READING AS A LANGUAGE SKILL AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ITS STUDY IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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ABSTRACT

In this age of Computer and technological advancement, reading culture amongst Nigerians is gradually facing extinction and has become a source of worry and threat to language teaching and learning. Proficiency in reading skill exposes the reader to a wide range of human experiences that sharpens his general outlook to life. This study attempts to highlight the significance of reading; the reasons for the gradual extinction of reading culture amongst Nigerians; how this has become a threat to language teaching and learning and the role of the Applied linguists in inculcating this fundamental skill to learners as a way of finding solutions to this problem especially in an ESL (English as a second language) learning situation..

Key words: Reading , Language, Applied Linguistics.

Introduction

Reading is one of the four language skills paramount to human development and a receptive skill with tripartite relationship with the author and the text. A prolific reader is ultimately exposed to and very much abreast with current global issue, people and places.

Reading can be defined as the ability to grasp reading contents quickly, understand accurately and recall much of what has been read.

> Aina et al opine that *'the experience of reading and hearing increases speed; facilitates comprehension, good pronunciation; develops reading and critical thinking*

skills. In addition, shared reading puts confidence in some timid children and encourages them develop a voluntary reading habit,' (wikipaedia,2015)

Generally, reading stimulates imagination, encourages quick learning, widens views, expands horizons and helps learning about different people and places. Ultimately, the acquisition of reading skill can make a student develop a positive attitude towards school and create high self-esteem.

People read for various reasons ranging from self-improvement, pleasure and relaxation, motivational feelings of pride and prestige (Oke, 1966).The essence of reading is basically to comprehend, and in whatever format a reading material is presented, reading involves complex processes that need to be undertaken with deliberate consensus and mastery.

Collins and Cheek (1999) describe reading as 'a process that requires the use of complex thought processes to interpret printed symbols as meaningful units and comprehend them as a thought unit in order to understand a printed message'.

Rubin reinforces this idea with the opinion that reading is a total integrative process that starts with the reader and includes the affective, perceptual and cognitive domain.

Reading is therefore a complex activity which requires frantic efforts, especially as it affects communication.

Levels Of Reading

Reading comprehension is a basic linguistic skill and an essential tool for acquiring all kinds of human knowledge in all disciplines.

However, 3 levels are involved:

1. The literal (factual) level which deals with the understanding of the denotative or surface meaning of texts.
2. The inferential level: This involves the creation of mental images from the information presented and the ability to understand the implication of such ideas. This level deals with the connotative meaning of what is read.
3. The conjectural level: This is the level whereby the information understood is used to develop new ideas and also to adopt a critical approach to what has been read.

Effective comprehension therefore implies that the information got from the material read can be presented in different ways, without losing the basic message of the text.

Types of Reading

Basically, reading can be classified into two broad types namely (i) Oral Reading (ii) Silent Reading (Intensive and Extensive Reading).

(1) Oral Reading: This type of reading is vocalized, involving a tripartite communicative interaction between the writer/author, the reader and the audience.

Public speeches, News broadcast, minutes of meetings, public announcements are examples of materials that fall under this type of reading. The essence of oral reading is significantly to inform, educate or entertain a given audience. Additionally, the communicative competence of the reader plays a significant role in this type of reading.

(2a) Intensive Reading: The intensive reading which is silent in nature demands an intense deep concentration on the part of the reader in order to grasp the meaning of the reading materials, draw inferences and make analogy. Here, special focus is on the grammatical forms, details on literal meanings and their implications. However, intensive reading is characterized by the following:

- Intense reading
- Classroom-based
- Emphasis on linguistic/semantic details
- Geared towards identification and acquisition of key vocabulary.

(2b) Extensive Reading: This type of reading requires voluminous texts. Unlike the intensive reading, the extensive reading is concerned with the overall understanding of the text and its main ideas, as against specifics.

Extensive reading necessitates speed and skipping of irrelevant materials in order to grasp the primary message of the text.

For this reason, it employs faster reading techniques such as skimming, scanning and the SQ3R.

The Extensive Reading is characterized by the following:

- Mostly used is extra-curricular activities like novels, newspaper.
- Voluminous and varieties of reading materials
- Emphasis on general information projected is the text.
- Employs faster reading
- Reading for pleasure

Language Teaching And Learning

Effective language teaching and learning involves a dual responsibility between the teacher and the taught, and transcends from direct concrete experiences to a more abstract expression. This process addresses learning difficulties amongst students, formation of their personalities and the creation of a conducive atmosphere by the teacher for motivational learning, The learner adopts a receptive stance which helps him to assimilate and dispose himself towards the use of such imparted knowledge for effective communication and self actualization .According to Wikipedia, language teaching and learning can take different forms, ranging from the structural approach(code meaning ,translation and audio-lingual) to the Functional (which focuses on language as an expression of certain functions ,such as request, interrogation) and the Interactive approach which prioritizes on the maintenance of social relations, using patterns of moves, acts, negotiation and conversional techniques. The most recent of these approaches from the 21st Century is the use of blended learning, which combines face to face teaching with electronic /computer based teaching and learning.

