

UNDERSTANDING READING PROBLEMS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: SOME OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

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Abstract

In this paper, understanding the typical reading problems in the Nigerian secondary schools are discussed. The factors are discussed based on the evidence obtained by observations and research findings. The importance of teaching reading as a subject in the secondary school is hinted. Recommendations are made to ensure that reading as a tool to learning is given a prominent place in schools and libraries throughout Nigeria.

Introduction:

Studies are carried out at all levels through the medium of English Language in Nigerian Schools. Reading, speaking, listening and writing play a very crucial role at various stages in intellectual growth of the Nigerian child. According to Hughes (1975) reading is the tool to other subjects taught at school. When undertaken, readers are engaged in activities for purposes for which reading is done but unfortunately learners do not engage in reading as expected.

The relationship of reading ability to scholastic success is not open to dispute. Achievement in reading is necessary to achievement in school and when no provision is made for achievement by the poor reader, the student is frustrated into emotional state of failure (Unoh, 1984). Critical minds cannot be developed outside reading and the quality of life and foundation of our life depend on how enlightened one is in this highly technological age. Oyegade (2003) in his article reported that it is an irony of life that most Nigerians have not fully embraced reading and exploited its potential. The question is why must this always be? This paper therefore discusses typical reading problems and their sources with particular reference to Nigerian secondary schools

What are Reading problems?

A reading problem implies the failure of conventional or normal instructional strategies to achieve the desired result, that is, to produce efficient readers. Reading

specialists have highlighted in their studies the reading problems found in Nigerian secondary schools. Historically, Unoh (1980) for example, listed the following as the typical reading problems of students in the secondary schools:

- (a) Slow reading rate
- (b) Inadequate reading interest.
- (c) Slow comprehension rate

Omojuwa (1984) opined that additional reading problems in terms of global constraints against the realization of reading objectives, they are problems of bilingualism, multilingualism, methodological confusion in teaching reading, inadequate facilities and personnel and reluctant reading and learning syndrome resulting to higher illiteracy syndrome.

Alegbeleye (1991) in the case studies of reading difficulties and remedial instructions among pupils in a secondary school, recorded some factors considered to be sources of reading difficulties. They are:

1. Low IQ
2. Poor general physical condition
3. Defective vision
4. Poor Auditory skill
5. Defective speech
6. Very limited vocabulary
7. Confused Directionality
8. Inadequate school method / Educational frustration
9. Adverse socio-economic background
10. Poor attendance and truancy and
11. Emotional and personality problems

Unoh also (1982) reported that research and experience showed that the sources of such reading problems include

1. Poor language development and linguistic – cultural experiences
2. Inadequate teaching of reading
3. Unsatisfactory teaching methods
4. Untrained or badly-trained teacher
5. Absence of development and remedial reading programmes in schools and
6. Inadequate facilities for extra-curricular reading.

Ogundipe (2004) reported in his research that from the testees' response to the reading tasks on the sub-skills it becomes obvious that the following reading/

learning skills constitute reading handicaps to the respondents and are believed to be contributors to the respondents low reading proficiency in English:

- a. Inability to recognize writer's points of view in the written text;
- b. Inability to use textual information to make value judgement;
- c. Failure to determine and identify writers attitude;
- d. Inability to identify recognises and understands structural relationship in the written discourse;
- e. Inability to generalize using basic facts contained in the written passage;
- f. Inability to distinguish between main ideas and supporting details in the printed text; and
- g. Inability to synthesize textual information in the reading process.

According to Wathan (2006), in the diagnosis of Blumber Centre (2006) of Indiana State University, the procedure was based on observation of the child's behaviour while reading and writing showed that symptoms of reading difficulties includes:

- Slow decoding (reading aloud) of written word
- Too many oral reading errors
- More difficulty in reading and writing grammar words (e.g 'if' 'and' but) than nouns and verbs
- Higher than average spelling errors
- Omission or substitution of suffixes in writing samples
- Average or above average Maths. skills
- Wanting to learn to read as evidenced by his efforts
- Artistic (Visual) skills.

