

Positivity towards Reading as a Tool for Better Academic Performance

Ayo Osisanwo, Ph.D
Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

Education is becoming so pivotal to success in life such that there is a dire need for a change in attitude to reading. Previous studies on students' reading have mainly addressed poor performances, and have always blamed the government of the day and inadequacies of reading materials. To address the existing gap, therefore, the present study was carried out to examine the attitudes of undergraduates to reading with a view to arresting incidences of mediocrity and mass failure among students even in the era of internet distraction. The research was executed using a twelve-item questionnaire for data collection from undergraduate students of Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Nigeria. The study raised four research questions as its guide. In selecting its respondents, it used the random sampling technique, but ensures that the respondents cut across all levels. Data collected were analysed using simple percentages. It finds out that positive attitude towards reading is obviously a panacea for a better academic performance. It is, therefore, recommended that students should inculcate and imbibe the right reading culture in order to engender the right positive performance while it lasts.

Keywords: Reading, attitude, academic performance, positivity, undergraduate

Introduction

Reading has been described as 'an activity characterized by the translation of symbols or letters into words and sentences that have meaning to the individual' (Chall and Stahl, 2007). Reading is an integral part of language and knowledge acquisition. It is a skill which is acquired and developed upon from time to time. As an activity which enriches the mind, reading enhances as individual's intellectual alertness and repository knowledge. Reading as an activity goes beyond just the mere recognition of letters or combination of letters to form words, it basically becomes meaningful when it is meant to add to an individual's knowledge or re-orientate such an individual in order to bring about a change in disposition to issues. Reading as a secondary skill which is consciously learnt especially within the four walls of the school, is not innate, rather it is acquired. The need to re-examine the purpose of reading and how well students in tertiary institutions have been harnessing the available human and material resources within their reach to heighten their reading prowess inspired the need for the present study.

An average Nigerian child has been adjudged as being vulnerable to non-reading habits (see Udosen and Ukpak, 2005). This claim seems to keep changing in the life of an individual by the time the individual grows from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. In other words, an individual becomes more focused and studious when s/he progresses from the lower-basic to basic to upper-basic school (pre-secondary) to secondary and to post secondary. It is obvious that an individual's goals and values in life at this stage becomes more focused. The individual gets to know more about the reason and purpose for living, and if course in relation to academics, why s/he is studying what is being studied. Nevertheless, studies have shown that a student may not have much assimilation difference between what is read at adolescence and childhood, since it is just being developed upon. It is therefore important to remark that an individual student's entry point into the realm of academics goes a long way in influencing him/her.

Ukpak & Phillip (2006) advise that recreational and pleasure reading among pupils should be encouraged since it exposes them to different types of literature and characteristics of good literature. Obviously, this is equally applicable to students in higher schools. In fact, it affords them the opportunity of a balanced mind. Attempts have also been made by Osisanwo (2001), Russell (2007) and Johnson (2007) to examine the pivot of reading from different perspectives. In a further attempt to justify what the essence of reading is, Wallace et al (1992:5) assert that:

Reading is so much a part of daily life for those who live in literate communities that much of the time we hardly consider either the purposes or processes involved. We take the activity for granted, much as we do with listening and speaking... In other words, our day to day reading behaviour is highly selective.

Wallace et al's idea above obviously shows what is obtainable among undergraduates. Since their reading is highly selective, they end up having a selective knowledge which may in turn retard their success. Their performance is affected since they have a limited knowledge. Many do not have time for recreational reading but only concentrate on what is directly related to the immediate needed knowledge to a given topic/course. Nevertheless, a host of others spend the bulk of their time on recreational materials, very little on

their academics and only a few make attempts to combine the two.

There is no gain saying the fact that undergraduate students are supposed to have grown to a level of self-independence. Having known their right from left, they are no longer supposed to be coerced or forced into the reading arena. They are believed to have known why to read, how to read, when to read and of course for what purpose reading is taking place. According to Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher and Mathematician who lived from 1872 to 1970, 'there are two motives for reading a book: one, that you enjoy it, the other that you can boast about it'. The second reason given by Russell seems more relevant for our purpose in this study and for undergraduates, that is, for academic purpose. Unfortunately, some of the students do not actually know why they are in the citadel of learning. There is no gain saying the fact that there are usually a lot of side-attractions begging for recognition. The students especially the new ones get carried away by 'freedom', hence the campus' jamboree deny them the opportunity of standing on their toes academically. This usually affects their performance.

