

Helping to Improve Readers' Skills

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Abstract

The main thrust of this article is to bring out remedial measures aimed at assisting struggling readers to attain a good level of proficiency in public secondary schools in Benue State. The study examined the state of reading in public secondary schools in Benue State during critical stage; it investigates the effects of poor reading skills on students' academic performance. This is with a view to advocating for improved strategies. The study found that the reading ability of the present students in Benue State public secondary schools is appalling. The results further revealed that many students in public secondary schools lack basic reading skills because they missed the critical period of learning reading and carry over the poor reading ability from primary school to secondary schools. The effects of poor reading skills are negative attitude to study, anti-social behavior and poor academic performance. The study therefore recommends improved strategies on part of the government, policy makers and teachers.

Keywords: Readers, Reading Skills, Improved strategies, Learning to Read, Reading to Learn

Introduction

The poor performance of students in external and internal examinations is no longer new in the parlance of scholarly works. West African Examination Council's chief examiner's reports generates different reactions especially on the performance of students in English language every year (Bewaji, 2000 and Ogwuegbu, 2000). Researchers have decried the falling standard of education and negative attitude of students to their studies in Nigeria (Falayajo, Majoku, Okebukola, Onugha and Olubundun 1997; Bewaji, 2000; Onukaogu, 2002).

About 75% of public school students and 40% of private school students are struggling readers (Gbadegesin 2016). Despite the high number of struggling readers in public secondary schools in Benue State, there is no remediation programme for the struggling readers (Gbadegesin 2018). It is therefore on these two previous findings that this study premised.

Emphasizing the importance of reading to the academic achievement of students, the U S Department of Education (1996) argues that reading is the first chapter in education. Learning to read at an early age and reading to learn at a later stage position pupils for long-term academic and career success. Van den Broek, McMaster, Kendeou, & Espin, (2007) note that when children become good readers in the early elementary classes (i.e. learn how to read and acquired basic reading skills at the critical stage), they are more likely to become better learners throughout their school years and beyond. Many students with poor academic performance today, might be potential academic success if some teachers have identified their reading difficulties and designed special intervention programme early to address their reading problems. Reading ability is one of the factors responsible for students' academic success or failure. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates the effects of reading ability on students' performance and advocate improvised reading remediation programmes.

Aims

The aims of this article are to:

1. explore the effects of the state of reading on student's performance;
2. examine the reasons for lack of reading skills among secondary school students;
3. investigate the effects of reading learning periods on students' academic performance; and
4. advocate improvised reading remediation programme.

What is Reading

Reading is truly fundamental and it is necessary for all aspects of life (Hairston 2011) especially, student's academic success. Reading is a number of interactive processes of word recognition and comprehension between the reader and the mind of the text constructor. 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 (Reading Study Group, 2002:11; Gbadegesin 2018). Comprehension does not take place in a vacuum, the readers typically make use of background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, experience with text and other strategies to help them understand written text. The readers use their knowledge to build, to create, and to construct meaning. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985:7) describes reading as "the process of constructing meaning from written texts," and noted that, "it is a complex skill that requires the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information". Reading Study Group (2002:11) defined reading as "the process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language". The definitions emphasize text, classroom activities and sociocultural context. Anderson et al (1985) propose five principles that guide successful reading: (1) reading is a constructive process, (2) reading must be fluent, (3) reading must be strategic, (4) reading requires motivation, and (5) reading is a continuously developing skill.

Methodology

To carry out this research, a thorough investigation was carried out through reading competitions organized at school, zonal and state levels. Furthermore, inter schools competitions were also used to complement our research methods.

Importance of Reading

Researchers agree that the importance of reading skills cannot be underestimated in the academic career of the students (Falayajo, Majoku, Okebukola, Onugha and Olubundun 1997; Onukaogu, 2002 Guang-Lea, Gable, and Klassen (2012). Guang-Lea, Gable, and Klassen (2012) observe that basic literacy skills need to be learned when children are in primary or elementary classes; those who experience difficulty in reading in early classes are always behind their peers in learning and rarely be able to catch up in subsequent years if nothing specific is done. Kolawole (2009) rightly identifies a poor state of reading among public secondary school students in Benue state but attributes this poor reading ability to the students' negative attitude. The negative attitude of the students to education generally according Gbadegesin (2018) is as a result of their poor reading skills. He further submits that behind negative attitude and anti-social behaviors many students manifest is lack of basic reading skills and therefore classifies them as struggling readers. It is hence, not only the negative attitude of the students that leads to poor academic performance but lack of basic reading skills leads to poor academic performance and the negative attitude manifested by the students. Many

secondary school students perform below expectation because they lack some reading skills required for effective study in their various subjects, (Bewaji, 2000 and Ogwuegbu, 2000).