It is obvious that studies and observations have shown that pupils encountering reading problems may read slowly and comprehend little in English partly because that is how far their competence in reading in English Language can support them. The likely sources of the reading problems will be discussed in three dimensions, viz biological, psychological and environmental.

Studies show that reading difficulties are neurodevelopment in nature (Alegbeleye 1991; Nathan V, Lauren L; Adam S and Nathan S 2006).

These studies showed that neurodevelopmental problems normally don't go away but they do not mean that a student (or an adult) cannot learn or progress in school and life. When pupils reading problems are identified early, they are more likely to learn strategies that will raise their reading level. Students experiencing reading problems could have developed hearing – auditory perception dominance

and laterality and perceptual motor problems. Minimal cerebral dysfunction, central nervous system disorders, central nervous system, gradular imbalance eye movements, speech defects and poor general health.

The focus of public attention especially parents is now secondary schools and concern has increasingly been expressed about the growing of near total illiteracy among post-primary or secondary pupils. In some cases the issue is not so much inefficient reading as it is one of total inability to read in English and quite often in any Nigerian language. Some surveys have been confirmed in some states of the federation that 40% of secondary school students could neither read nor write on the language of content subject instruction.

A research carried out by Ogundipe (2004) showed that reading performance falling below 60% was classified as low. He covered the four major reading skills at literal, critical, interpretive reading and creative reading. These performance indices indicate that the respondents' comprehension of the reading texts administered to them is 60% in three of the four major reading skills. It was only at the literal skill level that respondents scored above 60%. This performance showed low reading proficiency in English and 80%. It is quite insufficient for learning in the higher education level. The problem of low IQ, hearing rate, self direction, emotional and social maladjustment and relationship with family and peers may have negative psychological effect on learning. Studies have shown that operationally reading disability is diagnosed if there is a significant discrepancy between a child's IQ score and his reading achievement score.

Even though below average mental ability, home conditions not supportive of learning, inadequate school experiences presence of hearing and visual impairments and emotional problems may not be indicative of reading difficulties, they are likely inhibitors of reading proficiency. Apart from biological and psychological factors, environmental factor is also a determinant of reading in English Language. Attention should be paid to school classroom teacher and curriculum materials used in teaching, attendance of pupils and teachers, attitude of pupils to reading, pre-school maturational factors, language factors and neighbourhood standards. These factors must not be overlooked as possible reading difficulties secondary school pupils experience.

Reading as an important and indispensable tool of learning in all educational hierarchies of modern life, achievement in school, the relationship of reading ability to scholastic success is not open to dispute. There are questions raised by troubled parents about our schools, reading campaign is always in the air, at

conferences and seminars about very poor reading proficiency and growing incidence of near total illiteracy among secondary school pupils.

Reading is an art, one of the language skills and so a child's reading is closely connected to his oral language, his writing, listening and other work with words. The implication of this is that if language skills in general are poorly or inadequately developed, and if pupils are deprived of rich linguistic cultural experiences as a result of poor language training and inadequate verbal interaction within their cultural groups, reading problems are likely to arise. This is also evidenced in the research by Ghrib (2004) who was concerned about Tunisia's secondary students learning difficulties. He discovered that the learners' difficulties are basically linguistic.

Reading problems in secondary schools can also be traced to inadequate teaching of reading in schools. In Nigeria, the teaching of reading is practically limited to the primary schools unlike the schools of the western world where reading is taught at all levels at schooling. In addition there is the unsatisfactory methods of teaching reading. Sadly, Nigerian pupils in the primary and post-primary schools read slowly and comprehend little in English partly because that is how far their competence in the language can support them. Various answers have been suggested, of which teachers and the educational system have escaped blame (Omojuwa 1984; Denton, Brytan, Wexler, Reed and Vaughn, 2007; Balfalch, 2009).

