

Arresting Reading Comprehension Failures among Secondary School Students in Nigeria via the Promotion of Functional Literacy

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Abstract

Every year, schools cycle out majority of what some people may term “half-baked” graduates at different levels of our institutions. The major question that needs to be addressed is: how functional is the literacy at the disposal of these graduates? The answer to this question is very vital considering the assumption that many secondary school and university graduates cannot read or write fluently. The most worrisome is that there are reading failures among secondary school students which has a correlation effect on their academic achievements and which has also been found to relate to reading comprehension problems. The way out of this problem is to enrich the students’ environment with literacy and print materials, engage them in voluntary reading and introduce them to guided extensive reading programme. More importantly, the teachers of language should apply the eclectic method of teaching. The justification for these strategies is that a print-rich environment and literacy materials ignite reading interest in the students and encourage them to embark on voluntary reading. It has also been discovered that voluntary reading, intensive and extensive readings would bring about improved reading comprehension and this will subsequently arrest reading failures among secondary school students in Nigeria.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension Failure, Students, Functional Literacy

Introduction

No meaningful literacy advancement can be achieved without recourse to reading. Reading according to Omojuwa (2005) is the process of combining textual information a reader brings to a text, with background knowledge. The background knowledge (schema) is what facilitates understanding. Thus any reading that achieves its purpose is the one that is accompanied with comprehension. A reader ought to make sense of what is read otherwise no reading has taken place. This justifies the view of Agwu (2011) that there is no reading without comprehension.

Reading is not a passive but an active process that involves the reader’s communication with the text. Ekpu (2005), Udosen and UkpaK (2005) define reading as getting meaning from a text or from symbols that represent the language we speak; it is interacting with the language that has been coded into print.

Maduabuchi (2005) opines that reading involves a developmental, interactive, global and personal process, which necessitates learning. It equally incorporates the individual’s linguistic knowledge and can positively be affected by non-linguistic internal or external variables. Reading comprehension is therefore the result of a successful interaction of a reader with a text.

The view of reading is gradually changing in recent years. It was erroneously conceived as a part of English Language that involves a process of question and answer commonly referred to as “comprehension”. During reading instruction classes, the students are merely asked to read a passage in turn and answer questions from there. Most times the questions are given orally. The teacher thus ends up testing reading or listening comprehension instead of the actual teaching of reading. Araromi (2002) indicates that this method results to reading comprehension failure which subsequently affects the quality of students produced yearly as many graduates find it difficult to read simple passages with understanding. It is this poor reading comprehension failure that subsequently affects every other subject and consequently brings about mass failure in public examinations witnessed yearly (Oyebola 2004). This is a major hindrance to the advancement of functional literacy in Nigeria and it is a teething problem that has to be squarely addressed in order to improve literacy in the country. It is in line with this that the enrichment of the students’ environment with print and literacy materials, the introduction of voluntary reading, intensive and extensive reading, and the use of varied method of teaching reading is advocated.

Reading Comprehension Failure

Fatimayin (2012) indicates that reading difficulty implies that even normally capable students can fail to advance in reading particularly if they receive poor quality instruction from their teachers. A lot of factors may be attributable to the reading difficulties of many students. Some people have blamed reading problems on the

economic and social status of the home (Araromi, 2002). It is believed that the children with reading difficulties have differing cultural and language differences between the home and the school. This is in line with previous studies carried out by Anderson (2004) which show that social class, educational background of the parents, family income, and print-rich environment are contributory factors to students reading difficulties. In addition, linguistic factors, structural factors content factors, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge which this study is more interested in, highly contribute to reading comprehension difficulties.

Cultural/Linguistic Factors

The socio-cultural practices of the child's learning environment greatly influence the meaning a learner constructs. It is widely believed that the reader's cultural beliefs and values influence the comprehension of the text and by belonging to a particular socio-linguistic group, or having a religious or political affiliation, influence the way a reader views, thinks and comprehends a text. Agwu (2011) shows that many less able readers have difficulty in utilizing the grammatical and contextual meaning cues found in book language. Similarly, a lot of children with reading difficulties have also been found to have problems in expressive language in sentence completion and formulation, word discrimination, syntax, grammar, and phrase length. For example, less skilled readers often have difficulties with figurative language, such as metaphors, similes and alliteration (Araromi, 2002).

Structural Factor

Structural factor is often the most important element in the comprehension of a story or passage content. Most students need some form of structure to their learning and to be actively and purposely engaged in their own learning process (Udosen, 2011). The problem is that a characteristic of many students with reading difficulties is that they typically become passive and unmotivated readers.