The importance of reading ability cannot be overemphasized because according to Cimmeyotti (2013), the relationship between reading ability and academic performance seems like a logical connection since textual information is prevalent in our society. The results of the study carried out by Espin and Deno (1993) show that a relationship exists between basic reading literacy and students' academic success. The extent to which a student can personally and individually interact with printed materials and make meaning out of them (i.e. reading to learn) determines the level of their academic performance.

Adewole, (2001) submits that one of the main aims of any reading promoting programme is to lay a strong foundation that can benefit students throughout their academic career. Reading will help the students organise their thoughts and equip them to comprehend entire texts (Adigun and Oyelude, 2003). Students' poor performance in English Language and other school subjects is attributed to their inability to read fluently and comprehend (Ojo 1999; Gbadegesin 2016, 2018). Ajibola, (2006) states that reading ability requires a deliberate effort to cultivate; as such, students as well as teachers should be ready to give it what it takes. This is where the role of a well-equipped teacher comes in.

Munro (1995:1) identifies five levels of reading difficulties experienced by learners especially in English as Second Language (ESL) situation like Nigeria. They are difficulties at word level, difficulties at sentence level, difficulties at concept level, difficulties at topic level and difficulties at dispositional level. When students continue to struggle with the acquisition of proficient reading skills, they manifest difficulties in some or all of the five levels identified by Munro (1995). There is therefore need for appropriate reading remediation to enable them successfully overcome the difficulties. Lynne Wawryk-Epp; (2004:7) notes that proficient reading and writing skills are critical to students' academic success. If students are not competent readers, they are at risk for academic, behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. Teachers can change the trajectory in such situations by intervening early and providing explicit, intensive, and extensive instruction.

Learning to Read versus Reading to Learn

Early acquisition of basic reading skills is crucial in the development of children's academic career and children who learn to read early reap the benefits when they start reading to learn. Scholars agree that there is a critical period for a child to acquire basic reading skills through a deliberate effort of both the teachers and the parents. (Hairston, 2011; Donahue, Daane, & Grigg, (2003). Campbell & Crystal (1999) observe that when students have a poor start in reading, they rarely catch up later without appropriate intervention. This submission lends credence to critical stage theory in reading skills acquisition. This stage of early child exposure to reading activities is fundamental to the child's academic career. If a child could not acquire prerequisite reading skills at that time, he or she becomes a struggling reader and this could have negative effects on his or her academic career in the immediate and in future. The critical stage is a time a learner acquires skills necessary for effective reading activities. The critical period is a time the child learns how to read, (U S Department of Education, 1996). The learner is expected to learn how to read and acquire its basic skills while in elementary classes. Donahue, Daane, & Grigg, (2003) support the critical period theory in reading

skills acquisition when they submit that one of the primary goals of early elementary education is the development of basic reading and literacy skills. A measure of reading proficiency is expected to be acquired by pupils at the elementary level or critical period that will help them through their academic career. This is the critical period for learning how to read. If children miss the critical period, they become struggling readers. Teachers start building every day on the reading skills acquired during the elementary schools and the students develop their academic career by using the same skills. Students learn to read by teachers teaching basic reading skills that will be useful for their entire life time.

The stage suggested by scholars are not the same, however there was no significant difference in them. Learning to Read occurs during the early years of a child's education—typically kindergarten through basic three. Some scholars proposed ages 0-6 when the child would have spent about three years in school while others support ages 0-10 as the period when the child should acquire basic skills of learning to read. Although, Hamilton & Glascoe, (2006) propose the end of the third year in school as a benchmark for critical stage, Hairston, (2011), suggests the end of the fifth year in the elementary school. The submission of Hairston, (2011) seem to be more realistic especially in ESL situation like Nigeria. The fifth year is not even exclusive because the students are to combine learning to read and reading to learn as they go through junior secondary education. However, the latter is expected to have higher proportion of possibilities than the former. Acquiring basic reading skills during critical period helps the students to become active learners and participants during the classroom teaching and learning activities.

Others scholars like David (2005) argue that learning to read and reading to learn go on simultaneously from elementary school through secondary school education. This line of argument seems to be the most logical because there is no way a child will learn reading without picking information, and when a child reads for information, he or she is indirectly learning to read. This does not negate critical period theory which state that if a child fails to acquire appropriate reading skills at elementary classes, he or she might become a struggling reader unless there is early detention and intervention (U S Department of Education, 1996; David 2005). Emphasis on reading to learn and learning to read however differs from one level of education to another. While emphasis at elementary level is on learning to read, emphasis on secondary level is reading to learn. David (2005) rightly classifies reading period into three:

- i. Primary period –critical stage of learning to reading.
- ii. Secondary period –a combination of learning to read and reading to learn.
- iii. Tertiary period – a period of reading to learn only.

