

IMPROVING THE READING SKILL AS RE-ENGINEERING TOOL FOR EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The significance of the reading skill has eluded language artists when compared to other language skills – Listening, Speaking and Writing. The measure of reading rate and space is drastically reduced especially with the increasing craving for a movie- dominated and photo –based society. The patience and necessary momentum enveloped in print- based education has continuously led to the poor rating of literacy level in Nigeria by educational bodies even of the United Nations. Little wonder then that current ratings of our Nigerian Universities among their peers around the world are embarrassingly getting lower. This paper recommends a literature -based language curriculum for schools so that people can be empowered by functional receptive reading as basis for good productive writing. The paper suggests measures that can be taken to facilitate the development of a culture by which the western world has so downplayed the African essence.

The ecstasy which greeted the Nigerian Independence from Britain in 1960 had ushered in a developmental zeal in all spheres of life. The consequence of colonialism which had at least opened a window of the earlier 18th century Industrial revolution soon provided Nigeria a share of the crumbs of the print media. It had been a steady rise in its crescendo until 1966 when retardation came with the military rule.

Six years post-independence period had provided seeming stable opportunities for the University College Ibadan (now University of Ibadan) modeled after its London counterparts and other first generation Universities- Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Lagos, and University of Ife to emerge following an attempt at domesticating the University system without demeaning the University essence. Primary and post primary institutions increased to form basis for tertiary institutions of learning.

However, the 1966 Nigerian military take over obstructed the development process. Rich resources were wasted and worse still, the leftover was not equitably distributed. The largest chunk of our natural endowment were left in the hands of some leaders who displayed lack-luster performances and ushered in mediocrity in the educational system by stabilizing poverty and corruption as some of the undergraduate teachers were hardly able to gain access to good quality education and display proper teaching qualities. The end product soon became an educational sham in manpower and infrastructure.

In the words of Nnnana (2010):

Schools all over Nigeria had depreciated to sub human levels. Teachers spoke little or no English. Classrooms had no chairs and no roofs. How the students withstood their endless ear splitting noises was evident of how low a standard the young teenagers had adjusted to. What manner of leaders would they evolve into?

(Vanguard, p.50, Monday, April 12, 2012). The situation posed the question of whether leaders made out of this system can produce what they do not have educationally or provide what they cannot give intellectually.

Nnanna (2010) further echoes his indictment thus:

Nigerian Universities are more of a breeding ground for prostitutes and cultists than citadels of learning and academic excellence. We are among the worst even in Africa; let us not talk about the world at large. Our graduates are unemployable

(Vanguard p.50, Monday, April 12.2012). Perhaps this should be expected when there is an imbalance in what is read by students and how reading is enforced by the instructors. How much is read and for how long do these students read for developmental purpose? Much of the answers to these problems are hidden in the books for who cares to search.

Today, the education industry has been reduced to movie houses with the print education stunted with slide shows even as primary source instead of secondary materials. Onukaogu (2010) reiterated that:

The print-based education of the Western World appealed to the people for three main reasons. First, unlike our traditional education, it has literacy component. Our people were thrilled to see their thoughts, vision and ideas put in print. They were also excited that through print, they could communicate with people beyond their immediate communities.

The pivot of print –based Education is Language. Reading is anchored on the written text. While writing is the secondary productive skill, reading is the receptive skill necessary for its interpretation and extrapolation. Words in print signify nothing if not read. Thus the catalytic element for the print education is reading.

In the words of Dechant, 1997:1:

Reading is so interrelated with the total educational process that educational success requires successful reading. Experience has taught us that those who fail in school have first failed in reading.

The educational process in Nigeria has practically undermined the potency of reading to an extent that much of what students produce in writing is a result of the experience gathered from what has been read. Sybil (1984) identified reading as involving “understanding written language”. He identified further that:

Through reading what an author has written, you (the reader) set out to understand and respond to the author’s message. Reading involves the processing of the written material before you against the background of your earlier experience and concept. This means that when you are reading you should be thinking, predicting, questioning, evaluating, defining and redefining.

In reading therefore, a reader is involved in decoding phonemes/letters and this requires faculties of thinking, predicting questioning, evaluating, defining, and refining to a printed text. It is a process of getting the end result or meaning from writing.

Interdependence of Reading Variables

Reading skill comprises an interdependence of variables which include: The physical or visual process and the mental or intellectual. The physical of visual variable involves the movement of the eyes across a line of written symbols. The commonly seen lines could either be a straight line process i.e. from one line to the next and from the left side of the script to the right. Such is common with English, German or most Nigerian languages. However, for certain unique cultures like Arabic,

reading is done with the eye movement from the right side of the script to the left. Other Languages like the Chinese are engaged in diverse visual or physical processes as top –down reading physical processes where words could be arranged vertically from top to bottom especially when emphasis is required for short or capitalized texts. This does not undermine the horizontal stance of Chinese writing but rather shows high level of creativity in writing.

Such high level of word arrangement for the Chinese, even though physical, goes further to possess semantic implications. The physical constructions and arrangement of words on a page could denote warnings, danger, praise, status and attitude of the writer to his writing.

The mental or intellectual process of reading is a more sophisticated exercise as it involves how the mind interprets the words (comprehension). This stage of comprehension includes inferring, intra-sentential and inter-sentential relationships.

