

CHALLENGES OF READING SKILLS AND ADVOCATING FOR QUALITY READING HABITS AMONG NIGERIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

One of the effective ways of developing reading skills among youths is quality reading habits it can improve students' academic performance and enhance quality of life. Reading is highly important in Nigerian educational policy. Without reading there cannot be good and positive technology. Reading is very vital to progress and development of human life and its importance in the educational development of children and adolescents cannot be over emphasized. With proliferation of electronic media, it is uncommon to see children and adolescents carrying books to read. Technology might be slow, but it is very steady in taking over the control of Nigerian students' lives making them to cultivate a good reading habit. They have gradually abandoned book reading to pursue interests in movie watching and surfing on the net. Schools and public libraries are a witness of this dreadful situation. There are various ways of promoting reading habits among Nigerian students which include mobile reading tents, story hours, book talk, among others. Schools and public libraries play a leading role in the reading habit of Nigerian students. The paper concludes by admonishing schools and public libraries in preparing students for success in academics.

Introduction

The critical importance of reading in educational settings cannot be overemphasized. It has always been said that readers are leaders. People tend to develop their broad view only through reading. It is saddening to note nowadays that in Nigeria reading culture is deficient. This is because the general orientation has placed priority on other less important things. For instance, majority of the youth believe that reading does not bring quick money. People believe that education and reading is a long term project which does not yield immediate dividend but, if at all, a distant future. Reading involves series of systems like eye to eye movement, tracing, moving along with hands while reading. A

poor reading habit, therefore, does not only affect proficiency in the English language and other subjects, it possibly affects the coordination of some body parts.

Reading is highly important in Nigerian educational policy. Without reading, there cannot be good and positive technology. Societies may not develop in science-oriented culture. A society that does not have reading culture is not a developing society. Such society will remain stagnant especially in the field of technological know-how. The impact of reading culture on oral and spoken English in Nigerian secondary schools cannot be overemphasized especially regarding the pervasive poor reading culture. People are not ready to read nowadays instead they dabble into politics that could bring money

quickly. In this age of global context and internet pervasiveness, the essential of reading is paramount, but the question is how much young men and women have invested in reading. It is based on this premises that this paper seeks an advocating for quality reading habits through public libraries among Nigerian students and challenges of reading.

Concept of Reading

According to Kozak(2011), reading is a skill which enables readers to get a message; recognizing the written words (written symbols); getting (understanding) the meaning; used to teach pronunciation; grasping information from texts. Reading is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Reading consists of two related processes: word recognition and comprehension. Word recognition refers to the process of perceiving how written symbols correspond to one's spoken language. Comprehension is the process of making sense of words, sentences and connected text. According to Urquhart and Weir (1998), reading is the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print. They further opined that reading is a cognitive activity, and being so, it mainly takes place in mind; the other physical manifestations such as eye movement, sub-vocalization etc are, to them, 'comparatively superficial'. Reading is not just an act of going through the text. It involves certain attitudes and reactions towards the text a reader is reading. Also, Oyeyemi (2005) observed that reading is a means of tapping knowledge from superior minds. Fabunmi and Folorunsho (2010) also defined reading as a term used to refer to an interaction by which meaning encoded in visual stimuli by an author makes meaning in the mind

of the reader. It involves the recognition of printed or written symbols which serve as stimuli for the recall of meaning.

Reading is the ability to understand words contained in a document and to make use of the knowledge for personal growth and development (Dadzie, 2008). This implies making meaning out of recorded information either print or non-print in the life of an individual. People read for different reasons and purposes, some of which include for pleasure, leisure, relaxation, information and for knowledge. Reading is the identification of the symbols and the association of appropriate meaning with them. It requires identification and comprehension. Comprehension skills help the learner to understand the meaning of words in isolation and in context (Palani, 2012). He believes reading is a process of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning and problem solving.

Reading is a multi-dimensional activity that is geared towards achieving multifaceted purposes. There is intensive and extensive reading; there is also reading for leisure and reading examination (Schaltz & Stephen, 2009). People read books for a variety of reasons. They read to comprehend a text and answer comprehension check questions, to do grammar activities, to solve language problems, to improve language ability, to achieve pleasure and information, to know the instruction of using a particular tool, to be familiar with a particular country or place, to decode messages from a printed document, to get idea from inscription from any objects.