Learning to read is a process whereby children develop their fundamental reading skills and acquire basic reading processing skills which include fundamental decoding and sight-word skills. During the critical stage of learning to read, the child is deliberately taught skills like print concept, alphabetic system and phonemic awareness (U S Department of Education, 1996). Print concept is designed to equip the child with skills of how to handle books, how to process reading –from left to right and top to bottom. It also prepares the mind of the child that printed materials have meanings. The child learns upper and lower case letters learn how to combine two, three, four and five letters to form different words, engage in alphabetic drills and matching letters with objects.

Scholars agree that there is a critical period for a child to acquire reading skills through a deliberate effort of both the teachers and the parents (U S Department of Education, 1996; David 2005; Hamilton & Glascoe, 2006; Hairston, (2011). This stage of early child exposure to reading activities is fundamental to the child's academic career. If a child could not acquire prerequisite reading skills at

that time, he or she becomes a struggling reader and this could have negative effects on his or her academic career in the immediate and in future. The stage suggested by scholars are not the same, however there was no significant difference in them.

Reading to learn on the other hand entails reading for information and comprehension; the learners at this stage are expected to apply their reading skills to access information from print. Davis, (2014:2) notes that those learners who know how to read can educate themselves in any subject or area of life they are interested in. We live in an age of overflow information, but reading is the main way to take advantage of it.

Reading to learn is the second phase of reading activities. It takes learners away from the level of acquiring basic reading skills to the level of using the reading skills acquired to interact with the author and bring out information from print. It takes the readers to the level of knowledge adventure, new discoveries and gives access to information. The U S Department of Education (1996) explains that reading is the gateway to learning. Facility to understand and use written language has always been a prerequisite to the efficient acquisition of knowledge, and it is becoming increasingly important in today's information society.

After critical elementary stage of learning to read, the success of readers depends on their commitment to developing their reading skills further. Stanovich (1986) argues that individual differences in reading can be attributed to reciprocal causation, whereby high-progress readers read a great deal and encounter a wide range of written language structures, learn more vocabulary, and strengthen their decoding skills in the process. As a result, such readers continually improve in their reading abilities; just the opposite is the case for low-progress readers.

Who are the struggling readers?

Struggling readers according to Hamilton & Glascoe, (2006) are the children who have difficulties with learning the alphabet, and associating sounds, and those who fail to recognize the letters of the alphabet by the start of elementary education. In secondary school, struggling readers experience difficulties at one or more of these level –word, sentence, topic, concept and dispositional. Gbadegesin (2018) describes the struggling readers as low skills readers who missed basic reading skills at critical period, they are learners who are still learning to read when they supposed to be reading to learn. Struggling readers are unable to modify the sound pattern by altering stress patterns, to match known spoken words, they are opposite of skilled readers, who in contrast to poor readers, are able to assess their prior knowledge about a text's topic and apply reading strategies to build, monitor, and repair comprehension, employing different strategies for different purposes, texts, and problems (Anderson et al 1995). Skilled readers have acquired basic reading skills during the critical period of learning to read, the skills they employ when they need to read to learn. Struggling readers on the other hand, lack the basic reading skills hence, they could not read to bring information from the text.

So many characteristics describe a struggling reader among them as identified by Vacca and Vacca, (1999) are: students with lack of cognitive competences to coordinate and process reading activities; inability to recognize words, inability to read fluently and lack of study skills to comprehend given text. Moje, Young, Readence and Moore (2000) observe that struggling readers are strategically disengaged from literacy. Guthrie and Marcia (2003), explain a struggling reader as someone who is

not motivated to read and has low confidence in reading. A struggling reader lacks self-efficacy. Students who are considered to be struggling readers according to Hall, (2014) are typically operating below their current grade-level but do not have an identified learning disability of any kind. Hence, there is rate of possibility of academic success if identified and remediated. Hairston (2011) notes that foundational reading skills essential for a child's academic pursuit are lacking in a struggling reader; these skills must be present in order for the struggling readers to have equal opportunity to access the general curriculum. Struggling readers are at are at risk of developing reading difficulties because they have missed out the skills meant to be acquired during the critical stage. The ability to access the general curriculum is the stage of reading to learn. This is the stage where basic reading skills acquired during the critical period of learning to read is put to work. The struggling readers lack these basic skills, hence, there is need for remediation. Reading difficulties experienced by the struggling readers may be reverted if identified early and an appropriate remediation mechanism is introduced.

