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Adekola B. O.

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Assessing the Effectiveness of Reading Comprehension as a Tool for Functional Literacy in Nigeria Schools

Adekola B.O. Ph.D.

Department of Curriculum Studies & Instructional Technology, Faculty of Education, Olabisi
Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye

Abstract

Purpose: The study was carried out based on need to revitalize literacy in Nigeria Schools is both pressing and urgent. This is because a nation's education, economic, political, social, and religious development is dependent upon the level of literacy of its citizenry. Reading comprehension has been considered a basic tool for achieving functional literacy. This paper discusses the state of affairs of literacy in Nigeria Schools. It also enumerates the strategy for fostering functional literacy through effective reading comprehension. **Methodology:** The study explored the literature to assess the effectiveness of reading comprehension as a tool for functional literacy **Findings:** The study revealed that the reading culture of Nigerians is very poor and that most Nigerians only read to pass examinations or interviews. **Contribution:** It is emphasized that Reading comprehension should be taught as a separate and compulsory course beginning from the primary to the tertiary institution.

Introduction

Reading and comprehension have come to operate as one concept, due to their synonymous and symbiotic relationship. Comprehension is considered a by-product of reading. It does not occur in the absence of reading; neither is reading interesting nor meaningful without understanding. Reading comprehension is therefore, a tool for functional literacy.

Reading

Reading is one of the four basic communication skills, others being; speaking, listening and writing. Ngwoke (2006) defines it as the recognition and conscious reproduction of written or printed symbols, letters, words, word group and sentences either mentally or vocally by means of eye or finger contact. It can also be conceptualized as one's ability to acquire information by identifying written symbols". In this context "eye contact" relates to humans that have no visual impairment, whereas finger contact relates to the blind who make use of the Braille writing.

It is one's ability to observe writings such as symbols, letters, words, phrases and sentences; persons, pictures, signs, characters, and works of art and making interpretations and judgments on such things or persons. The Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary (6th edition) defines "to read" as "to look at and understand the meaning of written or printed words or symbols: to go through written or printed words etc silently or aloud".

Reading is a complex channel of communication which involves an interaction between the encoder and decoder (writer and reader). The writer (informant) communicates with the decoder (reader/receiver) who he does not see nor know; whose cultural, religious and socio-linguistic background he does not know. On his own part, the decoder/reader is expected to identify and isolate concepts graph logically represented on paper without the usual props of tone or voice recognition, finger or body gestures, facial expressions and the accompaniment of speech contexts. This is why reading is referred to as a complex communication system.

Functional literacy is therefore, not possible in an environment where people are not reading consciously.

The State of Reading Today

In Nigeria today, the reading level is very low in the spite of the increasing volumes of materials that surface every day begging for reading and comprehension. In an interview granted by Ausbeth a writer in THE SUN of Saturday November 25, 2006, she revealed that the reading rate of Nigerians is very poor and this affects zealous writers negatively. *"I would say that sadly, that not many Nigerian like to read: most people read because they need to pass their examination especially students.* The reading culture is generally poor. People do not engage in active reading anymore and it is painful. According to Oyetunde in Agwu (2004) reading is one area that is particularly problematic for children within the school system. A great majority of school children are failing to read, while some are unable to read.

Bunza in Agwu (2004) warns that "... there are many children at risk and unless we come to their rescue, the age of darkness might recur". Reading is the retrieval of written language in print.

Comprehension

Comprehension simply means understanding' or showing understanding of a reading text. The comprehension of a reading text is shown by the reader's ability to respond correctly to the issues raised in the text in question form. There is no way of separating reading and comprehension. Ngwoke (2006) regards reading and comprehension as twin sisters bound by a common chain. No one ever comprehends what he/she has not read nor does one take delight in reading what one does not understand or what does not make meaning to one. The foregoing has a lot of implications.

- i. If reading items are ambiguous or wrongly presented, textual comprehension is impeded.
- ii. For faster reading to take place there has to be adequate textual comprehension.

- iii. Slow reading habits are often as a result of difficulty in comprehending the textual contents. So, we can say that recognition of ink marks or symbols and also a meaning identification are necessary to ensure comprehension”.

The comprehension level is the level of reasoning, meaningful interpretation of both verbal and written symbols. Unit’s interpretation requires thinking, imagining, analysis and evaluation. Success in comprehension lies in the reader’s ability to read and recognize the form and supporting points of an argument; to grasp essential details in a report of a historical event; to recast, using his own sense, complex ideas presented in a text or discourse; to understand and interpreted scientific observation and make subtle distinction of meaning.

Most students perform abysmally poor in reading comprehension due to the fact that they lack the techniques involved in reading comprehension. This has a resulted in low literacy level especially among our students. It might be very important to review what literacy is and how reading comprehension promotes literacy.

Literacy

Lawal (2002) sees literacy as “the demonstration of competence in communication skills which enables the individual to function appropriately to his/her age; independently in his/her society and with potential for progress in that society”. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (New international edition) defines it as “the ability to read and write”. This view is corroborated by the BBC English Dictionary. Lawal et al (2002) goes further to identify many types of literacy “from pre-literacy, through dysfunctional literacy to computer literacy; all of which he considered to be united in purpose, function and significance’ .An illiterate person can be seen as one who is unable to read and write well enough to perform social functions successfully. We can then see that anyone who cannot read and write is illiterate and to enhance people’s literacy level, the teaching of reading comprehension should be promoted in the school curriculum.

