

REFLECTING ON THE READING CULTURE OF STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

Assoc. Prof. Regina U. Obi, (Ph.D.)

Abstract

In contrast to the students in universities in Great Britain, it is observed that students in universities in Nigeria maintain inadequate reading culture in their academic programmes. Rather than reading extensively to widen their knowledge and understanding in their areas of study, they tend to concentrate their readings on their lecture notes simply to pass examinations, and thus, neglect reading other useful books, in addition. This is a serious problem in schooling in Nigeria because it makes teaching and learning very narrow and unchallenging. It is, therefore, the intention of this paper to address this issue critically and proffer suggestion towards achieving adequate reading culture among students in Nigerian universities for extensive knowledge, effective citizenship and national development.

Since the 18th century, literacy has been one of the major concerns of nations worldwide when only the monarchs, aristocrats, and the rich had access to literacy, the ability to read, write and numerate. Today, the reverse is being the case when even the poor masses including women have the opportunity to be literate. Consequently, the rate of literacy for males and females including children and adolescents are increasing steadily through the efforts of missionaries and teachers, various governments, and nongovernment organizations.

UNESCO has alluded to literacy some elements of functionality and permanency. Based on this, Okedara (1981) among others, has stated that:

A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainment in reading, writing, and arithmetic makes it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community development, and for participation in the life of his country (Okedara 1981:25-26).

This paper shares the views of Okedara (1981) in his definition of literacy quoted above. The characteristics of literacy are reading, writing, and arithmetic/numeracy. These are the basis for citizenship, community, and national development. The key word in the title of this paper is reading culture, and it is defined as the ability and desire to develop the habit, and sustain the habit of reading any available resourceful materials whatsoever which can help people to achieve effective citizenship, community, and national development. Students in the universities are expected to maintain adequate reading culture in order to achieve excellent academic performance, gainful careers, and thereafter-effective participation in community and national development. It is the objective of this paper to find out the causes of inadequate reading culture, among the students in universities in Nigeria, which are obstacles to the gains of literacy, and suggest how to resolve them.

Literacy Situation in Great Britain

In the middle of 19th century in Great Britain, religious, social, economic, and linguistic conditions were some of the factors contributing to the level of literacy. The level of literacy was low. The church played significant role in the persistence, educational legislation was enacted provision were made for children to learn how to read and write. Industrial revolution also contributed immensely to the development of literacy and education. More men than women were literate because of gender issues. Men were expected to engage in economic and political activities outside the home, so they had to be literate. Women, on the other hand, were expected to stay at home bearing and rearing children, and performing general household duties. They were not expected to be literate to perform these duties. They were given the opportunity, to learn how to read so that they could teach their children how to read.

In Great Britain today, literacy campaign is still on, and practicable. Males and females including children, adolescents, adults, old, and elderliness are conscious of the gains of literacy. They attend primary, secondary, technical and vocational colleges and tertiary institutions. The level of their

literacy is high as well as their reading culture. The people enjoy reading, and thus, read everything they can lay hands on including "do it yourself brochures", and they put what they read into practice. They read in the parks and gardens, buses, tubes, trains, lecture theatres and halls, lobbies and libraries.

This researcher and the author of this paper was a student in Great Britain. In the case of students, it is observed that as soon as lectures were over, they rush out of the classroom to refresh themselves with snacks etc on their way to the libraries with lists of references from different lecturers. They are given assignments to do, too. In the libraries, the students engage in extensive reading, searching and cross-checking information; acquiring more knowledge and making extra notes; engage in discussions; reading ahead of classroom lectures; and getting prepared for tutorials, seminars, workshops, and symposia, and of course, at different levels of participation. Nobody tells any student to go to the library to read and make use of other facilities. Because of these exposures and participation, they are not afraid in any academic fora. They tend to ask challenging questions to lecturers and professors who welcome their questions and answer them as much as they can. They are not angry at the students' questions. This encourages the students to read more and ask more questions in the future opportunities. The type of informal and cordial relationship between the teachers and students makes teaching and learning very interesting and challenging. The students particularly enjoy reading because they have great desire to acquire versatile knowledge about the world, and be equipped for effective citizenship, community, and national development, and not just to pass examinations.

Each student on the average spends about five hours in the libraries reading and searching knowledge. In the light of the above, the reading culture of the students in universities in Great Britain is adequate. The above criteria are my own observation for about two decades is found to be inadequately used to compare the extent of reading culture of students in universities in Nigeria, which in

Research Methodology

Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting 200 respondents/students in selected federal, state, and private universities located in the Northern and Southern Nigeria. Participant observation technique was used for data collection in Great Britain whereas, structured questionnaires were used for data collection in Nigeria, research assistants were mobilized in selected universities, and they were requested to personally administer the questionnaires to the respondents. The respondents co-operated and answered all the questions properly. The research assistants returned the completed questionnaires through the post and hand delivery. The response rate was 100%. The data analysis is descriptive with frequency distribution, and simple percentages to determine the relationship between variables.

Socio-Cultural Background of Respondents

Out of the 200 respondents, 104 (52%) were males and 96 (48%) were females. They were all Nigerians and belong to different ethnic groups namely, Edo, Ishan, Hausa, Igbo, Ijaw, Ibibio, and Eflk. They study in the Faculties of Arts, Agriculture, Education, Social Sciences, Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Oplometry, Science and Engineering. There is no doubt that the socio-cultural background of the respondents could influence their responses to the questions asked.

