Using Reading Comprehension Strategies to enhance Students' Reading Proficiency in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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Abstract. Reading is an active developmental process in which the reader constructs meaning by using information from the text as well as his prior or background knowledge. It is also the ability to make sense of the content of what is read from print. Reading comprehension is a basic tool that enables an individual, particularly students meet the reading demands of their academic discipline. To be able to attain proficiency in one's area of work, one needs reading skills in general and specific knowledge, which keeps one sharp, smart and alert. Researchers have proven that good readers are more productive and efficient than poor readers. Reading is a booster to self- esteem and intelligence and helps one to have firm grips of life and circumstances. It is therefore very imperative for readers particularly students to be strategic in their reading comprehension to enable them attain the level of desired proficiency. This work considered the concepts of reading, causes of poor reading, importance of reading, and reading strategies such as Literary Awareness Program (LAP), News on the Board (NOB), and Language Experience Approach (LEA) at the lower level. At the higher or secondary school level. Strategies such as skimming, scanning, speed reading and a host of others are used to enhance reading comprehension among Nigerian secondary schools students

1. Introduction

Reading is a very indispensable skill at every level of learning in school and even outside the school. At school reading is carried out irrespective of the subject area, be it in the arts or sciences. In job carriers, reading is carried to enhance the level of productivity. Using different strategies at the educational sector is therefore very imperative in reading.

2. Concept of Reading

According to reading experts, reading is considered the most problematic skill among the four language skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Several researchers have given different definitions of reading and its importance in the area of communication. Nwogu and Nwoke (2010) defined reading as the ability to follow printed or written sequence rapidly for comprehension usually silently, while the eye scans whole groups of words or sentences at a time. Reading is a meaning-searching and meaning-getting activity. The reader is never passive; he is actively constructing information, making use of textual cues in conjunction with the information about language, content of text and knowledge of the world generally stored in his head. This

shows the fact that the reader is a contributor to what he reads as he makes use of the information he has prior to the reading exercise. (Ezeomah, Akpan, & Oyetunde, 1999).

Russell (2013) sees reading as the act of identifying symbols and obtaining meaning from it. The written symbols are used to form words and sentences, which are in turn expected to represent certain information or intention. Reading involves skill in the visual recognition of words and the comprehension of their contents. Nwogu & Nwoke (2010).

Reading is one of the language skills that pose problems to both teachers and students, as great majority of them are failing to learn to read, and many more are unable to read to learn Umolu (1997). Bunza (1997) warned that, 'There are many children at risk and unless we come to their rescue, the age of darkness might recur.' The problem is compounded by teachers' ignorance of what reading is, inadequate preparation by teachers, and poor methodology, and students' apathy to reading. In the lager society, reading level is very low in spite of increasing volumes of materials that surface everyday begging for reading. Ausbeth (2006) revealed that the reading rate of Nigerians is very poor and this affects zealous writers negatively.

Reading ability increases in importance as the society become complex and industrialized. The more technology advances, the more occupation require high levels of education or specialized training in which good reading ability is vital. Many graduates are unemployable today because they do not possess the minimum reading skills required for success in job-training programs. Few realize the level of reading competence they need in various occupations to be able to earn a living. Students who fail to read adequately, are increasingly handicapped as they progress in school. Some of them repeat the same classes while others end up being dropouts without graduation. The effect is the inability to secure gainful desirable employment. To avoid loss of self-esteem and permanent welfare status therefore, reading proficiency is very paramount.

To a large extent those who cannot read, or choose not to read, are cut off from cultural activities and find it difficult to associate with educated people. Reading therefore fulfils emotional and spiritual needs of individuals. According to Oyetunde (2000), there are overwhelming signs that the school system is failing in its critical role of developing efficient reading skills in children. Research evidence as well as the experience of many parents and teachers, show that an appalling high proportion of primary and secondary school children are either outright illiterates or semi-illiterates. Since it is impossible for many of such students to cope with the reading demands of the school curriculum, they drop out and relapse into illiteracy.

3. Causes of Poor Reading

Many reasons are attributed to poor reading or lack of reading comprehension. Some of these reasons are given by Lawal, Abanihe and Ohua (2004) as follows: poor foundations at the early stage of education, lack of reading texts, poor reading environment, certificate-oriented system, general lack of interest as a result of political gains, preference for home video and leisure to the boring stationary reading orientation. Others are the advent of social media such as text messages, twitter, Instagram, Facebook and a host of others. The above reasons have contributed one way or the other to poor reading mostly among students and the end result is the abysmal poor performance of students in examinations.