However, in whatever perspective language teaching and learning is viewed, reading as a language skill remains significant in the area of language acquisition,

The place of applied linguistics in reading

Reading is essentially a receptive language skill, involving the extraction of meaning from a text or discourse and a tripartite interaction between the writer , reader and the text.

The place of Applied linguistics in the acquisition of reading as a language skill is to provide the framework its acquisition for the purpose of pedagogy and practice as well as to improve learners use of the skill.

Succinctly put, the place of Applied linguistics in Reading can be explained in the light of Wilkins's definition '…….Applied linguistics is concerned with the increasing understanding of the role of language in human affairs and thereby with providing the knowledge necessary for those who are responsible for taking language-related decisions whether the need for these arises in the classroom ,the workplace**……''**(Schmitt, 2010:1)

The significance of applied linguistics with respect to reading is therefore as follows:

- to identify the stakeholders in the acquisition of the skill amongst learners.
- to investigate possible challenges inherent in their roles towards achieving this skill.
- to proffer linguistic strategies and techniques towards the improvement and inculcation of this skill amongst learners.

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- to formulate policies and procedures to be adopted in the reading and remedial processes of acquiring the skill.

Theories Of Reading

In general terms, a theory is a philosophical background that provides the basis for a particular practice. Theories cut across every discipline and are formulated based on the philosophies and objectives of a given area of study.

In the field of language teaching and learning , Richard and Rodgers (189:14) defines theory as 'a set of principles about how languages are learned ,how knowledge of language is represented and organized and how language is structured.' With regards to reading as a language skill, four basic reading theories are identified as follows:

i**. The Traditional Skill Model** : This theory of reading postulates that reading is a bottom- up or data driven process whereby letters are perceived in a left to right sequence until a word is perceived as a whole with meaning obtained in relation to other words. This theory of reading emphasizes and promotes skills like reading content materials effectively, accurate spelling, summarizing specified passage as yardsticks for measuring reading comprehension.

Implications for readers: Vocabulary development transcends from mere introduction of words , their spellings and definitions; to developing concepts for words and trying to determine their similarities and differences with other words ,using dictionary cues from a given passage. A proficient reader should be able to 'synergize with words', to develop a holistic approach to reading.

ii. The Psycholinguistic theory

This theory is a clear departure from the traditional model theory that postulates that reading is a process of predicting meaning based on the reader's knowledge of oral language with the associated cues in syntax, semantics and phonology. This theory is primarily a top- down or conceptually driven model with emphasis on the prediction of meaning. Essentially, the reader is expected to use prior knowledge and experience with language to get meaning from printed materials .Proponents of this theory include -D. LaBerge ,S.J ..Samuel ,R.Ruddell and a host of others.

Implications for Readers: The student readers need the guidance of the teacher to determine whether students have the general background knowledge to understand the meaning of a text, as well as offer remedial experiences to students with limited knowledge in reading through real –life situations.

iii. The Interactive theory.

This theory is an integration of the top down and bottom –up processing concepts developed by Rummelhart in his information processing model .He opines that while the reader is processing features, letters, spelling patterns and the like ,at the same time, he or she is also attending to the general context (syntactic and semantic environment) from which meaning is deduced.

Implications for readers: This will necessitate support from the teacher in creating the students awareness in their personal attitudes and beliefs in order to shape their interpretation of a text, giving it a meaning in relation to the author's intention.

iv. The Schema Theory

This is a more recent theory of reading comprehension. It states that meaning does not lie solely in the text itself but establishes an interaction between the text and the cognitive structure or schemata already present in the reader's mind. Comprehension of a text therefore involves the calling up of an appropriate schema from the reader's mind which fits into the message in the text. From these stored knowledge, inferences about the author's purpose and message is made to arrive at meaning.

Schemata therefore serves as a basis for making inferences or reading in between the lines for predictions. It also serves as a vehicle for searching memory for previously read materials and reconstructing meaning. In Ausubel's term, schemata is the ideational framework for understanding new information. Other proponents of this theory include M.J.Adams, M.Collins and R.C.Anderson.

Implication for readers: It should not be presumed that students or readers have schemata for all possible purpose of reading. The teacher should determine when to modify or shift the readers' views to a more appropriate schema in relation to a text. If we want students to comprehend a text in a particular way, we must assist them in setting up a cognitive structure to do so.

Process And Product Of Reading

Processes and product of reading come into play in the comprehension of meaning.

The processes of reading refer to the cognitive and psychological processes that take place during reading, in addition to the instructional techniques employed to make the readers or students arrive at a given response. A teacher must first access the mental background of the students so that new materials can be related to what is known.

In the overall process of acquiring the reading skill, three people are involved in a tripartite interaction namely : the author, the reader and the teacher.

