

Teaching Reading Comprehension at Senior Secondary School Level of Education: An Exploration of its Importance and Problems in Classroom Delivery

**Auta, Ibrahim Kanya¹, Ibrahim, Mustapha Afolabi²,
Ayeace, Joseph Kajinyana³**

^{2,3}Department of English, Kebbi State Polytechnic, Dakingari

Abstract

This paper takes a cursory look at the concept of reading comprehension – one of the basic components in English language as enshrined in the curriculum of senior secondary school level of Education in Nigeria. It identifies the advantages and roles played by reading comprehension in enhancing academic performance in virtually all school subjects among senior secondary school students in Nigeria. It explores some of the strategies to teaching reading comprehension and highlights practical problems associated with delivery of lessons in the teaching and learning of reading comprehension in typical classrooms of senior secondary schools in Nigeria. These problems include: lack of proper implementation of curriculum; unsuitable choice of language teaching strategies; inadequate instructional resources; and so on. The paper contends that to provide possible solutions to the identified problems, qualified English language teachers must be employed to handle reading comprehension; and the use of modern technology in lesson delivery by teachers should be encouraged. The educational implication which aims at stimulating students' academic performance in all school subjects may be ineffective if the issues are not handled wisely. The paper concludes that senior secondary school students must acquire the reading comprehension abilities, as it forms the basis for all learning activities. Finally, the paper suggests that teachers of English language should be exposed to more training so as to acquire knowledge of different language strategies. This could go a long way in ameliorating the problems in teaching reading comprehension at senior secondary school in Nigeria.

Keywords: English Language, Reading Comprehension, Classroom delivery, Comprehension Strategies, Language Teaching,

INTRODUCTION

English language is a compulsory subject offered in Nigerian secondary schools. It is “a must to learn and speak” language for senior secondary school students. The development and contributions of the Language to national development led to its inclusion in the National Policy on Education (NPE). Hence, the policy stated as it relates to teaching and learning that:

“The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. ii, From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment...(NPE para.4&5). For Junior secondary and senior secondary schools, the stipulation for English is that of a core subject” (NPE, 2004).

According to Ezeafulukwe (2016), the NPE does not state clearly what the medium of instruction should be for secondary education. But from its provision, one can easily presuppose that the intention of the government is that English should be the medium of instruction while it is also taught as a core subject.

One of the objectives for learning English language at senior secondary school (SSS) level of education as contained in the English language SSS curriculum, is to develop students' reading comprehension skills (NERDC, 2009). Yet, personal experience reveals that students' reading comprehension abilities at the senior secondary school level still have much to be desired. This is probably because of the language teaching method employed by teachers in teaching English language.

As one of the four language skills, reading is the extension of communication and it naturally builds upon other language skills already acquired. According to Agwu (2003) and Nduka (2003), reading is an indispensable tool for learning at various levels of education. With practice and further exposure to reading materials, children gradually learn to read at primary school and perfect their reading as they move higher to secondary school and higher institutions. Skills for reading aloud, silent reading, intensive, extensive and fast reading are then acquired (Nduka, 2003).

The Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) English Language Syllabus revealed the WAEC and NECO objectives for setting Reading Comprehension questions. According to the objectives, it is expected that after six years in the secondary school, candidates should be able to do the following:

- (i) Find appropriate equivalents for selected words and phrases
- (ii) Understand the factual content of a passage
- (iii) Make inferences from the content of the passages
- (iv) Respond to uses of English expressions to reveal, reflect sentiments, emotions and attitudes
- (v) Identify and label basic grammatical structures, words, phrases or clauses, and explain their functions as they appear in the context
- (vi) Identify and explain basic literary terms and expressions
- (vii) Recast phrases or sentences into grammatical alternatives (WAEC 2015-2021).

Success in all academic subjects at senior secondary school level depends largely on how well students can read and understand in English. The inability of students to read and comprehend in English is believed to have contributed to high rate of dropouts. Nwodo (2007) stated that the poor performance of students in reading comprehension contributed to the high rate of dropouts from schools in Nigeria.

The interaction between teachers and students during reading comprehension lessons in our senior secondary schools have more to be desired. Students are asked to read comprehension passages and answer questions provided at the end of the passages. Yet, there seem to be no improvement in performance at the internal and external examinations in our schools.

These problems cannot be divorced from the choice of language teaching methods by language teachers in teaching reading comprehension at senior secondary schools. This paper therefore, set to review the importance of reading comprehension, alongside; its challenges in the classroom delivery, with the urgent need to providing lasting solution that could facilitate and enhance effective reading comprehension among senior secondary school students in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Important concepts such as, reading comprehension, importance of reading comprehension, classroom delivery and reading comprehension strategies are discussed in this segment

READING COMPREHENSION

In a layman's understanding, reading comprehension means the ability to recognize and pronounce words correctly in a text and attribute meanings to them. Arua (2009) viewed reading comprehension as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. This definition coincides with the fact that comprehension is attained only when meaning is extracted from a text. In the same vein, Mamman (2014) defines reading comprehension as the ability to make out, to interpret, to

expound, to look at and compare the meaning of written and printed words. This simply implies that a student who is able to read correctly all the words in a passage but cannot answer any question on the passage is actually not involved in the reading process. Mamman reiterated that although word recognition is necessary in reading comprehension, it does not guarantee that comprehension will be attained.