4. Importance of Using Strategeis in Reading Comprehension

The importance of reading to both adult and students cannot be overemphasised. Reading is important to students because they need it to pass their examinations. Adults also need reading in order to perform creditably well in their jobs. Proficient readers constantly make predictions while reading and they continuously anticipate what will come next. Their prior knowledge and experience with texts as well as with the world around them allow them to do this. It is this continuous interactions with the

text that allows readers to make sense of what they are reading (Zare,2012; Zare & Othman, 2013).

For students to be proficient in their reading comprehension, they need to make use of their metagonitive strategies with the different types of reading which includes; intensive reading, extensive reading, scanning, skimming, speed reading silent reading to mention just a few, at the advanced reading level. However, at the lower level, strategies such as Language Experience Approach (LEA), Literary Awareness Program (LAP), News on the Board (NOB), Story-telling, News sharing to mention just a few, can be used for beginning readers to build their reading foundations. Making use of metacognitive strategies is very paramount in reading as it helps the readers to plan, monitor and regulate their reading activities. The knowledge and use of metacognitive strategies at every level of reading also helps the readers to predict, question and evaluate their reading achievement. The reading strategies at the lower levels that can be used by beginning readers as advocated by Oyetunde and Aboki, (1998) are: the Language Experience Approach (LEA), Literary Awareness Approach (LAP) and News on the Board Approach (NOB).

4.1 The Language Experience Approach

This approach is used to encourage learners to narrate their experiences or stories while the teacher writes it on the chalkboard. The teacher needs to be careful with the use of his vocabulary and sentence construction so as to carry the learners along. The story is read to the learners as narrated and written. It helps the learners to own the story and to associate words with letter which eventually improves reading.

4.2 Literary Awareness Program (LAP)

This is a language method that is used to enhance reading at the lower reading level by involving an adult to read interesting stories aloud to children every day. LAP helps to extend both the experience and language backgrounds of the children and introduces children to book language. It leads to improvement in children's listening and speaking skills.

4.3 News on the Board (NOB)

News on the Board is another strategy that is used to teach beginning readers as the teacher asks the children to share their news experiences in the class, while he writes some of the news on the board and reads it with the children.

4.4 Literary Experience Approach (LEA)

This is similar to News on the Board except that the stories the children dictate follow some particular theme or order. In this approach, children are encouraged to talk about their interests and experiences.
At the higher level of reading, strategies such as skimming, scanning, speed reading, silent reading are used to build student's reading comprehension.

4.5 Skimming

Reading to identify the main points of text is regarded as skimming. This means paying close attention to items that form the substance to the text. If the main team is located by the reader, he can easily skim further to locate the sub-team. Skimming may be done by previewing or overviewing a text for general information. During the process of preview, the reader finds out whether the text is an authentic source of knowledge in the area of reading and if it contains the information that he needs. For the student to discover the purpose and scope of what he reads, he needs to preview the text. On the other hand, if he wants to get the general idea of the reading material, he needs to survey it.

4.6 Scanning

Scanning means quickly glancing or searching through a piece of reading material for a specific information. It can be used as means of finding a name, date or meaning of a word in the dictionary to find an answer to a question in a text. It takes deliberate efforts of practice for one to get the skill of scanning. To get at the needed information, there is need to make use of the eyes quickly moving it to identify the clues and reading the clues for the needed information. To

carryout appropriate scanning, the teacher may involve the students in the following skills: a proper mental attitude, concentration, a purposeful thought, close attention to printed page and awareness of time limit.

4.7 Speed Reading

According to Aliyu (2010), speed reading is carried out by making great use of expanded eye span or sweep of the eyes with the aim of going over the reading material at a great speed. The material may range from novel, newspaper magazine or journal. Speed reading depends on the purpose of reading and the types of material to be read. It may be used to obtain gist of the main information in a text, while the reader may only slow down when a particular point of interest is observed. The skill can be used in scanning when reading for a particular piece of information.

To perfect training in speed reading, the teacher should drill the students in different kinds of texts, while the reader is timed when reading and his comprehension ability is observed.

5. The Importance of Comprehension

Reading comprehension is an acquired skill that is focused on the understanding of what is read. Oxford English Dictionary (2010) defines comprehension as "the action or fact of comprehending with the mind, understanding, grasping with the mind, power of receiving and containing ideas." The dictionary of Education defines comprehension as, 'the act of understanding of the meaning of the printed or spoken language as constructed with the ability to perceive and pronounce words without reference to their meaning.'

