

Some Reading Disabilities among Secondary School Students

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Abstract

The influence of Television notwithstanding, reading in our generation is becoming increasingly important. The value of reading is so enormous that in our society nowadays, time, efforts and money are being devoted towards improving reading. Some professional bodies and learned societies have engrossed themselves in workshops, seminars and conferences aimed at promoting reading and literacy. Some NGOs are not relenting in their efforts in promoting reading culture. They organize reading competitions among secondary schools. Enyimba Reading Festival has become an annual event in Aba metropolis of Abia State where students from different schools interact in reading competition. However, there are basic factors that affect growth in reading and these factors in their adverse, cause disabilities among young readers. This paper identifies and discusses the various disabilities in oral and silent reading among secondary school students and concludes with suggestive remedial practices for both the learner and the teacher.

Introduction

A substantial percentage of the street hawkers and those involved in manual jobs are of the school going age. Such have got used to their hand to mouth means of survival that they no longer give thought to the future. It is not disputable that one of the major reasons these children left school was financial constraints or lack of sponsorship. As a salvage measure to this situation, government has introduced free education (UBE programme) to a certain level; this has raised hope for those whose problems hinge on finance. Gerhad (1981) asserts, 'reading is not a simple matter', a point that reveals another factor that had shown some other children the way out of the school gate. The crux of the matter is how would this latter problem be solved? What hope could be given to a drop out whose problem was a classroom factor and how would future occurrence be forestalled? These questions are very aggitative given that reading is a stimulus to formal learning; 'a key to much of the learning that will come later...' (Minovi 1976:27). If reading means this much, it should be properly taught, otherwise children when they can no longer cope with the 'impossible' task of reading may get frustrated and quit reading.

The Concept of Reading

Reading research began in the year 1879 when Emile Javal published his first paper on eye movements and in 1886 when James Mckeen Cattell's paper on seeing and naming letters versus words was published. Surprisingly, serious attempts at building explicit modes of the reading process-models that describe the entire process from the time the eye meets the page until the reader experiences the click of comprehension have a history of a little more than few decades.

Theoretically, reading is viewed from two points. Reading is a mechanical process, reading is a mental process. Many people have not yet learnt that the rhythmical travels of the eyes from left to right over a page of print is not automatic, but a skill that has to be learnt. The

eyes systematically move, stop, move, stop and move along the line of writing and this movement is called saccadic movement. The stops the eyes make between the saccadic movements are known as fixation and it is during these fixations that reading takes place. The part of the line the reader perceives at a fixation is called perception span. Dellman et al (1974) elucidates that fixation time constitutes over 90% of time spent on reading, while the movement of the eyes from one fixation to another accounts for less than 10% of the time. The length of the perception span and the number of fixations per line are determined by the difficulty of the text, the readers' purpose and his level of efficiency.

However, during reading, time comes when the reader makes a backward movement from a point of fixation to a previously read. The backward movement is called regression. Certain factors, negative or positive can account for regression ranging from poor vision, difficulty of materials, attempts to grasp a point i.e. effort to reinforce the message and failure to imbibe the left to right orientation in reading. This is very important because according to Delmann a Chinese child learns to read from top to bottom of the page, a Persian child from right to left. In our own context, a child must be taught to cultivate the left to right eye movement as a habit. "Failure to do this accounts for why inefficient readers reverse letters in certain words (Minovi. 1976). The mental process of reading on the other hand, takes place in the brain. What the eye perceives is interpreted here and the reader now obtains meaning from the marks on the page, (Ituen 2004). Reading is the most widely used of all the language skills. Dellman et.al (1974), mystified reading as;

A telescope; because through it we can look at the distant stars and speculate about life on them; a microscope; because through it we can not only examine chromosomes and the atoms, but also infer those minute particles that even the finest lenses cannot reveal; a never-ending-wide -screen film on which the human pageant passes in review, it is still the only time machine that can recreate the events of the past and open up the vistas of the future .Primitive man calls reading magic and he is right.

Coming nearer home, Umolu and Oyetunde (1991) see reading as simply "a dialogue or communication between the author and the reader via the medium of print". This implies that reading is not a passive act. It involves making meaning out of a 'mass of impression' represented in various text aspects (Gerhad 1981). It is seen also as 'a process of communication through which formal learning takes place' (James 1984). Reading requires understanding of the thought behind or beyond the print.

Reading is the widely used of the language skills. It is a tool for learning and a stimulus for formal education. Anderson, (2002) sees reading as, 'a process of constructing meaning from the written texts'. He sees skilled reading as constructive, fluent, strategic, motivated and a lifelong pursuit. Elucidating on this, Anderson says, 'reading is a basic life skill, a cornerstone for a child's success in school and indeed throughout life'. He asserts, 'without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success inevitably will be lost. It is also perceived as a means of language acquisition, of communication, and of sharing information and ideas. Like in all languages, it is a complex interaction between the text and the reader which is shaped by the reader's prior knowledge, experiences, attitude and language community which is culturally and socially situated. Froetsch's (1998) definitions of reading as cited in Beth, (2006) highlighted three processes of reading which includes;

learning to pronounce words, learning to identify words and get their meaning and learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it. This by implication suggests that reading is a skill that demands competence.

