

PROMOTING READING CULTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE LANGUAGE EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to sensitize the Nigerian populace on the importance of reading for both self and national development. The paper highlights the different strategies for revamping the dying reading culture in Nigerian education system. In order to bring in a quality control measure and ensure that Nigerian children benefit maximally from reading in general and develop correct attitude and interest for effective readability. Other ways of motivating the learners to read and keep reading until he becomes a voluntary reader and a lifelong learner habits of reading formed were equally discussed. Finally, recommendations were made and if

implemented, will transform Nigerian learners towards academic advancement.

KEY WORDS: Reading, Reading Culture and National Development.

Introduction

Language learning includes four dimensions: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The paper focuses on the dimension of reading as it relates to development in Nigeria. Reading can be seen as a receptive behavior in knowledge acquisition. Effective reading strategies help build reading meta-cognition and increase comprehension. Reading has been regarded as an important academic language skill (Grabe and Stoller, 2001; Gu, 2003) and has received a lot of attention in second language teaching. It therefore, involves reasoning involving the meaningful interpretation of words, phrases and sentences requiring all types of thinking such as critical, analytical, creative, imaginative, evaluative, judgmental and problem-solving” (Okwilagwe, 1998). Lending support to this is Regis-Onuoha (2003) who sees reading as interactive and transactional. To this researcher, reading involves the use of verbal symbols in the construction and reconstruction of messages, ideas and concepts for the purpose of negotiating meaning. Reading as interaction and transaction involves the text, the author who shares his experiences and the reader who draws from his schemata to abstract meaning from his reading transactions, depending on the context. Okwilagwe is in the school of thought that sees reading as

comprehension. In other words, reading is said to be more than seeing words clearly, more than pronouncing them correctly, more than recognizing their meanings in isolation of other groups of words. Reading requires you to think, feel and imagine. In other words, reading is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the mere understanding of the meaning of words and sentences, but deals with the understanding of ideas. In this case, a person's background comes into play and determines to what extent a person understands a concept and the kind of interpretation he gives to that concept.

The importance of exercise to the body cannot be over emphasized. As such, reading can be construed as the coordinated execution of a number of processing stages such as word encoding, lexical access, assigning semantic roles, and relating the information in a given sentence to previous sentences and previous knowledge. It involves different activities such as eye movement, word recognition, speech, comprehension and vocabulary (Azikiwe, 1998). What this means in essence is that when we read, we use our eyes to view written symbols and we use our brain to convert them into words, sentences and paragraphs that communicate something to us. Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body. Reading helps to stimulate the brain and improves its capacity and memory. It improves your analytical skills. It is in fact the necessary exercise the brain requires to function effectively. Reading has the capacity of catapulting one from his immediate environment to a make-belief environment thus helping to reduce stress as one begins to enjoy his newly found

environment and gain inner peace through reading. Knowledge is generally said to be power. Reading helps to widen a person's horizon, forming building blocks for further learning, increasing his intelligence and stimulating his creativity.

Reading exposes one to new vocabularies which help to develop his speaking and writing skills. Acquisition of adequate vocabularies aids comprehension and makes reading much easier. Through reading, the child learns to be focused and concentrate on issues that matter. Reading promotes achievement in all subjects, not just English. Good readers tend to achieve better across all subjects (Fosudo, 2010). There are other benefits of reading, for instance through reading one learns to empathize with others which is an aspect of human intelligence. Through reading a child becomes more understanding of other people's problems; he becomes more tolerant and less judgmental. He learns to show more love to people irrespective of their social status, health issues, religion, tribe and family background. Readings shouldn't be for just immediate entertainment, or just to acquire certificate but should be for long-life learning. Through reading a person can identify and deal with some health/social issues. This process is known as bibliotherapy.

