

IMPROVING THE ART OF TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION IN OUR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Introduction:

Reading Comprehension is the ability to read closely and understand fully a passage of prose or verse. For anything in print to be meaningful, it must be understood. This understanding is basic to good performance in the English Language paper and indeed, in any subject (Ikegbunam, 1993). Unfortunately, there have been complaints from teachers and public examination bodies poor attainment of reading comprehension in our primary and secondary schools. The Annual Chief Examiner's Report of 1990 observes that even when comprehension passages were fairly short and straight forward, candidates exhibit a general weakness in comprehending what the passage is about. Thus, the teaching of teaching of reading and comprehension skills have been identified as a major problem in teaching English Language in Nigeria. This therefore calls on teacher's of English for improvement in the an of teaching reading comprehension in our schools for better performance and achievement.

The Nature of trading:

is a very important language skill at the primary schools. It can be divided into three parts: The mechanism of reading which involves initial teaching of reading in classes 1 and 2; reading aloud, that is the overall aim of the reading programme in class 3 upwards of the Primary School (Munby, 1975). The specific aims of the reading programme in the middle and upper primary schools are to train pupils in the comprehension skills of reading for exact meaning, implied meaning, relationship of thought, gist of the text and required information {Munby, 1975; Hubbard et al. 1986}. For reading to be complete, the meanings conveyed must be extracted since reading is the decoding of written symbols to arrive at the sounds and meanings symbolised (Abiri, 1969). However, there are reading problems at the primary school level as many teachers, particularly in the rural areas who are supposed to use English as the medium of instruction from the fourth year of primary school very rarely do so, with the excuse that the pupils cannot understand if they speak English, and their contact with the Language may be limited to that coming from the reading of books and the exercises done during English lesson periods (Abiri 1969). For such pupils, their needs must be taken into consideration by the teacher in trying to improve reading. This is vital as it is now believed that the age of readiness for reading is a function of the amount of time the teacher can devote to the learner, his methods as well as his materials (Abiri, 1969).

Too much emphasis on oral reading and failure to inculcate the habit of reading for meaning have produced mere "barking at print". This kind of teaching contributes to slow and laborious reading, vocalization of sub-vocalization of the reading text which are characteristics of bad reading habit.

THE READING TEXT

Reading comprehension skills are necessary for ail the school subjects as books are used to find out facts. Draw conclusion and relate information. The teacher should ensure that the pupils are competent in reading comprehension before graduation. To achieve this, there should be Oral and Written questions with answer on passages treated in class. In addition, Morgan (1969), Johnson (1979) assert that the teacher must actively encourage pupils to read wide and at the same time ensure that all their books are well within their capacity, as young readers who attempt books beyond their ability will fail inevitably. Apart from the general reading, it is recommended that the pupils have class readers which can be used as material for lively discussions between teacher and pupils. During such discussions, they will share their experiences of the story. Short scenes from the books might be dramatized. Extensive reading has great value in widening experience and enriching former experience as well as being an aid to language learning.

For effective learning, the reading matter" should invoke the atmosphere and reality of the immediate environment and the country concerned (Hilton, 1974), and "activities should build on the language experience which children bring from their homes" (DBS and Welsh Office, 1989; 15). Yates (1990) points out that the most effective approach to the teaching of reading is for a range of stories and poems to be read across the day.

Furthermore, he observes that short stories, picture books and longer novels should be read aloud, and the interest levels of the texts should vary as should the level of textual difficulty to reflect the range of reading level in a class.

It is as well important that the teacher should draw the attention of pupil-, ID the way in which significant words and phrases have been used in the passage and depict other situations in which the same words would be useful, and then invite the pupils to do likewise so that they will be left with a good idea on its use and meaning. The teacher should also guide against reading practices that impede normal reading. Fry (* 1965) notes that bad reading habits such as finger pointing, head movement, and cruder kinds of vocalization should be checked as the impede reading; and pupils should be encouraged to read in phrases and not individual words. Furthermore, intensive and extensive reading speeds for various purposes should also be observed for effective reading (Qlaofe, 1991). **THE TEACHING OF COMPREHENSION**

As stated above, the teaching of reading should emphasize the ideational-interpretive aspect, which implies that the learner should be led to place great value on the extraction of maximum meaning from what he reads. To make sure comprehension is attained, passages presented to the learner must not only be interesting, but suitable questions-which will guide him to extract the meanings fully must be provided, and the teachers must not turn the question-and-answer exercises into a mechanical process (Abiri. 1969).