The writer presents his/her ideas or information in words in a linear order while the reader has to read and understand this linear string of words. Especially for more experienced readers (say for schools and colleges), reading becomes less of a problem of recognizing words and more a matter of reasoning, involving the meaningful interpretation of verbal symbols (such as words, phrases and sentences) and requiring all types of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagination and problem solving. Thus, reading process involves both the acquisition of the meaning intended by the writer and the reader's own contribution in the form of interpretation, evaluation and reflection about these meanings. All the reading experts agree that reading means more than mere looking or even moping at the printed material, it is a practical task whereby the reader is required to react to the materials in several ways ending up in complete comprehension of the prints. However a scholar views reading, comprehension or understanding remains the centre of the matter.

The value of reading

The value of reading is paramount in our existence in the society. In spite of the advancing information technology, reading in our space age is becoming increasingly important. As our society keeps transforming to a technological one, more and more types of employment are requiring skills in reading. Again, as long as competition among nations is based to a large extent on technological achievements, there will be a premium in knowledge that can best be attained through reading (Dellmann et al 1974). The printed pages are projected to reach millions of people still untouched by the electronics and for those who cannot take advantage of the newer devices, reading still serves a unique purpose. They further acknowledged the powerful essence of reading when they asset "if all events of 100years were destroyed and only book left, man will still be man".

In agreement with this, Minovi (1976:11) declared; despite the influence of television, we still live in what has been called 'a print culture'. The insurmountable value of reading has aroused public interest to the extent that there is now a considerable concern in many countries including Nigeria about whether or not a child is learning to read or is reading to learn. Adults and parents are making painstaking efforts in ensuring that their children are able to read efficiently.

The Teacher and Reading

When analyzing the reason for the prevalent in reading culture among children, various agreements emerged. Among the factors blamed are Television which is argued to erode reading time, exchanges communication through the print with visual communication and damage eyesight. Some others blame it on general lack of discipline in today's schools and unnecessary expansion of the primary school curricular to the detriment of the basic skills. Yet others vocal enough blame it on shortage of teachers, too many poor teachers, lack of parental guidance and the permissive society. But Ramsey (1962) summarized "given a good teacher, other factors in teaching and reading tend to pale into insignificance". This line of thought has given more relevance to the teacher factor. This, in essence, has increased and made more strategic the role of the reading teacher. For instance, Moyle in Minovi reinforcing Ramsey says; "Children generally will neither begin to learn to read nor proceed to acquire the necessary reading skills if left to their own devices... no matter how rich the reading environment, they must be given systematic instruction".

Furthermore, Obah (1980) observes that “good reading habits are formed with regular application of good reading skills and attitudes”. Reiterating the importance of teaching reading, Blackie (1967) says in Minovi, traditionally, one of the first tasks of the infant schools is to teach children to read. It is still quite rightly, a major pre-occupation, since reading is a key to much of the learning that will come later...” If teaching of reading does not receive the magnitude of attention it requires in the infant school, the effect is long lasting. Hence (Mnovi:11) already reports; “Secondary school teachers complain frequently that the basic skills – what used to be known as the three Rs – are not being properly taught in the primary schools; so that 11 and 12year olds are arriving at their comprehensive schools or even grammar schools without the foundations for further learning. This imbalance in the teaching of reading has given rise to the shortcomings manifested young readers..

Reading Disabilities Associated with Silent Reading:

Constant Fixation

Having discussed the process of reading earlier, it is believed that we are familiar with the term fixation. An efficient reader makes less and brief fixations because he may fully recognize two, three or even more words in one glance, while a child makes many fixations per line at first – at least one for each word and his fixations per line decreases as proficiency increases. This is very normal. However, it is observed that a lot of students at JSS level make too many and constant fixations while reading. This is a disability that may arise from poor vision, low concentration and inability to recognize words etc. This should be diagnosed properly to proffer solutions.

Aimless or Reckless Regression

By regression is meant backwards movement of the eyes to a previously read word, sentence or paragraph. While reading, few regressions could be done to coordinate meanings. This implies that regression may not be a shortcoming. But when regression is frequent and mechanical it becomes a reading disability. A reader who makes aimless regression may be deficient in the left to right movement of the eyes on the print, word recognition or it could even be manifestation of visual defect. Aimless regression impedes comprehension and should be checked.

Lip Movement

Lip movement is a reading disability prominent among primary and JSS students. Here the reader is conscious of the letters and the words being read and as such make a subconscious articulation while reading.

Alternating Binocular and Monocular Reading

A good number of pupils and students have been frustrated, and consequently quit reading because of poor eyesight. However, visual defect is not necessarily the chief cause of reading disability because it is not peculiar to poor readers. Anybody who needs visual correction will certainly read better when effected. The issue of binocular vision entails the two eyes receiving the image of an object at the same time in the process of perception which does not happen with children with short sight, long sight or astigmatism. Children with such defects in other words are monocular vision. This being the case, if an individual ignores the image received with one of the eyes and sees with one eye at a time, it means that the individual has monocular vision not associated with visual defect but more of a habit. In other cases, the individual may form the habit of changing or alternating between one eye and the other and in yet another case may alternate between using one eye at a time and using the two eyes. In

this regard, the individual alternates between monocular and binocular reading. This is reading habit that should be given attention. Individuals with this disability usually apply too slow reading rate.