A Inferring

This refers to discovering the meaning of unfamiliar words/phrases and making use of context. It is generally believed that the longer a text becomes, the more likely to exist within the text some unfamiliar words. It is also widely accepted that a longer text provides a better chance of comprehension as it provides more pointers to meanings in its composition. Little wonder the seeming difficulty witnessed in understanding the gist in the genre of poetry for word economy. This is opposed to the reading ease experienced in lucid prose and drama.

The potency of inferring in reading is fundamental to vocabulary building as meaning are attributed to difficult or rather unfamiliar words based on word order relationship or contexts in which they appear. Consequently, good reading increases knowledge of the word/world. It improves one's imaginative capacity and ability and facilitates greater comprehension.

Reading is the bedrock for proper organizational writing skill hence it aids good and quality thinking based on experience from reading organized written thoughts and ideas of others.

B. Intra- Sentential Relationships

This refers more to the sentence pattern which is syntactic as it shows how the sentence element contributes to meaning. This level of reading relates the base sentence pattern (subject + verb) and other relative, subordinate or coordinate elements together. Indeed, many presidents, senators and other executive officers in Nigeria have difficulties in presentations of their reports because of undermining the basic sentence unit and its relationship to other parts of the same sentence. Good ideas have been relegated in poor sentence constructions. The place of concord (subject + verb agreement) has been relegated to the background. Perhaps, the increasing impetus of pidgin English in the Nigeria polity has provided an escape route for ill-informed graduates. It is a matter of consequence that unless the practice of reading is revived and placed as primary, the wealth of knowledge in most disciplines will be lost and our level of thinking will become shallow. The ambiguity and commotion that could ensue when a sentence like:

The militant embraced the police officer and he died

Could be avoided. The questions that would arise from the above sentence would be how the word *he* relates to the other words in the sentence. Such questions could include:

- a *who died? Militant or police officer?*
- b *Did he die as a result of the embrace?*

Sentence issues as '*death*' can be misunderstood and further cause turmoil if not well represented to a reader. Perhaps it would be clearer to say,

The militant embraced the police officer and died.

Here, at least, '*death*' is attributed to the militant while the cause of *death* by inference might not make *the police* suspect such cause; the cause of the *death* is to be ascertained by the reader.

C Intersentential Relationships:

This is perhaps the most sophisticated level of reading. It includes the relationships between sentences and progresses to the relationships between paragraphs. It provides an understanding between structures of a text. The vast majority of sentences used relatively limited number of organizational structures including enumerations, time order, comparisons, contrast, cause and effect, problems, solutions and descriptions. Each of these structures is associated with set keywords that readers can use in identifying structures used. Examples of enumeration structures like *firstly*, *secondly*, *and then*, *finally* and others help readers to note if the text is listing ideas, events or processes.

The significance of this link lie more in providing a gradient for the writer's thought flow along with a sequence of progression of idea. Inadvertently, a reader of good written works that are properly organized taps consciously or unconsciously into the vast resource of already read materials that would soon become the fundamentals to his good writing where he would exercise his productive skill. It is perhaps even more important to note the potency of good reading to the preceding listening and speaking skills than the later writing skill thus:

Reading to Listening

Good reading culture develops one's ability of listening skill. Every speaker produces language with a bias to convince his listener. Different speakers are bound to apply their individual styles to convince their listeners. A good reader is imbued with reading experience to associate his reading experience to listening levels of literal comprehension (ability to understand what is overtly said by a speaker), inferential comprehension (listening to what is said with the body of speech perhaps not explicitly stated) or critical listening (where the listener understands what is said and is able to relate it to his/her experience and views).

Reading to Speaking

Usually authors will relate the productive speaking to listening because of the audio-lingual relationship while undermining the relationship between reading aloud and speaking. Some schools of thought would rather refer to reading aloud as belonging to the speaking skill for the productive base of speaking not akin to reading. This is of no consequence to this work which emphasizes the organizational skill which constant reading can provide for a speaker. Constant reading increases a reader's vocabulary and provides proper contextual positions for language use.

A good reader has a wider glossary of terms to choose from in the course of his speech. Many words readers use in their speech were met in contextual or situational positions in written works while only a few were looked up in dictionaries. Reading, therefore, has the potential to help in organizing one's speech and building one's vocabulary.

Reading to Writing

This is a more acceptable relationship since experience of what is read is better produced or imitated in writing. The two are secondary skills. While writing refers basically to the store of value of what is read, reading gives life for a written work to be effective. Consequently, writing becomes first an imitation of what is to read, how it is organized and to what effect it is meant before one can exhibit that knowledge on his/her own.

Conclusion

Zeroing in on the cause of the falling standard of education in Nigeria, one cannot overlook the dearth of our reading culture. Hitherto Africans were accused of the absence of print education by the west to the extent that our cultures were termed primitive and non-existent. This was because we had no writing culture. However, when the worth of literacy became paramount in the Nigeria educational system under the British administrators, perhaps only a few enlightened Nigerians realized the salient potency of the basic reading tradition which first generation Nigerian graduates

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were known for reading was soon to become unpopular as the Nigerian literacy level continued to dwindle.

The place of the reading skill as the pivot for other language skills is justified and forms the heart of education.

Recommendations

This work recommends that there is an urgent need for the recreation of a space in our curriculum for reading as a separate subject from language. Also, the course might not necessarily be guided by a language teacher though he/she might be needed to teach the fundamentals of reading as, eye fixation or movement, non-vocalization and reading speed.

A teacher with a flair for extensive reading should be encouraged to transfer such to the students. Finally, libraries should be equipped with books and other reading materials as story books, current journals and even newspapers.

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