In another dimension, reading can be categorized on the basis of mode of reading. Johnson (1999) observed that there are two methods of reading namely, reading aloud and silent reading.

Reading aloud involves audible vocalization of what is being read and is good for young learners because it exposes error for timely corrective measure. Reading aloud is used for speech delivery in public gatherings, and is also the format for dictation and oral comprehensive tests. In silent reading, the reader reads in the inside of him. In other words, he does not vocalize what he reads. Wide reading imposes reading silently and this is necessary for developing the reading habit, effective reading and for a profound understanding of literate and technical tests. The ability to read is essential to being able to learn any subject taught in school. In the current high-tech society, proficiency in reading is a must in order to compete favourably in today's job market.

The importance of reading to educational attainment was highlighted by Falayajo, Majoku, Okebukola, Onugha and Olubundun (1997) when they noted that reading is considerably vital to the attainment of literacy in school. Hence, Onukaogu (2002) pointed out that reading is the fulcrum or cornerstone of literacy and that without it, there can be no literacy. With every activity of meaningful reading comes expansion of the horizon of learning, hence, the more a student reads, the more background knowledge he or she acquires about other ways of life, behaviour and thought. Furthermore, education also depends on intensive and extensive forms of reading because reading is basic to learning. So, a child's ability to read is the centre of the child's educational process.

Reading Skills and some of its Challenges

One of the literacy challenges in the 21st century is reading skill (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012). The major challenges associated with reading skills

can be explained by early reading problems. Lerner (2000) reports that children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up; poor first grade readers are likely to continue to be poor readers. Chall (1987) identified six stages of reading development, from pre-reading, an early stage known as 'logographic reading', which is the earliest stage in which young children begin to recognise limited vocabulary of whole words, using incidental cues such as a logo, a picture, a colour or a shape, through early literacy to mature fluent reading.

A considerable number of secondary school students do not have requisite ability to read and they also have negative attitude towards reading. Available evidence supports this assertion. For example, Adesemowo (1992) had re-echoed the view of Unoh in (1982) that students find it difficult to read for the gist, a trend corroborated by Ezeokoli (1998).

Studies by Bewaji (2000) and Ogwuegbu (2000) maintain that many secondary school students perform below expectation because they lacked some reading skills required for effective study in the particular subject. Further studies have also shown that secondary school students did not have interest in reading because of their negative attitude, lack of motivation by teachers, lack of reading materials, inadequate attention to reading, absence of reading on the time-table of schools and the influence of home videos, computer games and peer pressure (Kolawole, 1999; Ogwuegbu, 2000). Another problem associated with reading among secondary school students is inadequate provision of reading materials. Reading materials are not being provided sufficiently in many secondary schools in Nigeria especially in Oyo State. (Kolawole, 2009; Oguwogu, 2000; Bewaji, 2000).

Akinbote, Kolawole and Kolawole (2007) found out that reading skills in English were not being taught well at the primary school level in Oyo State. They also found out that most primary school pupils had no materials to read, teachers are not working hard to promote reading while parents could not give adequate support to their children due to their level of poverty. Also, Kolawole and Kolawole (2007) remarked that most primary schools had no functional libraries, books and teachers who can promote reading at that level of education. The cumulative consequence of these problems is that most pupils in Oyo State leave primary school level inadequately prepared to cope with the challenges of reading at the secondary school level.

The above problem is not limited to Nigeria. For instance, Kaufman (2001) observed that children spent their time watching television and playing video games when they were not spending a great deal of time reading and writing. Statistics collected according to Kaufman (2001) by the U.S. Department of Education "National Centre for Educational Statistics" shows that students' achievement in both reading and writing has been declining in recent times. Ikpaahindi (2008) rightly observed that information and communication technology especially internet technology has an adverse effect on the reading culture of Nigerians. This is because it discourages lazy students from engaging in serious reading. Many students prefer to spend most of their time in the cybercafés, browsing, playing games, chatting with friends. Ezema and Ekere (2009) identified that only few schools have good libraries, while most of the schools have limited dog-eared books locked up in few cupboards.

