

Reading Clinics on University Campuses: A Way Forward

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Reading Clinics on University Campuses: A Way Forward for Language Skills Development

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ABSTRACT

The role of a language centre in language development cannot be overemphasized. On our university campuses, there are many factors which impede language usage and fluency among students. The examination oriented language syllabuses which students had been exposed to at the lower level leave them satisfied and contented on entry into university with a minimum pass/credit level. The preponderance of pidgin and slang as campus languages, the large classes that limit students' oral participation at lectures and a host of other factors also limit students' language use/output. The result of these limitations can be witnessed in their poor performance at both productive and receptive language skills. This paper reviews the language and literacy problems of Nigerian undergraduate students and proposes the establishment of reading clinics in all university campuses to cater for the literacy needs of students. It is reasoned that reading clinics will create an awareness of the need to attend to students' reading problems and in doing this, remedy as well as develop language skills in the study.

INTRODUCTION

Reading failure has continued to remain a huge concern of teachers, parents and other stakeholders in the education industry. At all levels of education, students have continued to demonstrate gross inadequacy of reading skills commensurate with the amount and depth of their academic engagements. This situation, according to Omojuwa (2005:8), "has become a feature of learning programme at the higher levels of education". Omojuwa goes on to list the consequences of such reading skill inadequacy to include: dependence

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on handout and limited lecture notes, inefficient reading habits, negative attitude to reading task, a tendency to look for short cuts to knowledge as a means of passing an examination...”

Many reading scholars (Unoh, 1983; Umolu 1998, Omojuwa 1999; Onukaogu, 2001) among others, have recommended strategies that might help improve reading instruction at all levels. These strategies span across policy issues, methods, teacher preparation and facilities, (Omojuwa, 2005). Of interest to these authors is the issue of providing facilities for reading instruction. The paper thus explores the possibility of establishing reading clinics on Nigerian university campuses as a way of bringing to light the fact that reading failure is a malady that requires remediation and that like a physical ailment, it can be diagnosed and treated by experts in the field.

NEED FOR REMEDIATION IN READING

Remediation in reading implies the existence of a reading problem(s). Remedial reading instruction is thus assumed necessary where a student has failed to meet up the requirements of reading skills for his/her level. For instance, students in the university are expected to have acquired study reading skills that will enable them engage in self study activities. However, the reality in our universities points in the opposite direction. Karlin (1975:266) identifies self direction as a focal point of an efficient study reader.

According to the author:

In order for the students to acquire information through their own efforts they must learn self-direction and they must have efficient ways of pursuing their objectives once they have established them. They must learn to be selective as they receive large quantity of information, separating ideas and retaining only those they need ... (they must also learn to make decision, test alternatives and reconstruct ideas. In addition to using the skills of word recognition, literal and inferential comprehension, and critical evaluation-skills that apply to all kinds of reading, students who engage in study activities must become efficient users of sets of skills that have special relevance for them.

Our experience with Nigerian undergraduate students across all disciplines shows that, only a handful of them are able to engage in the kind of study reading being explained in the above quotation. A large number of students read at frustration level or at best, instructional level. Very few are independent readers. This situation has grave consequences for the university system. Students with reading suffer from untold anxieties arising from feelings of inadequacy and frustration. They eventually resort to aggressive and risky behaviours towards their teachers, parents and even their peers. The

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high incidence of high risk behaviours on Nigerian university campuses such as drug abuse, absenteeism, cult etc can rightly be linked to reading failures. What are the causes of reading failures?

Research into reading failures as summarized by Karlin (1975) has linked reading failures to a number of factors as follows;

1. Physical factors – brain damage, poor auditory and visual dissemination and general health.
2. Intellectual factors – level of intelligence
3. Emotional factors - feelings of hostility, dependency, insecurity.
4. Socio-cultural factors – the home, family experiences.
5. School factors – teacher factors, materials, policy issues.