IMPORTANCE OF READING COMPREHENSION

The ability to read and understand in English language is a “must to attain” for all senior secondary school students if they must succeed in their academics. Reading comprehension is believed to be the bedrock for understanding complex parts of all school subjects. Oyetunde, (2009) itemized reasons why students must attain the ability to read and understand:

- (i) In science and arts subjects, reading comprehension is a prerequisite for performing different tasks as instructions for carrying out experiments have to be read and understood by students before they can perform such experiments.
- (ii) Information from textbooks, reading passages can be useful to students only when they are read and comprehended.

In view of the above therefore, if a student cannot read and understand, he/she will find it difficult to succeed in performing tasks required of him/her at school.

CLASSROOM DELIVERY

Classroom delivery refers to the interaction among the student, the teacher, the content, the knowledge, as well as the mood students need for learning and collaborating with others in the classroom. Ali (2011) states that an appropriate lesson delivery requires a good lesson plan, objectives clearly supported by lesson delivery and evaluation of what has taken place in the lesson. In the same vein, To Avalon (2009), classroom delivery involves applying a repertoire of instructional strategies to communicate and interact with students around academic content, and to support student engagement. Avalon further classifies classroom delivery into four:

1. **Project-based Learning:** This is a delivery method in which students’ gain knowledge and skills by investigating and responding to a real-world complex question, problem, or challenge. It is a dynamic classroom approach in which students actively explore real-world problems and challenges and acquire a deeper learning.
2. **Blended Learning:** A classroom delivery method in which students learn at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.
3. **Flipped Learning:** A classroom delivery method in which individual students access concepts and skills prior to class, often through video or on-line learning, then spend class time in a dynamic, interactive learning environment as they apply concepts.
4. **On-line Learning:** A classroom delivery method in which student access content via the internet instead of in a physical classroom.

READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

The International Reading Association (IRA) Report (2001) suggests some reading comprehension strategies that teachers should use in the classroom delivery. These strategies are explained, thus:

The use of prior knowledge: The IRA explains that prior knowledge is using what one already knows to help understand something new. To help students comprehend and learn from a specific reading material, teachers should help students use their previous knowledge on a subject to help them relate to the subject which they are learning at the moment. Hence, making such connections help students understand what the author’s purpose is and what the story is all about.

Questioning: According to IRA (2001) there are several types of questions that a teacher should focus on. These include remembering, testing, understanding, application or solving, synthesis or creating, evaluation and judging.

The suggestion is that teachers should model these types of questions through “think-aloud” before, during and after reading text (IRA, 2001).

Visualization: Visualization simply means creating a picture or movie in mind while reading a text. According to IRA (2001) teachers should use terms like “mental image” and ask sensory questions that will help students become better visualizes.

Summarizing: Summarizing as IRA (2001) states includes the answer to who, what, where, when, why and how. Meanwhile, students take what they already know about a subject along with their reflections from the book to create their own interpretation and ideas about a certain text (IRA, 2001). Putting these strategies together, therefore, gives students a toolbox of strategies to help them improve their reading comprehension abilities.

SQ3R: This strategy, according to Nist and Holschuh (2000), stands for *Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review*. In order to get an understanding of the text, one should first survey the passage. This involves quickly looking at the title, headings and any subheadings. While surveying, the reader asks questions about the topic scanned, such as “What did my teacher say about this passage or topic?” The next stage is to begin reading. After reading a portion or section of the book, the reader recites what has been read aloud. The last technique is to review what has been read again (Nist and Holschuh, 2000). Hence, exploring different reading strategies depending on the learning situation is very important for developing reading comprehension skills.

PROBLEMS IN CLASSROOM DELIVERY

Given the numerous advantages that teaching reading comprehension has in the Nigerian educational system, the component should be approached with proper techniques and methodology for effective classroom delivery. Its instructional procedure should not be carried out without the use of appropriate teaching models, such as the interactive teaching strategies, which encourages active participation of learners in the learning process and appeals to the feelings of each participant. However, teaching of reading comprehension at the senior secondary school level is not without some challenges. Some of these challenges are explained below:

The English language Curriculum has not in any way supported the teaching of reading comprehension in the senior secondary school level in Nigeria. Reading comprehension is subsumed in the English language in such a way that it is seen as just a component. This has seriously deprived reading comprehension enough time in school lesson time table

The negative attitude toward reading comprehension is a problem bedeviling reading comprehension classroom delivery. Chinwe (2016) states that negative attitude toward learning inhibit intellectual growth and comprehension. Experience has it that many secondary school students prefer the listening and writing skills to the speaking and reading skills during language classes. This is probably because the later skills expose their weaknesses. The negative attitude toward reading therefore, is a significant impediment to the development of their reading comprehension abilities.