 Well-developed comprehension abilities involve interactive strategy used to come up with a meaningful understanding of the input (Lin, 2010). Comprehension may not be exclusively devoted to input alone, it may also affect the fluency of a learner's output. Russell (2013) says, comprehension carries the understanding of words or phrases beyond recognition to the understanding of the meaning intended by the author. The level of understanding of students can be attested to through their performance in examinations as well as their linguistic competence.

Oyentude (2015) attested to the fact that many educated Nigerians cannot express themselves in writing clearly; that is in ways that are coherent, grammatical and interesting. That is why many graduates of our educational institutions are referred to as educated illiterates. (Brown, 2007, & Grabe, 2010) said, from fluency, the amalgamation of competence (one's underlying knowledge) and performance (one's overt, external actions or behaviours) can be identified as an aspect of comprehension. Above all, comprehension can be identified as an interactive, strategic process which, when fully developed, results in reading fluency and proficiency.

There are different levels of reading comprehension. Day and Park (2005) discussed reading comprehension in terms of several different types, most prominent among them are; literal, inferential and critical reading.

5.1 Literal Comprehension

Literal comprehension is the first level of comprehension. It is the simplest way of locating information in the texts due to the fact that information is clearly and directly stated in the text. Questions are directly asked to assess the students' ability to understand and identify information that are stated in a text. Chiang (2005) opined that literal questioning can vary on levels of difficulty; based on text length, the order in which the questions are asked and how they match the order of the text. The use of pronouns is also considered, since it is needed to be identified before information in the text can be understood. In applying or employing literal comprehension skill, there is no need of applying interpretation since the information is explicitly stated in the text.

5.2 Inferential or Interpretation comprehension

Inference requires learners to go a step beyond literal understanding and to combine and use their own knowledge in order to come up with answers to implicitly stated information (Day &

Park, 2005). Inferential comprehension involves teaching students to read more strategically. This is derived from the teaching model that learners develop understanding through the process of interpreting new information in light of past experiences, rethinking and past knowledge that is based on new information. Using inferential comprehension involves teaching students to read more strategically. Inferences are the conclusions that are drawn on the bases of what is known and the judgements made on given information (Scott, Bonnie, & Russell, 2002).

5.3 Critical or Evaluative comprehension

Evaluation requires a learner to have a general knowledge of the topic under examination and an understanding of the reading material in order to give judgment or opinion about the text (Day & Park, 2005).

6. **Causes of Inefficiency in Reading Comprehension**

For readers to attain proficiency and fluency in reading comprehension, they have to guide against the following reading obstacles such as vocalization, word-by-word reading, finger pointing, regression, head movement, and daydreaming.

6.1 Vocalization

Vocalization is an act of pronouncing or sounding out words when reading. Vocalization may be in different forms such as, movement of lips, whispering, and mental pronunciation. Using any or all of these habits by a reader leads to reduction of speed in reading. For fast reading to be possible, the reader needs to engage both the eyes and mind by concentrating on the task, since the eyes move faster than the lips. The reader can discipline himself/herself by holding the lips together till he/she overcomes the problem.

6.2 Word -by-Word Reading
Some readers concentrate on individual words instead of concentrating on ideas to make meanings from what is read. Reading by looking at one word at a time leads to focusing attention on words instead of sentences or paragraphs which hinders the communication of important information. To overcome such a habit, the reader needs to give attention to key words and less attention to supporting words.

6.3 Finger Pointing

This is the practice of using finger, pencil, biro, stick or ruler to point at words line by line. This is a very bad reading habits as it delays fast reading. This is bad because nothing can move faster than the eyes in reading. To overcome this habit, the reader should train the eyes to follow the words in a text rather than using any other object to point at words.

6.4 Regression

Regression is that habit of going back to re-read words or phrases again and again, it can also be referred to as back tracking. When back tracking or regression is done once in a while in the cause of reading, it may not be bad. But when it becomes a habit, it slows down reading and prevents the reader from gaining full understanding of what is read. This habit can be overcome by stopping once in a while to reflect on what has been read to be able to understand the text instead of going back to re-read words or phrases several times.

6.5 Head Movement

Head movement is a situation whereby the reader keeps moving his head from side to side instead of moving his eyes from left to right. It is a bad habit because it slows down reading and exhausts the reader easily. It takes the reader efforts to move the head as he dissipates energy. This habit can be remedied by firmly holding the head in place to stop it from moving while reading and then make use of the eyes.