Inappropriate Reading Rate

If a student fails to diversify his reading rates to suit the purpose of reading, time available and the difficulty level of the material being read, he is most likely to employ too slow or too fast a rate and both have severe implications on comprehension.

Reading Disabilities Associated with Oral Reading:

Poor Articulation

This is usually traced to home and social environment owing to poor models. This disability manifests in poor pronunciation and enunciation resulting in stuttering and stammering at times.

Delay: This is also observable during oral reading. Here the reader hesitates for a long time before pronouncing a word. He either makes silent or subconscious practices before he pronounces or he may go blank while expecting help.

Exchange: Here the reader substitutes the exact word on the page with a synonym or he paraphrases.

Dropping: The reader in this case omits the word in the passage completely. This could be a defense mechanism or caused by a poor vision.

Slotting: This is a disability that manifests when the reader inserts a word that was not originally in the passage.

Remedial Practices

A good number of factors affect growth in reading. One of such factors is physical which borders on visual, hearing and speech. It is obvious that any child who has impairment on any of the three will not be able to read. For instance, a child with visual defect will find it difficult to read, because he cannot distinguish sounds he did not perceive. Also if a child has problems with articulation not necessarily dumbness, he may be withdrawn from reading. Therefore, it is recommended that Government establishes an outfit in various central areas where teachers or parents could visit to establish the visual, hearing status of their students/pupils/wards. This is because, if the visual, hearing and speech problems of the children are corrected or alleviated, there will be a booster in their reading programme/culture, because some of the stuttering, stammering, delay, substitutions, dropping, slotting they do may have been ensued from the physical factor.

- If the difficulty level of the text is high, the child may have to go back constantly and this may deter his development. To curb aimless or reckless regression, simply running a finger along the line in the right direction can help the beginner as long as the level of difficulty is right.

Also in the interest of those reading to learn, authors and publishers are enjoined to endeavor to match the content of their texts with the mental level of the children/readers and also improve on the character of the prints.

- Words are formed by letters, sentences by words and proper syntactic arrangements of these words in the sentences produces the right meaning. But teachers should guide

the students to appreciate the attempt to recognize both letters and words in the sentences when reading for meaning is not fruitful.

The fact remains that when reading for letter recognition or word recognition, you won't find meaning and when reading for meaning, little or no attention should be paid to recognizing the letters in the words and words in the sentences, otherwise the purpose would be forgotten, concentration marred and comprehension lost. It is just like listening to the news. If your interest is the accent of the caster, you will not assimilate the news itself, but if your interest is in the news, you will not appreciate the accent of the newscaster. If the teacher gets the students to understand this, the problem of constant fixation would be pushed behind.

- Students can be guided to diversify their reading rates to suit the purpose of reading, time available, quantity of material and difficulty level of the material being read.

This can be achieved through drills on different reading strategies like survey reading, speed reading, phrase reading, close reading, inquiry reading, critical reading and aesthetic reading. Each of these reading strategies has a special speed rate measured in number of words per minute. Each has a unique method employed to get the information required from the text. The drills can be in form of locating a given word within a time frame, getting the number of times a given word appears in a given text, reading to get the them and the supporting ideas.

If such drills are employed by the teacher, the issue of alternating binocular and monocular reading and that of inappropriate reading rate will be handled. The fact so important to mention is that drills on the various reading strategies will help the students not only to become fast readers, but also have the competence to vary their rates accordingly.

- The issue of lip movement can be tackled through counseling by the teacher. Omojuwa's (1985) study shows that "most teachers lack necessary training and interest required of a successful reading teacher". Also Abiri (1985) said that an ill-equipped teacher cannot impact a skill he does not possess and as such a reading programme under such a teacher suffers. This he emphasized when he stated: 'Most teachers do not have the inclination or experimental background to reflect appropriately on their own methods', and teachers so affected create problems rather than offer solutions to the reading problems of their student. Teachers should therefore be made aware of their vital influence on their student, especially in their reading habit. They influence their students significantly by their own example and by the procedure they adopt in teaching reading.

Recommendations.

- For the above reasons, it is recommended that seminars and workshops be organized for teachers at primary and secondary school levels to enhance their competence in reading and teaching of reading.
- Teachers should model reading to the students. Any teacher that wants his students to read must be seen reading. The teacher can get the students to practice loud reading.
- It will pay off if the students are guided to develop their own variety of text such as big books. A big book is a book that facilitates shared reading.

Conclusion

From studies so far conducted, it is obvious that the bulk of the job on improving reading lies on the teacher. However, others such as parents and government should contribute their quotas to complement the efforts of the teachers in ensuring that pupils and students go

through their compulsory task of reading with ease, and this will help to curb the harmful norm of school dropping.

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