world. Reading voraciously edifies the reader to the beauty and intricacies of life. To the students however, it is the "key" to academic excellence.

### **Factors Affecting Reading Culture among students**

Several scholars have examined factors affecting effective reading culture among students in Nigeria. For instance, Oyetunde & Muodumogu (1999:16) identified "ignorance of what reading is, inadequate preparation of teachers and poor methodology to be the reasons for a widespread reading failure in schools. Another scholar Eguare (2008: 136) measured these factors in the light of misconception about the teaching of reading. These misconceptions that hinder efficient teaching and learning of reading are:

- that reading is the academic business of primary school.
- that content area reading is different form subject matter reading.
- that remedial work alone is enough to meet the needs for reading, hence sidetracking developmental reading.
- that the teaching of reading should be left for the English teacher alone.
- that reading and the teaching of literature are the same thing.

These misconceptions need to be eliminated for enhanced learning of the skill of reading especially among students of post-primary schools who would undoubtedly require it for the continued pursuance of knowledge even beyond academic walls. For our discourse however, we would look at these factors under the following sub-headings:

**The learner's Social Background:** The social and educational background of the learner can promote or hinder effective reading habit of the students. Students need to be motivated by both the parents and the larger society. Unfortunately, most homes are not providing a good literate model Muodumogu & Oyetunde (2004: 65). The number of books at the disposal of the child at home can boast his/her morale towards reading, thus providing the rudimentary basis upon which the school can build. It is pertinent for parents to create time to read for their

wards or encourage them to read at their leisure time. It is disheartening to note here that most parents are not literate themselves to provide a levelled ground for a good start to their children at an early stage. The few literate ones are often time pre-occupied with job related stress to cope with such seemingly English language teachers' main business.

**The school:** The school is the ideal place where students are expected to be exposed to the techniques of reading. For a function-oriented reading habit, the school environment must be equipped with such facilities as library, well-stocked with up-to-date reading materials for all the students across the range and level of reading readiness. In terms of space, convenience and the quietness needed for enjoying reading, most classrooms are over-crowded. It is not unusual to find students cramped into classrooms meant for half the number. Frank (2004: 78) observed that under such circumstances, it is difficult to sustain students' interest in reading which requires a lot of concentration. In such scenario the teacher is most of the period struggling to get their attention and invariably not much is achieved. The absence of reading on school time table has made matters even worse than it really was. To crown it all, English language is now merged with literature in English as a single subject further reducing the students' chances and access to proficient reading. This will definitely have adverse effects on students' reading culture and by extension their social political and economic progress.

**The Teacher:** Poor teaching style on the part of the teacher can deter effective reading in the students. Choice of reading materials (books) by teachers is sometimes unsuitable as some are heavily loaded with high vocabularies very difficult to comprehend and often times laded with complex grammatical forms. The teacher needs to be a good model himself for him to inculcate the habit of reading in his students. It is not uncommon for teachers to ask students to summarize a topic and/or underline the topic sentence when he/she did not provide the necessary information needed to pursue the task in this regard.

**The Learner:** Interest in reading by the learner can positively affect the learner's ability to read and by extension improve his academic performance. The number of books the student reads, his hobbies his concentration in the text and his general attitude can influence his reading skill. The influence of peer group can to a large extent affects the student's interest in reading. Some students don't read without being prompted in a research carried out by Oyetunde & Muodumogu (2004: 7), it was found out that as high as 67% of the teachers said their students could not read without being prompted. In this connection, Frank (2004: 74), observed that "if language mastery must go beyond ability to absorb and memorize, students must be sufficiently interested in the language to read outside the class text".

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## **Way Forward**

In order to enhance reading among students for self and societal development socially, economically and politically, the students must be exposed to meaningful reading tasks. There should be adequate explanation of what reading is, how to read, best time to read, where to read, what best to read and reasons to read. Students should be encouraged to learn to read and learn through reading. The pivotal role played by both intensive and extensive reading at improving reading rate should never be toyed with. Motivation plays a key role in reading especially among students, thus an effective teacher can organize competitions in the area of faster reading, analysis of texts read, giving reports and summary of texts read, organizing reading week and or reading club. Reading should also lead to learning of other language skills of writing, speaking and listening in an integrative passion. In addition reading strategies should be made known to students to employ appropriate techniques to accomplish different reading tasks. This is because

.....a proficient reader is endowed with the knowledge of different sub-skills of reading for specific information, predicting outcomes, confirming predictions, identifying different discourse organizations, reading for inferences, interpretation, vocabulary development, critical evaluation, literary appreciation, and so on...  
Olaofe, (2013: 57)

Therefore, it is pertinent to enlighten students with the knowledge of these skills; scanning, skimming, intensive and extensive reading, silent and reading aloud each unique in its approach to reading tasks. Students should endeavour to read voraciously, and should see reading as a pleasurable activity gainfully employed not only for examination purposes but also for leisure.

## **Conclusion**

English Language teaching has witnessed tremendous achievements but is still faced with obstacles militating against its effective teaching and learning. The language being the medium used for educating people at various levels and sectors of the Nigerian nation need to be given a boost to ensure its mastery by students. Thus, the paper examined the imperatives of reading and some of the factors serving as impediments towards effective reading culture among students. These obstacles however must be eliminated to ensure a literate society whose greater majority of citizens can read beyond the lines.

## **Suggestions**

The home as well as the society must endeavour to encourage the students to read regularly. This they can do by establishing self-help library projects to encourage both intensive and extensive reading among students.

The Ministries of Education should build more schools, classrooms and libraries well-equipped with up-to-date reading materials.

More qualified staff should be employed to handle English language (by extension teaching reading).

English language teachers must be allowed to go to refresher courses, seminars, workshops, etc to acquaint themselves with current trends in language/pedagogy.

Content area teachers should endeavour to encourage their students to read i.e teaching reading across the curriculum.

Reading competitions (both within and outside the school) should be encouraged to give rise to increasing interest in the language through collaborative efforts of teachers and the school administrators.

Reading (library) period should be allocated on the school time-table.

Reading clubs and association should be formed by the school where students would be enjoined to have membership.

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