Structural factor is the knowledge of rhetorical matter as well as the arrangement and the presentation of the forms in which the information in a text is written. The speed by which the reader processes the text is influenced by the familiarity of the structure of the text.

Anderson (2011) reveals that the larger segments of texts could be structured in the form of content frames, which complement the larger whole. The larger units in a narrative might encompass the overall plot and organizational unit. The arrangement of thought and the coherence of ideas go a long way to determine the simplicity or difficulty of the reading material.

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that many students with reading comprehension difficulties have problems with word level processes such as phonological awareness, phonological encoding and naming speed (Robinson 1998). This being able to quickly identify individual words within a sentence facilitates text processing along with an understanding of the syntax and semantic aspects of texts. Furthermore, text conventions such as full stops and commas help to organize text into relevant components. At the local level of text coherence, pronouns may facilitate the formation of 'cohesive ties' that form linkages between the propositions that are being formed as the reader processes the surface structure of the text.

Text organizational features such as italics, underlining and subheadings along with illustrations, figures, graphs and maps also help readers process the text content into working memory more efficiently. Other helpful text features such as headings and subheadings, according to Anderson and Pearson (2004), are labels for various frame slots and can also make it easier for the reader to cognitively organize information. However, badly written texts may cause confusion for less able readers because they require a large number of restatements of propositions in working memory when the meaning is unclear (Vipond, 1980). Disjointed text units are also less likely to be remembered or understood by the reader.

Vocabulary Knowledge

One of the major reading difficulties encountered by students is the impact of increasingly unfamiliar vocabulary found in texts as they make progress in their reading levels (Leach et al., 2003). Unfamiliar vocabularies slow down the reading speed and affect meaning constructed from a text. When a text is packed with a lot of unfamiliar vocabularies, the readability level is increased and high readability level is one of the significant causes of students reading difficulties.

Vocabulary knowledge has to do with the knowledge of word meanings. A reader must be able to distinguish the meaning of most words encountered for comprehension to take place. This is based on the fact that some texts contain highly technical and multisyllabic words that students usually find difficult to decode. Maduabuchi (2005) records that vocabulary knowledge has a high degree influence on reading comprehension as it is conceived as an important and accurate predictor of reading ability of a second or foreign language learner. Deficiency in vocabulary knowledge gives rise to major reading difficulties. Agwu (2011) indicates that successful readers easily read meaning from texts because they have a greater existing vocabulary more experience using context clues, and greater background knowledge. When students are deficient in vocabulary

schemata, they begin to experience reading comprehension difficulties.

Decoding Factor

It has been established by researchers that children's early attainment of decoding skill is a reliable predictor of later reading achievement (Anderson 2011). Skilled reading comprehension requires the reader to be able to process the written symbols of text at an appropriate level. Poor decoders read considerably less than average readers. Improvement on students' reading comprehension requires appropriate teaching of decoding. Word recognition skills of the students need to be properly developed to guarantee fluency. This owes to the fact that students' recognition of words in comprehension passages increases their understanding. More so, the knowledge of sounds and letters and how they can be combined to produce words is very vital in the improvement of reading comprehension.

Background Knowledge

Every thing that has to do with successful reading comprehension largely depends on prior knowledge, knowledge in store, residual knowledge or knowledge in memory. It is not acquired overnight but rather gained as a result of the accumulation of varied experiences gained over time. A lot of reading of various texts, print-rich environment, and socio-cultural experiences largely enriches one's background knowledge. This knowledge is summarily known as schema (Anderson, 2004). Reading is successful when it is accompanied with comprehension and a successful reader is the one whose background knowledge is rich.

There is a connection between the old knowledge (prior knowledge) and the new knowledge for comprehension to occur. When readers comprehend communicative material, they apply their beliefs about the world and what they already know about the present topic as lens through which to interpret and understand the message the writer is attempting to convey. By using this lens children are more able to integrate background knowledge when required to make inferences about story information. This implies that the processing of information may be limited or enhanced by the knowledge base of a reader. Harris and Pressely (2007) indicate that even when skilled readers have inadequate prior knowledge to apply to a reading task, they tend to use the best available schema to organize the construction of meaning. The reader, therefore, will often rely on background knowledge of similar situations to form an analogy when relating to relatively novel story information. Poor background knowledge is therefore tantamount to deficiency in all the factors discussed.

The importance of schema (background knowledge) to reading comprehension calls for its activation and building for reading comprehension to be more successful in students with reading comprehension difficulties. The use of the advance organizers is consequently the best to do this job.

