

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: FOCUS ON THE READING SKILL

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Abstract

Language is regarded as the most important gift of God to man as it facilitates the activities of man on earth. Existence would have been impossible without a language to ease communication. Language has developed from sound and signs to four major skills being listening, speaking, reading and writing. Some schools of thought regard reading as the most important of the language skills as it is very important in the process of education. Reading is the first sign of literacy. This explains why reading is regarded as the badge of intellect. Any nation's economic, social, political and even technological growth is dependent, to a large extent, on their literacy level. Unfortunately, many students pass through school without acquiring proper reading skills. This adversely affects their education, attitude to reading as well as the studying of other subjects. It is of utmost importance that every student should cultivate good reading skills to be able to meet up with both academic and social demands on reading. The position of this paper is that the reading skill is essential for survival especially in today's information driven society. The reading skill is a tool for learning, understanding, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, information, and performing different activities in and out of work places. A person with a good reading skill/attitude stands a better chance of securing and sustaining a job or competing favourably in the work or business environment.

The 21st Century is characterized by changes in the immediate environment, wider

community and even globally. There are differences even in the approach to issues.

The world economy is now driven by knowledge forcing human beings to constantly upgrade their capacities in order to remain relevant in the scheme of things. The implication of this is that our youths, being students and job seekers must possess and/or upgrade the skills necessary for participation in the knowledge economy of today. To be able to participate successfully, our youths must possess certain skills considered vital in today's fast-moving world. Through a functional education, the development of these skills are made possible.

A functional education is that which considers modern socio-economic, political and technological trends in the global arena in order to ensure that necessary knowledge and skills are put in place for the growth of the workforce and in the interest of humanity. It is the resources inherent in man that education seeks to develop and sustain. The resources include knowledge, skills, talents, experiences and attitudes. It is through education that the right type of training, skills and attitudes are cultivated and imparted into the citizenry. This is clearly stated in the National Policy on Education (FGN 2004) concerning the goals of tertiary education thus:

1. To contribute to human development through high level relevant manpower development and training,

2. To develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individuals and the society.
3. To develop the intellectual capacity of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment,
4. To acquire both physical and intellectual skills which would enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society,
5. To promote and encourage scholarship and community service to forge and cement national unity and
6. To promote national and international understanding and interaction.

Achieving the above goals is dependent on quality education to equip people with necessary skills for optimal productivity. The National Policy on Education (2004) revised, states a philosophy based on integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and the provision of equal educational opportunities for all the citizenry. Part of the necessary skills to achieve this aim is the development of language skills. Language is essential in the life of man and as the trend changes so also the choice of a language that can match the era of globalization. This applies especially to a language with universal appeal like English Language which is universal in usage and very essential as a tool for everyday use (Otagburuagu, 2007). English Language is therefore an essential tool that facilitates employability for all especially in the world of today.

Unfortunately the reports from stakeholders, industrialists and business executives show that university graduates fall short of expectations in the field of work. Even a World Bank report scores Nigerian graduates low. According to Dabelen (2000), a World bank report says that

'Nigerian graduates are poorly trained and unproductive on the job.... Graduate skills have steadily deteriorated over the

past decade. The poor performance is particularly evident in two areas: poor mastery of the English Language and lack of requisite technical skill. These deficiencies make them unfit for the labour market and also for the larger society'.

It further stated that the shortcomings were particularly observed in oral and written communication and applied technical skills.

Concept of Reading

There are four major language skills all of which are very essential for the survival of man. These are listening, speaking, reading and writing. This paper focuses on the reading skill and its role in facilitating employability.

Reading derives from the Latin word 'literate' which means 'to read'.

Two theories will be used to analyze this concept- the fundamentalists and the functionalists theories. The fundamentalists approach an issue from the exactitude of truth. So this school of thought sees reading as the ability to encode messages correctly using acceptable signs and symbols with the corresponding ability and power to decode the message meaningfully (Otagburuagu 2007). This is in line with Ugwuoke's (2006) definition of reading as the recognition and conscious reproduction of written or printed symbols, letters, words, word groups and sentences either mentally or by means of eye or finger contact. This falls in line with the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary which defines reading as going through written or printed words in silence or speaking out to other people.

But by the turn of the 17th century, the functionalists rose and widened the scope of literacy and reading to include the importance, significance and purpose of the concept of reading. It was at this point that literacy expanded to include reading, writing and

numeracy. The conceptual expansion of the term literacy is still on-going. Thus, the functionalist's approach captures the deeper meaning of reading. According to Okwaligwe as cited in Okoye and Ene (2011) reading should be more of 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. Reading entails internalizing the meaning of the writer as well as the interpretation of the reader so that the reader can think, predict, question, evaluate and even create or re-create.