Inadequate Reading Culture Among Students in Universities in Nigeria

Out of the 200 respondents, 131 (64.5%) admitted that they read only lecture notes from their lecturers. They believe that there is no need to make extra efforts pass examinations. That they can conveniently pass their examinations and bag out their honours degrees by simply reproducing materials given to them by their lecturers in lecture notes. Whereas only 69 (34.5%) admitted that they do not only read lectures notes, and that lecture notes are not sufficient. To pass examinations very well, they must read in addition, other necessary materials such as books, journals and dailies, and use internet facilities to update information and records.

It is further discovered that only 96 respondents (48%) go to the library to read, while 104 (52%) do not go to the library to read at all. Out of the 96 who go to the library to read, 28 read for 2 hours each everyday; 46 respondents read for 3 hours each monthly; and 22 read for 5 hours each monthly. They go to the library to read other textbooks, journal and dailies, and make use of internet facilities and services to update documentation. They believe that searching information and reading extensively can improve their academic performance. Most of the respondents do not go to the libraries to read. This suggests that their level of reading culture is low and inadequate when compared with their co-students as stated above under literacy situation in Great Britain.

The search further discovered that reading extensively could make the respondents effective citizens of Nigeria in the following ways:

Socio-Economic and Political Enlightenment

Fifty-four respondents (27%) stated that it would help them to be current and keep abreast with significant development. Education cannot be achieved by confining oneself to only the area of study that essentially from a wide coverage of reading materials.

Knowledge is Power

Eighty respondents (40%) agreed that extensive reading could make people more articulate, confident in self, feel actualized and fulfilled with rewarding careers and enhanced lifestyles.

Innovation and Creativity

Only 15 (7.5%) respondents said that extensive reading could not make them effective citizens. They hold the views that Nigeria is not appreciative of extra hard work. The government does not seem to recognize extra work and genius, and does not reward hard work and transparency. That all the readings without obeying the rule and regulations, and law of Nigerian can never make any person an effective citizen. Data analysis shows that 92.5% of the respondents are aware that extensive reading (i.e. reading far and wide to acquire knowledge) could make them effective citizens of Nigeria. Only 7.5% of the respondents said no, in disapproval. Majority of the respondents are aware that reading will make them effective Nigeria citizens.

The research further discovered that the respondents had obstacles to extensive reading in the universities (see Table 1),

Table 1: Obstacles of Extensive Reading

S/N	Views of the respondents	Frequencies and percentages
1.	Poor library space; unconducive reading atmosphere; outdated books and journals; inadequate computer software and improper filing and referencing.	68 (34.0%)
2.	Poor financial support, hunger, fatigue, and lack of time to plan, and expensive books and handouts,	42(21.0%)
3.	(PHCN) blackouts/power failure, unfunctional generators in campuses, and distractions from immodest mode of dressing	38(19.0%)
4.	No responses	52 (26.0%)
	Total	200(100%)

Source: Fieldwork, July-August, 2010

Data analysis in Table 1 shows that majority of the students 68 (34.0%) sated poor library space with unconducive reading atmosphere, outdated books, journals and inadequate computer software and improper filing and referencing as the major obstacles to extensive reading in the Nigerian universities. Whereas only 38 (19.0%) mentioned Power Holding Company Nigeria PLc. (PHCN) still called NEPA blackouts/power failure, unfunctional generators in campuses, and distractions from immodest mode of dressing among students. There is, no doubt, that these problems have the tendency to discourage adequate reading culture, and encourage inadequate reading culture among the students. Only 52 (26.0%) said nothing which suggest that these respondents did not observe or experience any obstacles which they would like to state.

The 148 respondents (74.0%) who slated the obstacles to extensive reading were able to make concrete suggestions on how to minimize or eradicate them.

Implication for Citizenship Education

The above analyses demonstrate that students in the universities in Nigeria maintain inadequate reading culture. Students are aware of their inadequate reading through discussion with their co-students within and outside Nigeria; enlightenment programmes on radio, television, satellite, internet, and journals, workshops, conferences, symposia, and exchange programmes with other universities outside Nigeria such as Great Britain, United States of America, and Senegal. The students awareness of their deficiencies in reading culture has resulted in narrow and unchallenging teaching and learning, poor academic performance, and examination malpractice. University authorities should try to reduce students; inadequate reading culture as a way of achieving effective citizenship and national development.

To reduce inadequate reading culture among students in Nigerian universities the following suggestions are proffered:

- (i) The Federal Government should learn to appreciate, recognize and reward hard work, academic excellence, and transparency. This would spur students to increase (their search for knowledge).
- (ii) University authorities should provide libraries with conducive reading environment, stock libraries with modern books, journals, other resourceful materials and equipment; (iii) University authorities should provide bigger lecture theatres/halls for classes to accommodate healthily the increasing population of students;
- (iv) University authorities should plan work-schedule well, and ensure that lectures stop fixing classes outside the normal school lecture timetable. This could help to reduce stress on students and allow more time for extensive reading, and research; (v) University authorities should provide regular water and electricity power supplies in campuses; free computer and internet services; and security for female students; (vi) Parents and sponsors should give sufficient monies to students to enable them cope with expenditures in the campuses; and
- (vii) Students should stop attending parties, clubs and associations indiscriminately. This could save them time that could be used to read and increase knowledge.

Summary and Recommendation

The paper is an attempt to demonstrate that inadequate reading culture exists among students in universities in Nigeria. Unconducive library space with outdated books and journals, hunger, distractions, stress, irregular and intermittent (PHCN) black out are the major causal factors. If the suggestions recommended above are taken seriously and implemented, students in Nigerian universities will develop and sustain adequate reading culture. This will, in turn, enhance their academic performance, and provide solid base for the achievement of effective citizenship and national development.

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