Studies have equally shown that the larger percentage of academic success is brought about by reading, that is, the development of reading skill. This may not be unconnected with the perceived decline in success in Nigeria, since scholars in Reading such as Onukaogu (2001) and Omojuwa (2005) have decried the deplorable condition of Nigerians' disposition to reading. Although we have a reading culture in Nigeria, it is nonetheless very low. A larger percentage of students do not feel at ease reading without being forced to do so, hence, when examinations approach, they begin marathon reading which has not been part of their body system. No wonder some faint, collapse and other end up being admitted in clinics/sick bay during this crucial period.

A study similar to the present one was carried out by Ageyemang (1998) in a Ghanaian University and another one by Anigbogu (2007) in FUTO, Nigeria. These studies show that the situation is similar to the one conducted here. Students usually complain of time to read and equally time to do justice to series of assignments. The problem here actually seems to be on their inability to apportion their time effectively. The paper impacts the reading community by reminding the average student of the expected activities in order to achieve excellence.

Research Problem

Previous studies on students' reading have mainly addressed poor performances, and have always blamed the government of the day and inadequacies of reading materials. In other words, not much has been done in addressing the need to reduce incidences of mediocrity and mass failure based on students' attitude towards reading. To address the existing gap, therefore, the present study was carried out to examine the attitudes of undergraduates to reading. We are not contending the fact that the whole time of the students should be spent on academics only. Nevertheless, when an individual student develops a positive attitude towards reading, the reading will definitely bring about a positive performance. How can these attitudes be turned to make the students' performance better, academically? This question which constitutes a problem is what the present paper seeks to answer with a view to addressing the dying reading culture among Nigerian undergraduates.

Research Questions

1. How regularly do undergraduates read?
2. To what extent do they read for pleasure or academic purposes?
3. To what extent are they affected by the environment?
4. To what extent do they cover their recommended texts before examinations or the end of a course?

Research Methodology

The study is a survey of students' attitudes to reading. A research instrument titled 'Students' attitudes towards Reading' was administered to 140 students. The data obtained from the questionnaire administered to 140 undergraduate students of Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, comprising both male and female students. The questionnaire was administered to selected students from the schools of languages and sciences. The questionnaire administered on the undergraduates sought for students' attitudes to reading. It dwelt on how effectively they manage their time in reading, have fun with reading, apportion time to reading, read recommended texts, read beyond the class among others. The simple percentages were used for analysis.

Presentation of Results

Table 1: Responses on Students' Reading Attitude

M = 140

S/N	ATTITUDES TO READING	Number/percentages showing Attitudes
1.	Students who study more during examinations/tests (SDE)	127 (90.7%)
2.	Students who read something daily (RSD)	72 (51.4%)
3.	Students who see reading as boring (RAB)	106 (74.2%)
4.	Students who read their academic courses daily (RAD)	55 (38.5%)
5.	Students who do not take reading as fun (TRF)	110 (78.5%)
6.	Students who only read when they feel like (RFL)	40 (28.6%)
7.	Students who do not have a specific time-table (NST)	84(60%)
8.	Students who only read the recommended texts (RRT)	100 (71.4%)
9.	Students who read and assimilate better in the night (ABN)	95 (67.9%)
10.	Students who have no specific reading period (NSP)	52 (37.1%)
11.	Students who are forced to read because of their friends (FRF)	63 (45%)
12.	Students who read and understand better in a noisy environment (RNE)	25 (17.9%)