Struggling readers could be succinctly described as learners:

- i. That are not dyslexia (i.e. they do not have learning disability) but have various forms of reading difficulties.
- ii. That have difficulties in processing letter to meaning.
- iii. That missed the basic skills during critical stage.
- iv. That are learning to read when they should be reading to learn.
- v. Who operate below the level of their present class?
- vi. Who cannot comprehend what they read; hence learning cannot place?
- vii. That have no motivation to read.
- viii. Who cannot access information form general curriculum?

The State of Reading in Oyo State

One of the fundamental objectives of education is to produce a literate citizenry and as a consequence, all educated people in the world are expected to be able to read and write a particular language of instruction, (Kolawole 2009:389).

The four communication skills –listening, speaking, reading and writing, are classified in four ways

1. Oracy - Listening and speaking
2. Literacy -reading and writing
3. Receptive - Listening and reading
4. Expressive –speaking and writing, (Kolawole 2009; Gbadegesin 2018).

There are studies on poor performance of students in different subjects in Nigerian primary and secondary schools and factors like infrastructural facilities, dearth of qualified teachers, supervision and motivation of teachers have been discussed as some of the causes, (Akinbote, Kolawole and Kolawole 2007). The role of reading ability in the academic success of the students is sparsely explored in this part of the world. Reading difficulties are common and are associated with poor long-term academic achievement (Hamilton & Glascoe, 2006). There is no way a struggling reader could maximize his or her academic potentials and excel in learning.

Basic reading skills in English are not being taught well at the primary schools in Benue State, (Akinbote, Kolawole and Kolawole 2007). This result corroborates Gbadegesin (2016 and 2018) that many public secondary school students in Benue are not fluent readers, they are still learning to read when they are supposed to be reading to learn. He notes that the value of struggling readers in public and private secondary schools in ATISBO, Saki-east and Saki-west, local government areas of Benue

State is 69% and 32% respectively. Kolawole (2009) concludes that most pupils in Benue State leave primary school level inadequately prepared to cope with the challenges of reading at the secondary school level. This places a great number of secondary school students at the risk of becoming struggling readers, most especially the ones whose parents cannot make up for the school deficiencies. Gbadegesin (2018) regrettably notes that as many struggling readers are turned out of primary schools annually, there is no single public secondary school in Benue State with a functional remediation programme for the teeming population of her struggling readers. Elementary level of education is the critical period where students learn to read, any failure at this level may affect the students for the rest of their academic career.

From the foregoing, if basic reading skills in English are not being properly taught at the primary schools in Benue State as observed by Akinbote, Kolawole and Kolawole (2007), the resultant effect is presented by Gbadegesin (2018) the about 69% of students in public secondary schools in Benue State are struggling readers. It might be safe to conclude that the state of reading in Benue State public secondary schools is appalling.

Interestingly, the problem of struggling readers is not peculiar to Africa alone, (though it is more pronounced) it gives concern even in countries like America and United Kingdom where English is their first language. Hairston (2011:27) note that there is an epidemic of struggling readers in schools across America while making reference to the statistics given by National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 as eight million struggling readers between grades fourth through twelfth. However, remediation programme is given attention to in the U S and the United Kingdom. The U S Department of education and the U K Education Agency give adequate attention to remediation programme. To promote academic excellence, successful reading skills must be promoted among secondary school students. Teachers need to be adequately prepared to identify struggling readers and design effective remediation strategies to assist struggling readers to acquire prerequisite reading skills. Hence, the need to help struggling readers deserves more attention than it is given at present in Benue State.

Helping to Improved Readers' skills

One key idea required in improvisation is the concept of "knowing how to act in the moment" (Maheux and Lajoie, 2010:86). Improvisation is deployed on human beings' everyday activities from communication to organization. This cannot not be ruled out of teaching especially when the situation is abnormal. Improvisation becomes the key when teachers possess ability to conceptualize their teaching. Improvised remediation involves going beyond the regular time-table and teaching period; it is a 'Macedonia call' to save our education standard and the future of our nation. It means making a sacrifice that will take the teachers out of their comfort zones to salvage the situation and restore our nation's academic glory through development of basic reading abilities in learners irrespective of their level of academic. It should be noted here that the improvised reading remediation is not limited to English teachers only but cut across all subject teachers.

When reading deficiency is discovered, intervention for struggling readers must be early, strategic, systematic, and carefully designed. U.S. Department of Education (1996) observes that whatever the reason children fail to read by the end of the third grade, remediation must be organized for them.