Lack of and poor states of educational libraries are other challenges of reading skills. Libraries that can stimulate students' interest to read and develop positive reading culture are not readily available and accessible to adolescents. For example, a former state library in Oyo town was demolished for building a radio station. The library has neither been replaced with another one nor given another land by the government. This could further deteriorate the reading culture among students that are willing to read and an avenue for giving excuses among students that are not willing to read in the first instance.

Lyon (2000) asserts that reading as a language-based activity does not develop naturally, and for many children, decoding, word recognition, and reading comprehension skills must be taught directly and systematically. If a child's knowledge of English is poor, the reading skill as well as reading comprehension will also be poor (Baker, 2006). Cummins (2000) in his developmental interdependence hypothesis opines that a child's L2 competencies are partly dependent on the level of competence already achieved in the L1. This is because bilingual students draw some knowledge when performing reading (Baker, 2006).

Cummins (2000) further asserts that once the reading ability has been acquired in the L1, it is available for use in the L2. If the L1 is poor, it will prove difficult for skills to be transferred to L2. Similarly, Ellis's (2000) Nativist theory confirms that learners' inputs conform to their own internalized view of what constitutes the L2 system. They simplify the learning task by forming a hypothesis based on the knowledge process of their L1.

In highlighting the challenges of reading, Yilmaz (2000) submitted that people who do not learn to read through an intensive phonic programme often have one or more of the following symptoms: Below grade level reading achievement; slow reading; poor comprehension; fatigue after reading only for a short while; poor spelling skills; and lack of enjoyment from reading. Kolawole (2009) concluded that nothing has changed significantly at the secondary school level in OyoState as far as reading is concerned. This is because the state of facilities such as libraries, books, journals and furniture that are helpful for developing a good reading skill and culture is low and something drastic has to be done about it. This conclusion is a springboard for this paper.

Reading Habits

Reading habits are well-planned and deliberate patterns of study which have attained a form of consistency on the part of students toward understanding academic subjects and passing at examinations. Reading habits determine the academic achievements of students to a great extent. Both reading and academic achievements are interrelated and dependent on each other. Students often come from different environments and localities with different levels of academic achievement. Therefore, they differ in the pattern of reading habits. While some students have good reading habits, others tend to exhibit poor reading habits. Academic achievement means how much knowledge the individual has acquired from the school (Bashir &Mattoo, 2012).Reading is an essential tool for knowledge transfer and the habit of reading is an academic activity that increases skills in reading strategies.

Reading habit goes a long way to determine quality of reading that is needed for sustainable and literacy development. Oji and Habibu(2011) contended that reading forms part of an individual to the extent that it becomes a habit which once developed, become very difficult to break. However, what children and adolescents read and why they read can be difficult questions to answer. The art of reading could be an interesting experience for children and adolescents if they are properly guided. A reading habit cultivated early in life helps the child to grow into an independent adult. In Nigeria, there is the general outcry and a serious one for that matter, against the falling standard of education. Several factors are attributed to this fall in standard, but hardly has the establishment of the school and public libraries been mentioned. The absence of school and public libraries and the role they play to uplift that standard of education is ignorantly left out. It is on this basis that this paper is written to highlight the role school and public libraries can play in encouraging reading habits among children and adolescents which is a catalyst to learning.

Factors that can Sustain Quality Reading Habit among Nigerian Students

It has been observed that students rarely read for pleasure or self-development, they rather read to pass examination. Even in some cases, students find it hard to read for examination as they now devise many methods (examination malpractice) to pass examination all in the name of running away from reading as an activity. As a major thesis of this paper, there is the need to espouse some pragmatic factors that are capable of enhancing quality reading habits among Nigerian students.

Probably owing to technological advancement, reading habits are changing, so also quality of reading is changing. In the contemporary society, where technology is gradually taking a steady control over individual lives, the reading habit is fast vanishing into thin air and reading quality is reducing. Students now lack the skill of reading. Instead they spend more hours on electronic media. Based on this, authorities in educational institutions and government can improve access to relevant information and promote a reading culture as prerequisites for strengthening literacy skills, widening education and learning opportunities, and helping people to address the causes of poverty.