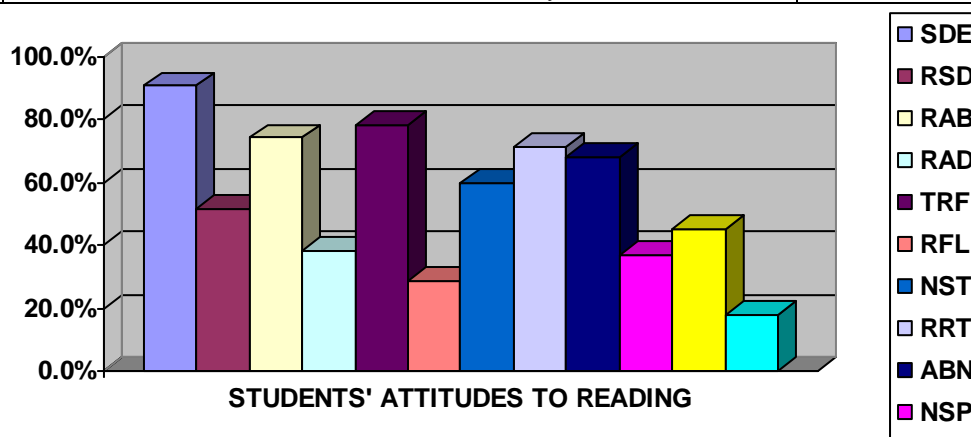


Figure 1

Discussion of Findings

The table 1 above shows that 90.7% of the students study more during examinations/tests. This is a pointer to the fact that the attention of more students is only drawn to excelling at examinations. 51.4% of the students agreed that they read something daily. This is rather low. Although it is more than average, but it is believed that for an individual student to increase his tempo, speech and assimilation rate, he must read something daily. If this is the goal, one would expect about 98% if not 100% of such in an academic environment. 74.2% of the students believe that reading is no fun. It bothers one to note that the heart and mind of these students are probably not so committed to academics. No wonder they see it as no fun and equally boring. Obviously, when an individual's heart is not committed to something, perfection may be far from him. Only 38.5% of the students also said they study/read their academic courses daily. This is equally too low. It has been psychologically advised that a student should revise within 24 hours whatever s/he has newly learnt. When the students fail to do this, piling them up until the day of examination, it will obviously show in their performances. While just 28.6% confessed to reading only when they feel like, 60% do not have a specific time table for reading. In other words, they read anything they feel like reading. One expects that such students would have studied when they feel bored and for such periods, they read novels and probably things other than their academic courses. Do they even actually have time for recreational reading?

Consider 71.4% of them confessing to it that they do not read anything outside their academic courses/recommended texts. In other words, novels and newspapers which recreate the body are not part of their reading. While 67.9% of the respondents read and assimilate better in the night, 37.1% do not have specific reading period. That is, whenever they feel reading should come, they jump at it. Finally while 45% of the respondents read because their friends are doing so, 17.9% read and understand better in a noisy environment. It is therefore glaring that those who love to read in a noisy environment will not be able to read in the night except if it is a noisy arena.

Some of our respondents were actually able to discover when they read best, however majority of them did not. In fact, this is a very major step that everyone should take to an academic environment. Discover yourself first. What works for student A may not work for student B. There are people who do not understand

when they read except if the reading is accompanied by music, probably being played on the tape, cassette player, vcd, mp3, etc. Whereas, majority will prefer to read in a very quiet atmosphere.

Positive Attitudes to Reading

Having considered from the data above the attitudes of students to reading, it is obvious that majority of them have negative attitudes to reading. In this way, one may not expect so much from them in terms of performance. For a positive and improved performance therefore, the mind of the individual undergraduate student needs to be re-orientated. Of course, the teacher/lecturer is not left out of this. In fact, teachers/instructors have a major role to play in the lives of these students, majority of whom are yet to discover themselves. It becomes the duty of the instructors to help in impressing these positive attitudes on the minds of the students since they have once passed through the stage. This is contained in the words of Allington (2005) that while a mediocre teacher only does the telling, the good one gives the explanation, the superior teacher demonstrates to the students and the greatest of the teachers inspires the students. The students need encouragement and of course to be inspired to work. Many, if not all of them are passing through this very stage for the first time. The teacher/instructor can therefore give them the required confidence and make them see the pleasure and fun in reading. He should make them see that reading is not a tedious exercise. It is not boring and if boring it can be made interesting.

Many students have often complained as evident in the research finding that their poor performance is brought about by lack of conducive environment, hostile instructors, alienation from teachers, inadequacy of teachers, lack of technical know how on the part of teachers, inadequacy of time, boredom, inadequacy/lack of textbooks among others (cf: Emejulu and Udengwu, 2006). On the contrary, we want to argue here that 'commitment' is the keyword to finding a lasting solution to the poor reading habit. If individual students would give themselves committed to reading, with the allocation of time, to what is to be studied, how it is to be studied, when it is to be studied, it would definitely go a long way in showcasing a purposeful and rewarding performance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In building a positive attitude towards reading, undergraduates should bear in mind the fact that, though they are at liberty to do whatever they like in the university/college system, it may also seem that they are at liberty to have whatever grade they wish, nevertheless, they are not at liberty to get whatever grade they want in the real sense of it. They work for whatever is earned. Education is becoming so pivotal to success in life; hence there is a dire need for a change in attitude to reading. Students have to step up their reading culture. More so that students who graduate with very good grades having sacrificed so much while in the school system by burning whether 'day-light or midnight oil' usually become 'hot-cakes' in the labour market, while their unserious counterparts may be on the search for employment/job opportunities for ages. Therefore, the reading that is done at the right time, in the right place, with the right people, with the right frame of mind and for the right purpose is a step towards positive reading which obviously engenders a positive performance. It is therefore recommended that since the proverb says 'a stitch in time saves nine', the concerned students should inculcate and imbibe the right reading culture in order to engender the right positive performance while it lasts.

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