Ineffective implementation of the English language curriculum is another impeding factor to the teaching of reading comprehension at the senior secondary school level of education in Nigeria. The researchers’ ten-year work experience reveals that classroom teachers who are part and parcel of the key implementers of the curriculum often skip reading comprehension aspect during lessons. Perhaps because of their inabilities to teach the aspect or the hectic nature of the component.

Application of unsuitable instructional methodologies in teaching is also a stumbling block to teaching reading comprehension at senior secondary school level of education in Nigeria. Daniel (2013) reports that teachers use ineffective instructional tactics and do not always involve students in learning activities that would inspire them. They focus on preparing students for examinations, leaving out exciting instructional ideas that will push them to master the fundamentals of the subject matter. Meanwhile, they use classroom learning practices that are centered on the teacher and do not create or encourage students to actively participate in the learning activities.

Another problem that obstructs the teaching and learning of reading comprehension is lack of infrastructure in libraries, e-libraries, and multimedia learning facilities. There are no resources available to encourage students to read. Most schools lack libraries with enough textbooks for reading comprehension, they are merely consulting rooms with outdated materials which do not correspond to 21st century learning materials (Faluke, 2017).

The teaching of reading comprehension may also be adversely affected by lack of sufficient qualified English language teachers. In a classroom setting, competency and mastery of subject matter are important drivers of production. In Nigeria, the lack of expert teachers in English language has had a negative impact on the teaching of reading comprehension. Secondary school students require seasoned English teachers to carry them along with the appropriate teaching methods that could help them process reading texts for maximum comprehension.

Time allocated in the lesson timetable is quite insufficient to perfectly exhaust reading comprehension lessons. The forty (40) minutes per period allocated for English lesson in most senior secondary schools is not enough to apply some of the suitable strategies, such as the interactive strategy in teaching reading comprehension to senior secondary school students. This has seriously inflicted and is inflicting a serious problem in teaching reading comprehension at the senior secondary school level of education in Nigeria.

WAY FORWARD IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION

Competent language teachers and appropriate learning resources are required in order to streamline the process of teaching reading comprehension at senior secondary school level of education in Nigeria. Ihejirika (2014) reports that seasoned teachers and proper resources go a long way in reducing the obstacles learners face in learning process. To this effect, competent teacher training and appropriate learning materials are required to prepare learners for the task and to modify their unfavorable attitudes toward learning.

Language teachers should also be fully aware of the different methodologies, strategies and learning activities suitable in teaching reading comprehension. Think-pair share, group discussion and Socratic dialogue under interactive teaching and learning strategies encourage students to critically process a reading text for maximum comprehension. Incorporating modern learning technology such as, digital photo, slides and the like into the classroom could also assist to engage students and develop their intellectual thinking, learning interest and abilities. Hence, the availability and accessibility of these technology learning gadgets in our secondary schools could serve as a solution to the teaching of reading comprehension in particular and English language in general.

Teachers should be trained and re-trained at regular intervals through workshops, conferences, and seminars for continuing professional development schemes for innovative teaching to renew their teaching skills. This would help them grow in terms of competence and skill. Muhammad and Jauro (2022) state that teacher-training assist teachers in utilizing various ways in order to enhance and improve educational activities and Students' social skills and critical thinking would be nurtured and developed. Hence, a competent teacher who employs learning tools, tactics, and strategies to process knowledge and motivates students to learn is required for effective teaching.

It has been stated earlier that the senior secondary school English language curriculum does not favour effective teaching of reading comprehension in our secondary schools. Secondary school teachers should therefore be included in the development of curriculum and modules for English language.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

Students' reading comprehension abilities stimulates and encourages learning: Students that can read texts and understand stay more focused in their learning activities than those who cannot read and understand. In Nigeria therefore, learning reading comprehension could be of great benefit to senior secondary school students because comprehending any reading text or material is believed to be the bedrock of success in their academic pursuit. It is also believed that students' reading comprehension abilities determines the rate of students' success or failure at the WAEC and NECO examinations. On the whole, adopting an appropriate strategy to teaching reading

comprehension by teachers, such as the interactive teaching strategy could certainly provide a lasting solution to teaching reading comprehension at senior secondary school level of education in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that a senior secondary school student in Nigeria must acquire the reading comprehension abilities, as it forms the basis for all learning activities. Hence, it assists in the development and expansion of language knowledge. It is also obvious that teaching reading comprehension at senior secondary school level of education in Nigeria is faced with some problems at the classroom delivery. However, adopting appropriate reading comprehension strategies depending on the learning situation could go a long way in ameliorating some of the problems.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on observation and educational implications of the study, the following suggestions are made in order to improve the teaching of English reading comprehension at the senior secondary school level of education in Nigeria:

- (i) English language teachers' should use appropriate reading comprehension strategies depending on the learning situation. This could certainly ensure effective teaching and learning of reading comprehension.
- (ii) Considering its importance to students' academic pursuit, reading comprehension should be taught as a separate subject and not as a component under English language.
- (iii) Proprietors and principals of senior secondary schools should embark on vigorous monitoring and checks on lesson delivery and coverage of syllabuses in order to ensure full and effective implementation of the curriculum.
- (iv) Senior secondary school teachers should be part and parcel of the curriculum development process since they are the key implementers of the curriculum.

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