So reading enriches the thinking process of an individual's brain. Regular reading exercises the brain and so the brain utilizes more oxygen as one reads thereby making one a better thinker (Raths, et al 1996, Okoye & Ene 2011, Otagburuagu 2007). For centuries now, reading has been a yardstick for identifying or measuring, a person who is knowledgeable, who has authentic information, who can analyze, evaluate and predict future events based on information available to him or her through reading. Therefore the ability to read becomes synonymous with 'a person of substance' (Otagburuagu 2007). Such a person who reads with deep understanding, becomes a guide, a leader, and a reliable resource for useful information. That may explain why in the early fifties and sixties in Nigeria, some illiterate men used to buy newspapers and tried reading them with the material turned upside down without their knowing the difference. This simply underscored their desire to belong to the elite group of readers.

Reading is a very important skill especially for literate people. Reading is a skill that cannot be acquired outside school. It is a consciously learned skill and it is vital for academic success so much so that even the blind is made to read. This shows the indispensability of the reading skill. According to Duffy and Sherman (1972:1), 'reading is the most critical of the fundamental

skills for a learner's success or failure in both school and society depends largely upon this skill as a reader generally and of English language specifically.

The Problem with Reading in Nigeria

The hue and cry over dwindling reading culture underscores the importance of reading both for students and non-students alike. If it were, not why should no less a personality than our former President Dr. Goodluck Ebele, Jonathan GCFR demonstrate this by gathering students and reading to them in 2011, before tasking them to do the same. The then Head of state used a popular maxim "Bring Back the Books" because he was worried that the youths have put the **books** aside.

The general lack of interest in reading is gradually devastating our country, Nigeria. A people that does not read denies itself of vast opportunities of discovering important information, knowledge, facts and news hidden in several write-ups. Ikegulu (2003) also lamented the poor reading culture which she said was taking a toll on our society and economy. She put it thus: "Our nation is burdened with graduates who cannot read, do not read anything, and are not interested in reading. These people weigh down the economy." No wonder the saying: 'If you want to hide something from Africans, put it in a book. They will not go near it (Ene & Okoye 2011).

The attention of the world, many education stakeholders and researchers have been drawn to the problem of reading in the third world countries. It was revealed that some of the academic problems of our students may be traced to reading acquisition difficulty.

In Nigeria the problem with reading can be traced to poor foundation in the basic schools. The absence of trained language teachers who know the proper procedures for

introducing and teaching reading leaves a lot to be desired (Ugwoke 2006).

Every child needs to be fully competent in reading in order to succeed in school, in the place of work and also to discharge responsibilities expected of good citizens in a social and democratic environment. Everybody needs to read to be able to participate in the continuity of learning. World Bank (2003) describes it as life-long education for the knowledge economy.

But unfortunately, the attitude of Nigerians to reading is very poor and this is worrisome. This has drawn regrets from many scholars who foresee the danger ahead. Oyetunde cited in Agwu (2004) lamented as follows:

Reading is one area that is particularly problematic for children within the school system. A great majority is failing to learn to read and many more are unable to read to learn.

Bunza as cited in Agwu (2004), collaborates this view when he warns ‘...there are many children at risk of not learning to read and unless we come to their rescue, the age of darkness might recur’.

In this information driven society, every imaginable information is available in the superhighway and only good readers can assess and use them. Reading is not only essential for using the print medium. Television channels, radio stations and the internet sites all need their users to be literate. Have you ever compared the number of watchers in a football viewing club and the number of people in a reader’s club? Or will you ever compare the crowd in the stadium during a soccer match and the number of people in all the libraries in Nigeria put together? No wonder the saying that when you want to hide something from an African, you should put it in a book. It is not expected that this should still be so in the 20th century which is also the information

age. The information age gives access to football, games and movies but above all provides more materials to be read for our personal benefit. Our youths need to turn a new leaf.

How Reading Facilitates Employment?

The ability to read involves the ability to use thinking skills. According to Raths et al (1996), reading involves thinking operations such as the following: comprehending and analyzing, describing, comparing and contrasting, interpreting and inferring, judging and evaluating, summarizing and drawing conclusions. The above skills are referred to as generic abilities or key skills which can be deployed flexibly in a wide range of life and work situations (Onukogu 2002, Caleb & Ekpo (2015, Okoye & Ene 2011). Ability to develop and use these generic skills leads to the development of critical thinking which prepares children to deal with the challenges of life. Harvey et al (1977) state that education and training should help students to develop positive disposition to critical thinking so as to satisfy employers’ desires for school graduates who are curious, critical and analytic, reflective thinkers, problem solvers who are quick to learn, flexible and able to add value to their organizations.