At the early stages, the passages presented for reading should as far as possible be practical so that children can reproduce the ideas physically. A lot of writers like Munby (1975) and Park (1984) have developed effective strategies that could aid pupils to understand and locate information in a reading passage. The common strategy to all of them is SQ3R.

The SQ3R is mnemonic for Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review. The teacher should therefore observe this in teaching reading comprehension for successful attainment. However, a teacher without the knowledge and use of SQ3R is not likely to develop in pupils efficiency in reading comprehension.

On reading comprehension assessment, the reading passages should not be too long. If it is too long, split it into shorter parts for the ease of reading comprehension. Questions should follow the reading passage intended to check whether the class as a whole has understood the passage or not. All pupils in the class should do the exercise in writing to ensure that all the class participates (Hubbard et al., 1986).

The problems of teaching reading comprehension, therefore, centre round the question of adequate and proper training of teachers of English, the provision which proper consideration has been given to phonic and semantic grading of words used, and the provision of lively and interesting materials and illustrations (Abiri, 1969). These problems confronting reading comprehension still continue today and there is the urgent need to solve them in order to attain success in reading comprehension in our schools.

THE TEACHER

The teachers of English in primary schools should possess adequate competence in the language. They should also have firm control of the appropriate contents and method of English language teaching with particular reference to the teaching of reading. Unfortunately, most teachers in our primary schools today seem to lack the teaching qualification and are therefore inadequately trained in these skills to teach effectively.

Troike and Saville - Troike (1982) remark that language proficiency requirement is essential and in many ways the most important requirement of all for all teachers of English. In terms of general background, Dubin and Olshtain (1986) observe that for effective teaching, teachers must have up-to-date understanding of linguistic and learning theories, broad knowledge of the cultural patterns pertaining to the target language as well as to the learners' first language and familiarity with educational context for which their materials will be utilized in reading. Thus, teachers from the same environment may be better suited to teach since they continually observe local conditions, and adopt ways which are appropriate to the locality for the teaching profession. Furthermore, teachers need to develop themselves by attending conferences and workshops to update their knowledge of the curriculum and methodology. According to Wilins (1982) the teacher should have inherent sensitivity to other people, gain sympathy of his pupils and adopt an intuitive flexibility. He warns that if the teacher is insensitive, authoritarian and rigid, his pupils will learn less happily and less efficiently from his teaching.

A good teacher should therefore, be like a woman of motherly type with a genuine affection for her pupils, able to bring a home atmosphere into the classroom for effective learning. The government of Nigeria should implement the provision in the National Policy on Education (NPE) on provision of specialist teachers for language arts with special emphasis on reading at the primary school level (NPE, 1989:14). These no doubt would improve the qualification of English teachers and make for improvement in the teaching of reading for self-reliance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION:

Reading comprehension poses a problem to the learners of English, particularly at the primary school level. The teacher of English should therefore attempt to solve the problem for improvement. The teacher of reading comprehensions has to bear in mind the SQ3R and the levels of reading competence when teaching. He should also be competent and proficient in English generally.

At the primary school, the instructional level is opposed to independent level of reading at which the pupils can do satisfactory reading provided they receive preparation and supervision from the teacher. Due attention has to be paid to the teaching/learning of English as it is the **medium of instruction** for all subjects in the school curriculum from primary four upwards as provided in the NPE (1989).

To ensure some degree of effectiveness in the teaching of reading, qualified teachers of English with specialization in reading should be employed in all schools. Apart from class readers, interesting reading textbooks should be provided to all classes. The English syllabuses for the various classes should be appropriate and available.

Teachers that do not have the minimum qualification requirement to teach in the primary school should proceed on in-service training immediately to meet the requirement. Finally, the teachers on the ground should have regular conferences/seminars and workshops to update their knowledge and teaching methodology on the subject. It is hoped that by these, our primary schools will be adequately staffed with qualified teachers and the teaching of English with particular reference to reading will be enhanced and improved for better attainment.

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