Voluntary Reading

Reading is an active tool for literacy advancement in any society. It is the major means of deliverance of any society from the shackles of illiteracy and poverty. It sharpens knowledge and makes the intellectual capacity of a person sound. One is intellectually active when one cultivates the habit of reading. Nigeria is perceived as a country with poor reading culture and this tremendously hinders literacy advancement which has a corresponding developmental negative effect (Oyebola, 2004). Students need to be encouraged to add to their school reading voluntary reading which is also known as reading outside school, spare-time reading, leisure reading, recreational reading and independent reading (Krashen, 2003; Anderson, 2011).

The importance of voluntary reading cannot be over-emphasized. It gives the students the opportunity to develop interest in reading and, the opportunity to personally control their reading task: they decide on what to read, when to read and how to read. This makes reading lively and more interesting to the students. This type of reading is mainly done for information or pleasure. Independent reading involves personal choice, reading widely from a variety of sources and choosing what one reads. The major challenge in this regard is the availability of reading materials for students especially from less privileged homes.

According to Fatimayin (2004), voluntary reading cuts across all categories of literate people - adults, youngsters, men and women. This researcher further shows that reading involves all kinds of literature, depending on reader's interests and purpose. In other words, one can read for pleasure, novels, romance, fiction, science fiction, biographical books, poems, plays, magazines and newspapers. Oduolowu (2006) states that successful reading requires the recognition of written words and the understanding of their meaning, but that successful reading, especially of difficult material is dependent upon the ability to think like and with its author.

Voluntary reading is a form of recreation. Fatimayin (2012) records that reading for pleasure is traveling without exerting oneself and the information one picks up from biographic, philosophical and psychological books to a large extent goes into shaping one's thinking and personality. Reading, in its own way, liberates individuals and societies from the shackles of illiteracy, backwardness and poverty. Voluntary reading also promotes functional literacy which facilitates intellectual development made possible by reading all sorts of books for academic, pleasure and recreational purposes. This is to say that through the process of recreational

reading, students' lives, attitude to people, situations and events as well as their morals and communicative competence are enhanced. The richer, better and wider the variety of books and materials one reads, the better ones experiences.

Fatimayin's (2004) main purposes of reading for English can best be grouped into eight categories; the last four are reading for pleasure to prove the immense benefits of recreational reading in the lives of students.

- (a) Acquiring main ideas in what is read,
- (b) Getting enough information or the important facts backing-up the main ideas,
- (c) Locating a particular fact or finding the answer to a specific question;
- (d) Gathering material for a critical analysis;
- (e) Sharing the author's feelings or those of his characters;
- (f) Learning how to do something;
- (g) Accumulating wealth of knowledge and broadening horizon;
- (h) Getting pleasure from reading.

It is evident therefore, that voluntary reading would help students overcome their reading problems as well as enhance functional literacy when students become voracious readers as they constantly engage in reading.

Reading, apart from providing opportunity for fun and leisure has a lot to contribute to both individual and national development. Potter (2011) observes the contribution that reading good literature does to children: reading good literature can promote a sense of security, achievement and a sense of informed appreciation in the child. Voluntary reading promotes a deep awareness and builds the child up emotionally and intellectually. It equally educates children unconsciously and pleasurably. According to Fatimayin (2012), the two major broad areas of reading that students must be exposed to in order to promote their interest in reading and enhance their academic performance include intensive and extensive reading.

Intensive Reading

Intensive reading involves careful and detailed reading for facts. The advantage of this type of reading is that it enables the students to have an understanding of exact and implied meanings of words as well as the relationship of thoughts. Through intensive reading the students have detailed knowledge of the text so as to make critical judgment of them. Moreover, intensive reading helps to sharpen the learner's imagination and also increase his/her power of thought as factual and critical questions play a very prominent role in determining whether or not the texts have been understood. According to Oyetunde, (2001), intensive reading gets the students involved in the independent use of the language and encourages free expressions. Through constant practice and exercises in intensive reading, the student might gain good control of the language, become capable of forming accurate and correct concept and develop in an effortless manner, keen perception and ease confidence and fluency in the correct English expression. This in place, reading failures would be arrested.

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading involves reading many books outside prescribed texts in any topic of interest (Oyetunde 2001). Under this approach, the main purpose is to get the gist of the texts and also for the required information. Extensive reading is also applied to train students to read for pleasure and relaxation. While extensive reading calls for speed and reasonable understanding and retention of materials read, intensive reading demands careful and detailed study of materials for understanding the minutest points. However, intensive reading and extensive reading complement each other.