Another factor that can facilitate reading quality among students is the availability of a well-equipped library and information centres. All schools especially primary and secondary schools should have sufficiently equipped libraries where state-of-art books are found. This will not only improve students' reading habits but also ensure quality reading among them. While stressing the importance of good library especially to the promotion of reading culture, Kolawole (2009) noted that there is no gainsaying the fact that a good and conducive library has a tendency to attract students to books and book related materials.

Formation of book readers' club is another antidote to poor reading culture and challenges of quality reading in Nigeria. If quality books are provided and libraries are well equipped, then these can be complimented with readers' club. Readers' club can be a veritable tool for ensuring quality reading for sustainable development and desirable literacy level.

Basal Reading Programme (BRP) can also be introduced in Nigerian schools.

It will go a long way to enhance desirable reading culture and the one that is capable of facilitating sustainable development. According to Ransom (1978), Basal Reading Programme is a 'developmental' programme. The main characteristic of this programme is that the same basic books are recommended for all the readers of a particular reading group. The programme starts with pre-reading, and gradually develops towards more complex criteria of reading. The benefit the students receive from this programme is that they develop their reading process systematically. The programme provides the readers with opportunities to read more and more, and at the same time, controls the arbitrary increase of vocabulary and its complexity.

Reading and Sustainable Development

According to Etim (2007), basic literacy means an individual's ability to read, write and speak in English. Reading is the corner stone of learning. Gbadamosi (2007), quoting Osundare (2009), describes reading as 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 habit is the use of reading as a regular activity. It is the cultivation of an attitude and possession of skills that make reading a pleasurable, regular and constant activity. Reading habit is identified as the most important determinant of a student's success in education and in our modern complex society (Nssien, 2007). Reading culture is the process of building up positive reading attitude among students and children over a period of time. When an individual habitually and regularly read books and other information materials that are not

necessarily required for him to advance in his profession or career, he is said to have a reading culture (Gbadamosi, 2007). Reading culture in essence therefore is the kind of culture that imbibes reading and studying as the basis of growth and development. It is the type that sees continuous and dedicated reading of information resources by pupils, children, students and adults for knowledge acquisition, which will be applied practically for development. Reading sharpens the mind, makes one reason rationally and objectively as well as projects one for greatness in life.

Development generally means the improvement of people's lifestyle through improved, qualitative and functional education; incomes, skills development and fulfilled employment. Development also means that people should be able to read and write. In Africa, this is a problem as most people are still illiterates, Nigeria inclusive. Investment in education is a productive venture. This is because an educated labour force is a source of productivity for national development. Nigeria needs this kind of development in order to meet the needs of its present generation without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their needs.

Conclusion

Like every other nation of the world, it is very important for Nigeria to produce students that are capable of engaging their peers in the art and science of reading. Nigerian students at all levels also need to meet the international standard in today's globalized world; it is necessary to improve students' reading proficiency in English. This is because almost all the subject matter at all school levels are written in English language.

The success of children in school depends to a large extent on their ability to read and comprehend which is in turn dependent on the support we give in promoting reading habit. The role of the school and public libraries in preparing students for success in academics is very crucial and cannot be undermined. Availability of the right type of books especially the beginning reading stage is very crucial to the acquisition of good reading habit. Information through reading is the life blood of all human activities. Man's existence on earth is meaningless if it is devoid of reading, Thus, reading materials should be constantly made available to children and adolescents. It is difficult to be knowledgeable if one is not in the habit of reading widely and since it is impossible for anyone to meet all the required reading materials, the library fills the gap. The school and public libraries have a role to play in this direction.

Librarians should be in the forefront championing innovative techniques and advocacy for reading promotion. Television watching, video and internet browsing time should be limited so as to increase reading time. The availability of variety of books for children and adolescents should be expanded to meet various reading needs and levels. These are books that are not necessarily classroom texts but can complement what is learned in the classroom or help children and adolescents investigate into their own private reading interests and habits.

Recommendations

Parents and students should be well orientated on the importance of reading as a crucial factor needed in academic success. The application of information communication technology should be an

added advantage, not in any way over ride the reading culture.

Relevant and current books should be made available for students' use, for it is not possible to be reading in abstract. Books to be read should be made accessible and affordable. There should be integration of story hour, book talks and exhibition in the

curriculum as this will help to imbibe reading culture in the students.

Mobile library services should be provided by Non-Governmental Organizations and philanthropists in order to bring back proper reading culture.

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