The reading habit of Nigerians is still very low. The average Nigerian reads less than one book per year and only one percent of successful men and women in Nigeria read one non-fiction book per month (Hasting and Henry, 2006). Nigerian children graduate from secondary schools with poor reading skills simply

because they read only to pass examination without being taught how to read for long-life learning. In the same vein, a number of studies on second language learning reading show some common obstacles encountered by learners. Most students at the secondary school level are uninterested in reading and they have poor reading habit (Ikonta; 2004, Odumuh; 2004 and Nmadumelu, 2017). As such, scholar's like Akinbode (2006) observes that most of them perform poorly in reading comprehension and essay writing. This problem is compounded by the fact that regular reading, most times is not a requirement for getting promoted on a job. The state of reading should be the concerns of all stakeholders in Nigeria and as such, should be given much attention.

Concepts Defined:

Reading as a Concept

Reading is a receptive skill that is meant to go hand in hand with comprehension. Nwogu and Nwoke (2002) in Nmadumelu (2016) maintain that "... reading involves the development of mental skill. It is a mechanical process involving print recognition... For a learner to show perfect understanding of what he records; he must be involved in the intellectual activity of evaluating and synthesizing" It can be construed as the coordinated execution of a number of processing stages such as word encoding, lexical access, assigning semantic roles, and relating the information in a given sentence to previous sentences and previous knowledge. It involves different activities such as eye movement, word recognition,

speech, comprehension and vocabulary, (Olaofe and Masembe, 2006; Azikiwe, 1998). What this means in essence is that when we read, we use our eyes to view written symbols and we use our brain to convert them into words, sentences and paragraphs that communicate something to us. Motivation for reading is seen as an important contributor to the amount and breadth of reading. Researchers have found out that when children believe they are competent and efficacious in reading, they tend to read more. In most cases however, even when children are competent and efficacious, they may not in fact, engage in the reading task except they have a purpose for doing so.

National Development

The term “national development” is very comprehensive. It includes all aspects of all life of an individual and the nation. It is holistic in approach. It is a process of reconstruction and development in various dimensions of a nation and development of individuals. Moreover, national development implies development of a nation as a whole. It can be best defined as all round and balanced development of different aspects and facets of the nation viz. political, economic, education, social and material. John (2015) defines national development “... as the total effect of all citizen forces and addition to the stock of physical, human resources, knowledge and skills.”

Reading Culture

Reading culture evolves when an individual habitually and regularly reads books and other information

materials that are not necessarily required for him to advance in his profession or career (Ogugua, 2015). Motivation for reading is seen as an important contributor to the amount and breadth of reading. Researchers have found out that when children believe they are competent and efficacious in reading, they tend to read more. In most cases however, even when children are competent and efficacious, they may not in fact, engage in the reading task except they have a purpose for doing so.

Eccles in Okpala (2005) defined the different components of task values as interest value (defined as how much the child likes the reading activity); attainment value (defined as the importance of the reading task); and utility value (defined as the benefits the child derives from the reading task). The interest value has a significant influence on recall in reading. Children could read literature above their grade level if they are adequately motivated or if they find the book interesting.

Language competences in people vary from one degree to the other among individuals. The extent to which an individual gains success in reading depends on the extent of his competence in language. A person cannot learn anything unless it is tied to something already known. This is where the schema theory comes into play. This theory emphasizes the building of new connections and knowledge on existing experience. Prior knowledge facilitates text processing and comprehension by providing a framework to which the text content can be related, permitting generation of inferences, and serving

as a basis for evaluation of the accuracy and importance of the text content (Starr and Lovett, 2000). Building schema is particularly important for children who lack a wide experiential background. Scaffolding is the process of using pre-reading, during reading and post-reading activities to assist students to successfully comprehend learn from and enjoy a reading selection.

Children who lack the necessary cultural and linguistic experience will find reading an impossible task. Even if the child is able to read the surface structure level of the language, there is still the need to understand and appreciate the all-round meanings and implications of the writer's expressions. The frustration and eventual failure of bilinguals (and second language learners) in reading can be attributed to language problems arising from learners who are hurried into reading in a language they can neither understand well nor speak fluently.