After the teaching of word recognition skills and of literal comprehension of easy materials, the children are ill-prepared for more complex reading tasks at the post-primary and post-secondary school levels.

Teachers of reading hardly exist in Nigerian schools. The teaching of reading in our primary schools is left to teachers of general subjects who cannot claim to have been trained in the art of teaching reading and developing reading skills. Ineffective teaching of reading in Nigerian schools is another factor that accounts for these reading problems. It has been observed that it takes an average post-primary school child over 30 minutes to read a page of text, his written composition is full of spelling errors. This linguistic incompetence is traceable to inappropriate language teaching procedure adopted in the primary and post primary levels.

(Omojuwa, 1984; Ghrib, 2004).

Another salient factor apart from the teacher and system is that of subject matter or interest. The students who like to read may rebel against the teachers imposition of unwanted reading materials. The reader and the printed materials

offered need consideration, the interest that a reader brings to the material, his affective involvement and the reader's background of information related to the conduct of the materials are of vital importance in his ability to read the materials.

Caution is needed by specialists to pay attention to areas of psycholinguistic and linguistic factors in our secondary schools where there are no readability formula to grade the readability of secondary school texts. Reading materials can be unsuitable at the language level, cultural element, length, format and print (Omojuwa 1984).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has concentrated only on some of those aspects of reading problems observable at the secondary school level to which it seems the attention of those concerned with the educational process of Nigeria needs to be drawn.

Apart from being an important tool of learning Hughes (1975), reading at secondary school level as well as at the other educational levels, is certainly an important means of developing other language or communication skills. Reading in English allows for emotional stability, resolving emotional conflicts, enjoying leisure and sharing vicarious experiences (Unoh, 1982). These considerations and other valuable reading skills have allowed for the enormous investment that is being made, in terms of money, research efforts and time, by more literate countries like United States of America, the United Kingdom and Canada, in the study and teaching of reading at various educational levels particularly at the secondary school level.

The enormous activities and publications of the International Reading Association and the College Reading Association both in the USA and a similar association in Canada, testify to the importance these countries attach to reading as a subject in the curriculum. Ironically, in less literate and less developed countries such as Nigeria and some other African countries, little or no importance is attached to the teaching of reading problems in the secondary schools in both first and second language situations, (Unoh, 1982; Oyegade, 2003; Alegbeleye, 2005).

At this point, it is necessary to make some recommendations:

1. The improvement of facilities for, and methods of teaching reading at the primary and post-primary school levels should be embedded in educational planning and curriculum development.
2. There is need for developmental reading programmes in all Nigerian secondary schools with well trained reading specialists or librarians.

3. Extra-curricular reading at secondary school level should be encouraged by all means, including the provision of more schools and public libraries.
4. There should be branches of Nigerian School Library Association in this country, the establishment of book clubs and the subsidising or controlling of the prices of much-needed books for easy access of secondary school pupils to enough books.
5. Reading Centres of Clinics or Reading consulting services should be available to all secondary schools, as a means of providing guidance and counseling in reading and learning and also of diagnosing reading difficulties in pupils and remedying specific cases of these difficulties which often arise.
6. There should be more promotion of books and reading through displays, booklists author visits carried out by libraries and publishers.
7. There should be more active involvement by librarians in the reading development of children, especially in the secondary schools.
8. Home is also concerned with the educational process of the child, it should team-up with the school to make reading a continuous growing experience.

This paper concludes by raising certain questions for deliberation on reading.

- a. Should poor readers be given a special remedial class? Should a situation like this arise?
- b. Why the recurrence of unwillingness of secondary school pupils to read and cannot cope with sustained reading?
- c. Which factors considered to be causes of reading difficulties apply most to the secondary school pupils in Nigeria?
- d. What criteria should guide the selection of books – fiction and non-fiction for post-primary school pupils? How can such criteria be enforced in practice. These questions are deliberately made to promote one of the objectives of this Conference.

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