6.6 Daydreaming

A daydreaming reader is someone whose mind wanders away from what he is reading. He lacks concentration and it hinders him from giving a coherent account of what he reads. A daydreaming reader wastes a lot of time on

reading thereby giving a false sense of having read as he stays long on reading. This problem can be tackled by taking note or underlining important points while reading.

7. Strategies for Attaining Reading Proficiency

For students to attain proficiency in reading, researchers have indicated that teachers need to adopt innovative teaching strategies in students' reading comprehension. Many students as well as teachers have no knowledge of metacognitive strategies and its application in reading comprehension. Muodumogu, in Ebibi (2018) evaluated students' awareness and application of metacognitive strategies to reading and found that most of the students had limited knowledge of metacognitive strategies and that maturity did not guarantee the application of metacognitive strategies. There was a further observation that readers do not spontaneously acquire metacognitive knowledge and control as they grow. They should be taught certain cognitive skills or strategies to enable them process what they read to attain proficiency in their reading comprehension. On the part of the teachers, they lack the methodology in teaching reading comprehension.

Stahl in Ebibi (2018) studied the effect of three metacognitive strategies on beginning readers engaging them with informational texts. using the five instructional practices of Survey, Correct, Read, Outline and Look-back (SCROL) which is similar to SQ4R and found that learners' comprehension of the texts was greater under the SCROL than in the control conditions. He further discovered that students were not differently affected by the treatment in the way they integrate textual information with prior knowledge. The conclusion was that, a teacher is responsible for aiding the students in pulling out deeper meaning from reading by assisting them to form mental representations from informational text, by asking questions that encourage the students to apply prior knowledge to the context of the reading and getting the students to critically think about what is going on to be able to make relevant and practical predictions.

The following strategies have been identified by reading experts to aid students in gaining proficiency in reading.
- Purpose setting
- Self-Monitoring
- SQ4R OR SQ3R
- Evaluating text
- Note taking/annotating
- Activation of prior or background knowledge

7.1 Purpose Setting

Purpose is the foundation of effective reading (Oyetunde 2015.p.2). it is very important to define the reason for reading a given material before reading. If the purpose is not defined, the reader may find it difficult to understand what he has read and much of what is read may be forgotten.
One's purpose of reading may be to gain information, verify existing knowledge, or to critique a write up. A person's purpose of reading may be for enjoyment or to enhance knowledge of what is read. A person reading poetry for enjoyment needs to recognize poetic language and devices.
Some purpose-setting questions may be helpful in guiding students. For instance, questions such as; why am I reading this book? Why did the author write this book? What new information do I expect to get from reading this book? If a student has these questions in mind and is able to answer them, he will be able to establish the purpose of his reading and will end up achieving his purpose.

7.2 Self-Monitoring

This is a strategy that helps the student to stop and think over what he reads. It is more or less a self-evaluation strategy that enables the student to test himself to know the extent of his understanding of what he has read. This can be done by summarizing what is read either orally or written. It is a way of monitoring comprehension, correcting misunderstanding and consolidating what is learnt. This system of pausing to reread to gain full understanding is a

means of relaxing the eyes and it is to the reader's advantage.

7.3 SQ4R OR SQ3R

This is used to guide the students to read a text with ease.

Survey: a text can be surveyed from the title, headings, subheadings, maps, pictures, sidebars, bold marks, italic and print before reading.
Question: the students may turn a heading or title of a text to questions and tries to answer them. This enhances understanding of what is read as the answers can only be given when the passage is understood.
Read: reading brings about enlightenment and information. It leads to answering questions correctly.
Recite: reciting enables the reader to remember what he read and it enhances comprehension.
Review: reviewing a text leads to remembering important details of a text and brings a recollection of facts.
Reflect: Reflecting of a text helps the student generate questions and gives accurate answers as well.

8. **Conclusion**

It has been established that the purpose of reading is comprehension. That is, getting meaning from print. Without comprehension, reading according to is a frustrating, pointless exercise in word calling. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that how well students develop the ability to comprehend what they read has a great effect on their entire lives. This implies that learners' acquisition of good reading comprehension skills or strategies will not only guarantee their success in their academics but will also ensure their accomplishment in their professions at adulthood.

9. **Recommendations**

It has been established that reading is problematic to both adult and students generally since many fail to learn to read, while others fail

to read to learn. To be able to learn to read, and to read to learn therefore:
- The teachers should be metacognitive to help the students have knowledge of themselves, the tasks and the strategies.
- Students should be guided by the teacher to predict, question, and evaluate their reading activities.
- They should be introduced to the different methods of reading both at the lower level as well as the higher level of reading comprehension.

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