The immediate goal is to have the child see reading as rewarding so that for him, reading becomes an end in itself rather than a means to an end. The child should enjoy reading and see it as an important part of his recreational program. For greatest enjoyment, certain special skills, attitudes, and appreciation must first be developed. There are basically three levels at which children read:

Independent Level: This level is said to be the highest level at which a reader can read with ease and fluency without assistance from any source.

Instruction Level: This is the level at which the reader can read satisfactorily with the instructor's assistance.

Frustration Level: At this level, the child's reading skills break down. Fluency disappears, with a fall in word recognition and comprehension.

Every child should target at attaining the independent level of reading.

Factors Militating Against Reading Culture in Nigeria

Many factors militate against reading culture in Nigeria, some of which are discussed below:

- i. Socio-cultural factors. In most families, children are not familiar with reading. Their parents can neither read nor write to serve as role model to them. Books are not easily available because nobody is interested in buying and stacking books. In the child's immediate environment, there are no reading rooms; no books and no book shelves. Some parents lack knowledge on how to help their children. There are no programmes such as family literacy where parents and their wards are brought together and taught their roles in promoting reading. Some parents are too busy to give their children the necessary attention needed at home.
- ii. Language is a major factor militating against reading culture in Nigeria. Reading becomes a struggle if the learner is not competent in the language. Researchers believe that there is a correlation between language proficiency and comprehension (Okpala,

2014). Literacy education is successful in a positive learning atmosphere in which learners and teachers feel comfortable with the overall language use. The background knowledge of the child which includes his mother-tongue forms the initial bases for learning. The mother-tongue should be preserved and not allowed to go into extinction. Authors should be encouraged to develop quality prose in different mother-tongues for the Nigerian child. Factors that affect comprehension during reading are: (1) What the learner already knows and brings to learning experience, (2) the mother tongue of the learner, (3) the cultural background of the learner, including family culture, oral tradition, and indigenous knowledge of the learners and their relationship to the literacy being acquired, and (4) the identity of the learner in relation to gender, class, religion, and race (Quarie&Glanz, 2011).

- iii. The non-availability of good books is another factor militating against reading culture in Nigeria. Developing a reading culture is dependent on availability of books. There should be a public library in every community and a school library in every primary and secondary school but this is not the case in Nigeria. The few libraries available lack adequate funding so they can't afford to buy good quality books. The cost of books is high coupled with poor distribution network of locally published books.

Some researchers believe that Nigerian children prefer watching television, listening to radio or playing computer games to reading (Anyagwa, 2000). However, some other researchers share a different opinion on the

effect of Information Communication Technology (ICT) on reading. Okebukola (2004) stated that ICT has not negatively impacted the reading culture of Nigerian children. This researcher believes that Nigerian children are still reading but online. ICT is a welcome development and has come to stay. All stakeholders should find ways of redirecting children's use of ICT for positive benefits.

Strategies for Improving Reading Culture in Nigeria

The following are the major strategies for improving students reading culture in Nigeria:

- i. Providing Access to Books: Several research studies had shown that students develop love for reading when they have access to reading materials (Amuchazi, 2004). Also, Dike (2004) emphasized that one of the cardinal ways school libraries can engage in promoting free voluntary reading is by making reading materials accessible to students. When libraries provide access to interesting books, they help to relieve the effect of poverty among children of poor and illiterate parents.
- ii. Reading Interest and Guidance: Reading interest and guidance help to motivate reluctant readers. When librarians know their users and help to match the right books from the library's collection with the right child, even reluctant readers would be encouraged to read (Hicks and William, 2002). Reading guidance can also be in form of conversation, book list and displays, book talks and reading experiences (Dike, 2004).

iii. Conference Reading: The best way of getting children to read is by associating reading with pleasure. When children read together, taking turns in reading and being read to, they get easily motivated and develop positive attitude towards reading. They gradually develop into voluntary readers. Parents should cultivate the habit of reading to their children from when they are still being carried in the womb.