These factors interact in many ways to produce poor readers along the educational continuum. At the tertiary levels, there are students who have many reading problems like these identified by Ogundipe (2004:225) among polytechnic students as follows:

- a. Inability to recognize writers' point of view in the written text.
- b. Inability to use textual information to make value judgement.
- c. Failure to determine and identify writer's attitude.
- d. Inability to identify, recognized, understands structure/relationship in written discourse.
- e. Inability to distinguish between main ideas and supporting details in the printed text.
- f. Inability to synthesize textual information in the reading process.

It is obvious from the foregoing that Nigerian undergraduates require remediation in reading in order to correct anomalies in reading that have occurred at the lower levels of their education. The problem however is that there is no deliberate attempt made at this level to teach any form of reading whether development or remedial. It is assumed that anyone coming into the university has acquired reading skills at literal, critical, interpretive and creative levels and would therefore be able to go at the pace of lecturers. This assumption has had serious repercussions in terms of course design and provision of facilities. The general studies courses for instance should have catered for short falls in students' knowledge and skill development levels but they do not adequately provide such safety nets because of:

1. The number of students involved.
2. The time available and
3. The course design itself.

Large class populations do not allow for closer contacts between lecturers and students with the result that many students end up not even attending lectures at all. A situation where lectures in the use of English for instance, hold once a week does not provide ample opportunity for students to learn much. In addition to these two points, the course design itself is made on the assumption that students have already acquired some basic skills. The design is therefore more developmental than remedial.

THE READING CLINIC OPTION

The idea of a clinic connotes a remedy. One thus views a clinic as a place one goes to get a remedy, help, a prescription for a problem. One attends to ones health problems because ill-health incapacitates, reduces ones functionality. Health clinics are ready places to go for such health remedies. Ignorance is a disease, much the same way as malaria is because it renders one incapable of living a fully functional life. Illiteracy is a harbinger of ignorance; it breeds ignorance, disease and poverty. Its endemic nature can be seen in widespread human and material waste being experienced in Nigeria in all facets of her national life.

The university is still the citadel of knowledge and should be a forerunner in the fight against illiteracy, instead of being a breeding ground for illiterates or at best semi-illiterates. Establishing reading clinics will go a long way to making students to view reading problems in the same way they view health problems and see the need, indeed, a compulsion to attend a reading clinic in the same way one would seek a remedy in a health clinic. How will a reading clinic on campus operate? First, it requires a policy back-up of the university authority via senate/ council approval followed by approval and release of fund for its establishment.

The reading clinic could be domiciled in the university library to enjoy the space and the technical support of that department. Resource persons in reading, language, language arts and literature could be identified to provide service to the clinic. Among services to be provided are:

- a. Diagnosing problem readers via reading tests and interviews.
- b. Preparation of standardized tests and other diagnostic kits.
- c. Treating diagnosed problems by guiding students through remedial reading programmes.
- d. Preparation of materials.

For the clinic to serve the purpose for which it is established, those who need its services must be made aware of its existence and the kind of services it offers. This implies that like all service providing establishments, it must be publicized. Its target users must be enlightened to enable them seek help when need arises.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Reading failures in the school system remain a major concern of teachers and other key stakeholders in education. At tertiary levels, students manifest a variety of reading problems whose origins have been traced among others to

pro instruction, social/cultural backgrounds and lack of appropriate facilities/materials at this level. At the lower levels of education reading is not taught as a subject and no sustained attempt is made by teachers or students, at reading improvement. Students are thus plunged into massive academic engagements which require higher self-study. Their lack of competence at accomplishing the reading tasks before them results in frustration and consequently, aggressive behaviours.

The paper has opted for the establishment of reading clinics to enable students with reading problems attend to these problems by seeking the help of professionals who would diagnose and treat them. It is reasoned that when they perceive physical unfitness, then they will be motivated to seek help, realizing that like physical ailments, reading problems incapacitates them and reduces their chances of success in academics.

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