Just as it is important for students to engage in reading activities, it is equally very important for what is read to be understood, otherwise reading becomes unhelpful. According to Potter (2011), without understanding words become only a series of lifeless symbols which neither communicate nor produce learning, and consequently add nothing useful to the life of the child. This researcher maintains that when a learner understands and interacts with written or printed language, the language summarizes the knowledge of the world, fulfills many of his effective needs and touches the very fiber of the child's existence. Bdliya (2004) puts it more clearly by the assertion that the primary goal of reading is meaning. When students derive meaning from what they read, reading comprehension failures would be a thing of the past.

The Role of Extensive Reading in Advancing Functional Literacy

According to Folashede (2004), a lot still needs to be done to improve the course content of the school syllabus in order to promote the reality that reading is a foundation upon which all subjects are built as well as a prerequisite for a continuous educational development and functional literacy. Agwu (2011) suggests that one of the best ways to achieve this as well as help students increase their language proficiency is to encourage them to read extensively. The research carried out by Anderson (2011) shows that extensive reading results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling and grammatical development. A study by Hayash (1999) of the effects of extensive reading on students proficiency in English found that students who reported

reading more books experienced significantly greater improvement in reading tests, (than those who were compelled to read) as measured by pre-and post-test. The students also reported that the extensive reading programme helped them to improve on their English. The same perception towards extensive reading was held by the students studied by McQuittan (1994), in which he overwhelmingly found extensive reading to be not only more pleasurable but also more beneficial for language acquisition than instruction in grammar. In the research result, there was a remarkable increase made by these students on measures of Language use which the researcher specified as oral language, reading comprehension and writing, language knowledge (which include word recognition, vocabulary knowledge and grammar), as well as improved academic performance. Children who are exposed to an extensive range of interesting and illustrated storybooks, who are encouraged to read on their own and share them with other children, are consistently found to learn the target language more quickly; they appear to learn the language incidentally when immersed in a meaningful text.

Numerous studies have also suggested that extensive reading leads to greater writing proficiency. Janopoulos (1986) for instance, found that writing proficiency correlates positively with the quantity of time spent on reading for pleasure in the second language. Hafiz and Tudor (1990) found that language skills and writing was the area students made the most significant improvement. Indeed, Tsang (1996), in comparing the effects of three programme, the one that included extensive reading was found to be significantly effective overall. In the area of content and language use, the extensive reading programme was also the only one that was found to be significantly effective.

These research works have provided persuasive evidence of the positive effect of the systematic exposure to extensive reading in the second language on second language proficiency. In these studies, second language composition was found to be positively influenced by extensive reading.

In addition to its cognition benefits, extensive reading helps to develop a positive attitude among students towards reading in the second language; it also increases the motivation to read in the second language (Hayashi, 1999). Perhaps this is because the more one reads, the easier reading becomes. Elly (2003) asserts that children who read extensively later develop positive attitudes towards books. The effects of extensive reading are thus both cognitive as well as affective. This helps to increase students' language proficiency and functional literacy in the long term.

Print-rich Environment and Literacy Materials

An environment that is full of literacy materials is one of the major factors that encourage the advancement of functional literacy. According to Ajayi (2002), libraries play a very important role in enhancing students' reading habit. The researcher notes that many schools do not have good libraries and those who have could not afford the high cost of books and even where books are available, they are too few to cope with the ever-increasing student enrolment due to population explosion in schools. Sadly, many important teaching materials like newspapers have been largely ignored in the teaching and learning of reading. Ajayi (2002) therefore advocates the enrichment of school libraries with current newspapers since newspapers are highly rich in information covering local, national and international affairs, up-to-date information of political health, music, sports, entertainment, arts, fashion, law, economics, medicine, science and technology. Anything learnt in the course of reading helps directly or indirectly to build the society.

Research shows that some children who have access to print and construct meaning from it learn to read prior to school entrance and that early experience with language, stories and print are formative (Morrow 1991). Equally, children who came from print-rich homes learn to read prior school entrance and they easily develop interest in reading than their counterparts without prior print encounter. The former do not encounter more problems in reading comprehension (Clay 2000).

Print-rich environment alone cannot do the magic of advancing functional literacy without the modeling of adults and care givers. Research indicates that most Nigerian adult/parents are too busy to read and therefore do not stand as good reading models to the child (Potter 2011). Children from poor homes are the worse hit by negative attitude of parents/guardians towards reading. A poor illiterate home may not rank the purchase of books high as against the purchase of food. Illiteracy and poverty are therefore, one of the factors affecting literacy development in Nigeria.