Oke (2002) notes that a World Bank Report shows that over 50% of the world’s illiterate population lives in Africa. Out of the 120 million Nigerians, literacy analysts posit that more than 60 million people are illiterate. Arua (2006) also argues that Nigeria is a prominent member of the league of nine nations with the highest number of illiterate citizens.

It is therefore certain that the literacy level in the country is very low and this is a worrisome state of affairs, which has implications for the national economy and for literacy materials.

The development of a nation is consequent upon their literacy level. It must therefore be noted that a high level of socio-economic development of a country does not produce a high level literacy but attaining a high reading level does. In our country today, the level of illiteracy has been very high, in spite of our long-standing age of political, economic and social independence. This is largely due to our poor reading attitude in Schools. Even though the various governments of the country at the federal level have at various times launched different educational programmes aimed at eradicating illiteracy but very unfortunately only little success has been

recorded along that line. Lawal et al 2004 observe that “in Nigeria, illiteracy is as high as the nation’s level of poverty” according to them, a greater proportion of the Nigerian population is still battling with illiteracy. This situation may not be surprising in view of the infinitesimal attention given to reading in the nation.

Findings have shown that a small number of our youths who are in school read, and only an insignificant number actually comprehend. This is largely responsible for the abysmal performance of candidates in qualifying examination like the West Africa School Certificate Examination. An analysis of the performance of candidates in the English language over the years and especially in 2004, 2005 and 2006 revealed a discouraging performance in the comprehension aspect of paper.

The reason is not farfetched; most of our students don’t read; and majority who read don’t understand since comprehension of a concept enables the reader to apply what he has read. We discover that our literacy problems remain unsolved when readers don’t comprehend.

Literacy Materials

Literacy materials are written or printed texts, icons, etc designed for purposes of promoting literacy. We draw inspiration from Oke (2004) to define a text as elaborate sign posts of the meaning which a writer has presented in specific symbols and which a person must process through the use of content and linguistic knowledge in order to capture the author’s intended meaning. Literacy materials derive from the creative impulses of their designers/authors. Written texts are more authentic and convincing systems of any language than speech, and its influence on humanity is incalculable, Otagburuagu (2006). In the same way, when such materials are used for literacy purposes they exert a penetrating effect on the human mind. Good literacy materials synchronize emissive competences of the writer with the readers’ receptive competences.

Literacy materials are varied in nature and purposes. Good literacy materials must meet the changing and varied needs of the users for information, work, service, growth, knowledge, and leisure. The canvas of literacy materials range from primers, simple and fully illustrated children’s bedtime stories, folklore, discipline-specific books, reference materials, brochures, newspaper, community bulletin boards, newsletters, etc.

Literacy materials must be dynamic; they must grow with time and in their scope in order to accommodate the changing realities of the society of the users. Literacy materials therefore must be tailored to help the individual to build capacity which will enable him to play to expected roles as a citizen of his community. There is no better alternative to functional literacy. The political and economic destiny of Nigeria depends on the level of functional literacy it can attain in the new millennium. I align with Henry Peter Brougham, the 19th century British political leader to state here that literacy “makes people easy to lead but difficult to drive, easy to govern but impossible to enslave”. Literacy is a gateway to economic and intellectual prosperity and illiteracy, an easy route to slavery and poverty.

Reading Comprehension as the Tool for functional literacy

Today, there is a clamor for revitalizing the literacy level of people in the country. There can be no other way to do this except by consciously revitalizing the reading culture of our people. Today, illiteracy working through ignorance has pervaded through the rank and file of the people. As days roll on, and with technological innovations going on daily, we see there is a lot to know about the computer operations, Internet operations, the GSM mobile set operations and other new disciplines of study sprouting here and there, reading becomes the only way to being literate in them. We find out that we live in ignorance in the midst of abundance of knowledge due to our lackadaisical attitude to reading occasioned often by outright illiteracy.

Most people read because they need to pass their examinations especially students. The reading culture is generally poor. People do not engage in active reading anymore and this is painful. Even though she expressed the hope that things would improve due to her belief that people are becoming a little conscious about the need for them to be properly informed she shows that this poor reading attitude was affecting writers when they write and do not have readers (Ausbeth 2006)

The place of reading in the world today cannot be over emphasized. The world is fast turning into a global village by reason of high technological advancements. Reading intensively and extensively remains the sure way of acquainting ourselves with global realities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Reading plays very vital roles in the literacy of a people. A people are illiterate who cannot read. As the only way of extracting information from both near and far, a people that neglect it have surely bargained for backwardness. In Nigerian unlike the advanced countries like America, Britain etc. reading is still occupying a third class attention since the society appears to have a positive attitude towards paper qualification. To remedy this situation and subsequently revitalize our literacy level, greater attention should be paid to reading comprehension in the curriculum. Reading comprehension should be taught as a separate and compulsory course beginning from the primary to the tertiary institution.

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