Ability to read increases ones chances of success both in securing employment as well as in excelling in any job whether as an employer, employee, self-employed or an investor.

There are jobs that require practical application of the reading skills. They include news casters on television and radio stations, pastors and priests, imams and other workers of God, teachers, secretaries to mention just few for oral reading. Researchers, clergy, secretaries are among those involved in silent reading. Invariably, every job involves some form of reading or the other. From the chief

executive who is always reading correspondences and writing memos to workers who must read instructions and carry them out. Even security men, messenger and cleaners have to read duty rosters, circulars, announcements. (Harvey et al) put it thus:

Reading skill is a sine-qua-non for the acquisition and use of knowledge. The importance of reading in enabling one access and use information points to the need to devise ways to help learners develop their reading skills.

In advanced & highly literate society like Europe and America, reading is a yardstick for measuring quality, success and standard. In selecting leaders, emphasis is laid on knowledge and information level which are attributes of good readers. Reading is used for academic purposes. Students and learners of all grades need to be proficient readers to be able to carry through their academic programs. They need study/intensive reading skills which will enable them to tackle their course work successfully.

- An applicant looking for a job must read and correctly interpret newspapers and magazines advertisement, posters, fliers and handbills, instructions on eligibility or otherwise, directions and requirements, application form filling and accompanying requirements. More importantly, he/she must prepare for the oral or written interview.

In these days of information age, a poor reader is certainly lost in the myriad of information available in the internet and air waves. He must be computer literate to assess and manipulate the computer. The reading skill is indispensable for one who is looking for a job.

The reading skill is required for daily survival. One needs to read road or city maps, warning notices like 'out of bounds' 'keep off' , 'no parking' , 'no stopping, no loitering, no hawking' or even beware of dogs, traffic

signs/light as ignorance is no excuse for flouting the law. Workmen must to read equipment or instruction manuals, drug information and expiry dates of materials or deadlines for submissions or events and so much more to read and be rewarded.

Reading is needed for job maintenance. As an employee, one must read appointment letters, job descriptions, duty rosters, worker handbook. Depending on the type of jobs, reading is required to different degrees. Even Nigerian farmers now read about new farming in-puts, disease management, text messages to get useful information about meetings, supplies or disease epidemics and management and many more.

Good reading skill promotes international intelligibility. One must be able to read with a manageable intonation that is intelligible at international level for various interactions such as conferences, meetings, summits or even social gatherings. At the same time one should be able to understand the English of other nationalities. A good language skill can earn one a job at the embassy, high commission, multi-national companies. International organizations and many foreign concerns.

Reading is also for leisure. When one develops a good reading attitude, then he can afford to read for pleasure. A good reader gets engrossed in a good book and forgets even to eat. This is simply because a lot of enjoyment comes from reading. Reading is also good for keeping abreast of events in the society. That is reading for life-long learning/education.

Even after retirement, ability to read can still keep one busy as is the case with Bayo Atoyebi, our television commentator who keeps busy and earns cash analyzing and highlighting issues raised in the dailies

during the good morning express on NTA (Nigerian Television Authority). One can keep busy proof reading materials for writers, printers and publishers.

Conclusion

Reading is such an indispensable skill that every human being needs it. Any country that does not read is economically, politically and socially poor. All effort should be put into promoting good reading skill in the youth since it can facilitate their getting good jobs. Ability to read and understand is vital for success in school and in job security. Besides, reading is necessary for lifelong education.

Recommendations

- The nation's educational planners must include reading in the curriculum and entrench it in our schools' timetable as a way of emphasizing the importance of reading in the education system. According to Mkpa () even advanced countries like Britain have a special time designated for reading in the school timetable.
- Well trained English language teachers should be allowed to introduce and teach reading.
- The appropriate and tested formulae for teaching reading should be applied to instill the reading skill into our children at the foundation level.
- There should be a space on the timetable allotted to reading or library hour and teachers should ensure that this period is not used for playing computer games or chatting but should be spent in reading various materials such as magazines, newspapers, novels, flyers, bulletins and other materials too numerous to mention. This lays the foundation for extensive reading and development of a positive attitude to reading culture.

- Schools should ensure a good reading environment with class and school libraries, conducive reading arrangement, mobile lending library system and good teacher role model.
- A conscious effort to de-emphasize home videos and games while upholding interest in reading should be made by both schools and parents.
- Parents and schools to make available easy to read and interesting novels and reading materials to the children to make them discover the pleasure in reading.

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