Fatimayin (2012) asserts that the children who learn to read before coming to school and one who learn to read successfully in school come from homes where there are enough reading materials and they are often read to. Equally daily experiences with books help all children succeed in school and gifted children are more likely to be read to daily, have books and reading areas in their homes, and go to library more than once a month (Omojuwa 2005).

On the other hand, Oyetunde (2001) opines that students' pattern of borrowing books from the library for recreational reading hinge on the attitudes of their teachers. Teachers who consistently bring their classes to the library to do content area research have students who frequently use the library for independent reading. The importance of print-rich environment to the advancement of functional literacy, therefore, is indisputably

overwhelming.

Use of Varied Methods of Teaching in Enhancing Functional Literacy

The method used by the teacher while delivering lessons to a large extent affect learning outcomes. To achieve functional literacy, the method employed by the teacher must be properly addressed.

Many writers have defined method in various ways. According to Azikiwe (2005), methods are the ways educational aims are translated to practice as well as reality. It is in practice that a particular method of teaching could be evaluated to see how educational aims have been realized. Method is, therefore, the carefully adopted style of teaching to promote learning.

Several arguments have been going on, on the best language teaching method that would guarantee functional literacy. This led to the birth of many methods of teaching language such as the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), the Direct or Natural Method (DM), the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), the Silent Way Method (SWM), the Total Physical Response Method (TPRM), the Audio Visual Method (AVM), the Play Method (PM) the Oral Method (OM), the Eclectic Way (EW), to mention but few. The controversy over which method is the best has diverted the attention from the target of achieving functional literacy and obscured the important areas such as the quality and quantity of teachers for the tasks, their proficiency or mastery of the language and the realization that the main object of learning a foreign language is to enable learners use the language in life situations. This means that the effectiveness of teaching and learning of a second language should not be solely attributed to the method(s) used. Azikiwe (2005), therefore, advises that the teacher should adapt or use methods depending on some factors such as the class, availability of resources, the ability of the learners and lastly the preparation of the teacher.

Azikiwe (2005) further affirms that there are many methods from which to pick and choose from when preparing a lesson because some methods could be effective for teaching some aspects of language, while ineffective for others. Thus, method will become inefficient if inflexibility is not applied. What becomes the best bet to enhance functional literacy is the Eclectic way, which is the varied method of language teaching.

The Eclectic Way

The proponent of eclectic way is Harold Palmer. Palmer believes that the Eclectic Way is not a compromise between two antagonistic schools but a bold combination of what is valuable in many systems or methods of teaching: a combination which will incorporate every type of teaching except bad teaching, and every process of learning except defective learning. It is therefore, very vital to adopt a variety of methods in teaching and learning situations which will give equal attention and opportunities to learners with differing learning abilities. In a class of different kinds of learners, it would be inconceivable that any single method could achieve optimum success in such situations.

Then, what is eclecticism? According to Oladosu (2002), eclecticism is a method of teaching in which the best aspects of other methods are integrated and used to achieve the educational objectives of a specific programme. When every student participates actively in lessons, it becomes very interesting and learning is facilitated thereby advancing functional literacy. However, language teachers should not be a slave to any method, text and materials in the execution of lessons.

Thus, the eclectic approach to teaching implies a degree of flexibility and adaptability on the selection and use of techniques, methods or approaches in teaching and learning process. With the proponents of eclecticism, there is no hard and fast rule with regard to methods of teaching especially in language learning. When this is done, students would benefit maximally from learning for the advancement of functional literacy.

Recommendations

- The students' environment has to be properly equipped with literacy materials like assorted books, newspapers and magazines, novels and every material that would enhance functional literacy.
- Home, school and public libraries have to be properly furnished with current books and literacy materials and students are to be encouraged to visit libraries frequently.
- Parents, teachers and guardians have to play a good reading model to the students by reading themselves and by helping the students to solve their reading problems.
- The eclectic method of language teaching has to be adopted by the teacher to cover the various reading interests of the students so that every student will be carried along in the reading process.
- The students have to be introduced to the voluntary reading, intensive and extensive reading strategy as a means of improving on their reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The much needed development in Africa, Nigeria specifically, can only be attainable in an atmosphere of functional literacy. Thus, to enjoy progressive literacy in Nigeria, students' environment has to be richly

equipped with literacy materials. They should be introduced to voluntary reading as well as intensive and extensive reading. The method of teaching employed by the teacher also has to be properly evaluated to include the eclectic method of language teaching.

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