iv. Reading Clubs: Reading clubs enable children to share their individual experiences. They should be established in all communities. Activities of a reading club include storytelling, reading aloud to each other and sharing book experiences, debates, writing and illustrating stories. Literary events can also be organized such as exhibitions and book fairs with publishers. Awards for organized competitions can serve as reward for reading. This should be encouraged. Reading clubs should not be abandoned in the hands of interested individuals and NGOs, the federal government can lend support by helping to establish reading clubs in our communities.

Literacy and National Development

Literacy as defined by UNESCO is the “ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials.” If Nigeria is to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century she must harness the energy and creativity of all citizens. We are living in a global world and an individual who cannot read or write is cut off from opportunities for self advancement and deprives the society of his own

contribution to national development. Life-long literacy is required for industrialization and technological development, participation in culture and in government at different levels (Iloeje, 2014). National goals cannot be actualized without good reading culture. An educated citizenry can easily be mobilized for political, social, economic and technological development. In the world today, according to United Nations, more than 861 million adults are illiterates while about 113 million children are illiterates. Nigeria has been listed by UNESCO as one of the 15 countries of the world accounting for three-quarters of world's illiterate adults. Fourteen countries out of the 15 listed countries are African countries. Africa has the highest illiteracy rate (40%) and is the slowest in progress. This alarming situation has been a source of great concern to UNESCO. Illiteracy has prevented individuals from participating in democracy and other forms of social interaction for a functional society. UNESCO advised all countries to reduce female illiteracy to 20% by 2020 and eradicate all adult illiteracy by 2030. Youth literacy target is 100% by 2030. In order to improve the literacy level of Nigerians, the Federal Government of Nigeria committed itself to universal primary education (UPE) in 1999. This programme provided a minimum level by which all children will be educated. Education was made free and compulsory at the primary school level.

For national advancement, a literate and highly skilled population is needed. If all Nigerians could read and write, and given the opportunities to take advantages of these capabilities, academic, economic growth, health

and political participation would all improve. Female literacy (including women of reproductive age), for instance has led to the reduction of child deaths in recent times (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation).

Conclusion

Reading promotion in Nigeria should be the task of every stakeholder starting from the family unit to the authors/illustrators, to the school, to the librarians, the children themselves and the Federal Government. Irrespective of potential values of leisure reading, onus is on the authors, parents, teachers, and librarians to see that children reap the manifold benefits derivable from leisure reading. A way of protecting the interest of children is by ensuring that authors are knowledgeable and experienced in order to produce qualitative materials that would elicit from the children, the desired results originally intended by the author.

Recommendations

Authors should bear in mind that Nigerian children are still developing a reading culture and there is still a struggle to help children improve on their reading habits. Authors therefore, should write in such a way that will encourage children to want to read and continue (Okpala, 2005). The authors should also consider the fact that the average Nigerian child lacks adequate vocabulary in English as English is not their first language in most cases, hence the language level of children's literature/prose should be suitable for the intended readership audience. Parents, teachers and

librarians should base their selection of children's prose on standard criteria. What children gain from reading must be maximized? Librarians should be engaged in the collection of good quality children's books. Succinctly therefore, the following recommendations should be given serious consideration:

Librarians should look out for certain criteria such as readability, pictorial illustrations and behavioral objectives in the selection of children's prose for library collection.

1. Prose with local contents should be encouraged
2. Parents are encouraged to build up their own home library
3. Authors should incorporate these three variables (readability, pictorial illustrations and behavioral objectives) when writing for children.
4. The Federal government should declare a national reading/literacy day. A family literacy programme that will bring together all stakeholders can be organized on national literacy day.
5. Every Local government in Nigeria should have a public library
6. Libraries should be well funded by the federal government
7. The Federal government should establish a board particularly for quality control of prose literature.

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