Most non-readers share a common problem; they have not developed the capacity to recognize the reading experts call phonemes.

Improvisation prepares the teachers to know how to deal with the unexpected reading deficiencies manifested by the students. Maheux and Lajoie, (2010:86) argue that improvisation is the ability to develop know-how competencies to actually act in the moment and make the best in terms of the subject matter such as unforeseen and startling events that sparkle in the everyday of teaching and learning activities. Adebisi and Adelabu (2013) submit that improvisation is an appealing teaching strategy which promotes cooperation, collaboration, self-control, goal-oriented learning as well as emotional intelligence skills. The concept of improvisation is crucial to the existential reality of complexity because it involves a constant dialogic between tradition and innovation, security and risk.

Maheux and Lajoie, (2010:86) concludes that improvisation is obviously central to effective teaching and learning activities. Improvisation is the practice of making and creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings, (Adebisi and Adelabu 2013). This can result in the invention of new thought patterns, new practices, new structures or symbols, and way to carry out the usual. Improvised reading remediation requires that the teachers possess intuitive and technical understanding of the necessary reading skills and how to present them.

Remediation is a special attention giving to a struggling reader to acquire necessary reading skills that will enable him to read to learn. It is a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of both the teacher and the student to remediate the situation. Struggling readers are not students with learning disabilities, they just missed basic reading skills at the elementary levels and need motivation and special attention to catch up. This is where remediation comes in. Remediation is the way this study proposed to help the struggling readers in public primary and secondary schools in Nigeria.

Where there is no government remediation programme deliberately enshrine into school programme, teachers should engage the struggling readers in improvised remediation. If every teacher in public secondary schools will take one to five struggling readers and organize special reading remediation for them, the poor level of reading among secondary school students will reduce, anti-social behavior will reduce, negative attitude to study will reduce and there will be better academic performance recorded in our schools.

Carol Denton (2016), identifies what the teachers are expected to do while helping the struggling readers as teaching skills, strategies, concepts, providing differentiated instruction for all learners, providing explicit and systematic instruction, giving opportunities for application, and measuring student progress. A successful remediation programme for struggling readers should be consistently organized in small groups of 1-5 learners, with a separate time; this will encourage the full participation of the readers. The teachers who teach struggling readers should play the role of facilitators and motivators and encouragers. Adebisi and Adelabu (2013:13) conclude that improvisation bridges the gap between course-book dialogues and natural usage, and can also help to bridge a similar gap between the classroom and real life situations by providing insights into how to handle tricky situations.

With a larger percentage of pupils seeking placement in public secondary schools in Oyo State annually certified as struggling readers, the efforts of the secondary school teachers cannot produce positive results. Basic learning skills are needed for effective secondary education. Therefore, if the objectives of secondary education will not be evasive, improvised reading remediation is highly

needed. The government must be deliberate about, the ministry must be meticulous about it, the teachers must be passionate and discrete about it and the learners must be readily available for it.

Conclusion

Knowledge is power; the study empowers teachers in Benue State public secondary schools in particular and Nigeria in general with prerequisite knowledge needed to help the struggling readers. The submission of the epidemic state of poor reading ability among students across the state, (Kolawole 2009; Gbadegesin 2016 and 2018) places the teachers at a vantage position to salvage the situation. Maheux and Lajoie, (2010:86) argue that when a teacher improvised especially in teaching some abstract and difficult concepts, the learners learn and grasp the content easily. With the prevailing circumstances, the place of improvisation in the teaching of basic reading skills cannot be ignored (though the students supposed to have acquired the skills when they were in primary schools). Teachers are faced with a lot of challenges why they might not be of any special help to struggling readers. However, if their effort will produce the desired results, there is need for improvised remediation to fight the menace of reading deficiencies and poor academic performance in our schools. The study concludes that lack of basic reading skills is one of the factors responsible for students' negative attitude to their studies and invariably, their poor academic performance. The critical reading approach was discussed to keep the teachers informed of the focus of reading classroom interaction at a given point. Gbadegesin (2018) finds that though students are aware of their reading problems, many teachers take reading problems for outright academic problems. This study hence called the attention of the teachers to lack of basic reading skills as reading in learners.

Recommendations

This article therefore calls the attention of teachers to the need to identify the level of reading challenges manifest by respective students and recommends that they improvise a suitable remediation programme to help the struggling readers in their respective classes. It is a special attention giving to a struggling reader to acquire necessary reading skills that will enable him to read to learn. It is a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of both the teacher and the student to remediate the situation. Remediation is recommended also that government should address the teaching of reading skills from the primary levels and introduce remediation programmes in upper primary and junior secondary schools across Benue State.

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