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Author- The author's responsibility is to ensure that readers understand the text by anticipating the readers educational level in such a way that the readers could use their background knowledge to achieve comprehension. The author could employ techniques like pre-reading questions, introductory paragraphs and other instructional materials appropriate to the reader's level.

The Reader- The reader should be able to relate his background knowledge to the author's message .In this case, reading becomes an interactive communication process between the author and the reader.

The Teacher-The teacher must first understand the different perceptions to reading a text namely: Text as a vehicle of Information(TAVI) and Text as a Linguistic Organization(TALO).While TAVI means that every text is written to convey information; TALO means that a text bears different morphological, syntactical, semantical, graph logical features with some pragmatic associations that must be deciphered to appreciate a given text as a linguistic body. Having understood these perceptions, the teacher is charged with the responsibility of developing appropriate schema for the students by determining whether students have the general background knowledge or experience to understand the text as well as use it. In addition, the teacher should relate the subject to students real life to develop their interests as well as assist them in word recognition and vocabulary development , In both instances, new words should be presented in meaningful contexts and related to personal experiences to arrive at the meaning of new words.

Langer (1981) introduces three stages of teaching reading known as the PREP: Pre reading, Reading and Post reading plan.

The PREP technique ascertains the reader's opinion on a given text by the teacher and notes how students acquire and organize information prior to reading. This technique shows that students with much prior knowledge give definitions, synonyms or analogy to a given text; students with some prior knowledge give examples or characteristics while those with little prior knowledge give very sketchy or no picture of the text at all.

Earle (1969) proposed another technique to the acquisition of reading skills known as the Structural Overview aimed at assisting students to understand content materials .

In this technique, key words are first listed. Through structural overview and questioning at various successive levels, students are required to remember what has been read, to organize and sift out the irrelevant , leaving the meaningful.

Product Of Reading

This involves questioning students and getting answers. The possibility of eliciting right answers from students will be determined by the appropriateness of the learning process, adopted in the teaching of reading .The ability of the teacher to apply the appropriate learning process towards reading will culminate into achieving the desired learning outcomes and product in reading.

OTHER LANGUAGE SKILLS: Listening, Speaking and Writing.

LISTENING: Learning a language is not limited to the knowledge of its grammatical rules and syntax but with the way of life and the cultural behavior, values and customs contained in the culture of the language ;thus the transmission of the basic language skills of listening , speaking, reading and writing also have their cultural influences. In a second language learning environment, learners train their listening abilities to understand better. Some learners have poor listening skills due to poor vocabulary, weak grammar, vague pronunciation, and lack of knowledge of the cultural background of the target language. Listening is closely related to the culture, economy and politics of the target language. It is a known fact that when we are listening to some familiar events, it is relatively easier for us to understand. On the contrary, listening to materials which are strange to our cultural background may prove difficult to understand. Teaching strategies should therefore be geared towards reconstructing the learner's thinking order and helping him adjust to the new and unfamiliar patterns of the new language**.**

SPEAKING:

Effective communication through speech is essentially the practical use of language and the use of materials mutually intelligible to the interlocutors involved. A good speaker is one who is abreast with both the linguistic aspect and contextual knowledge of a language and this propels him to use proper sentences in proper context. Teachers should sensitize learners on the implications of constructing English words, phrases and sentences based on their understanding of how their first language is formed and also assist the learners 'get into' the target language by use of proper sentences in proper contexts.

- **WRIT**

  ING: A writer's style is a reflection of his personality , experience and beliefs. Good writing skill is the product of a solid foundation built on intensive and extensive reading abilities because the writer builds his work on the experiences and knowledge acquired through reading as well as real life experiences. The goal of the teacher is to enhance students'

mastery of writing skills in the target language and to familiarize them with the techniques and mechanisms of good writing which include spelling ,punctuation and capitalization and other rudiments of effective writing.

Relationship between reading and other language skills

Bright and Mc Gregor (1970) advocate the use of reading as a tool for teaching writing. They opined that through reading passages, writing accuracy can be guaranteed especially amongst ESL learners .Wilkins (1978) supports that reading provides an avenue for students to acquire vocabularies for effective writing in a second language.

Hart ,Slacks et al(1967) uphold the indispensability of previous knowledge acquired by the students through reading and other real-life situations ,in gaining mastery in writing skills.

Rubinstein (1969) supporting the reading-writing theory, opines that to learn to write, a man must learn to use and trust his mind. Other language skills such as listening and speaking are prerequisites and framework for the acquisition of reading skills.

Whereas listeners and readers aim at decoding and constructing meaning (receptive);speakers and writers use the use the vehicle of language to encode and express meaning(productive).

However, each of these skills can be analyzed, using the top-down and bottom-up processes. The top –down process makes use of shared knowledge and contextual information while the bottom-up depends on grammatical , phonological and orthographical expertise as aids to the accurate interpretation of meaning.

Ultimately, one language skill is inadequate in a communicative activity. Listening ,speaking, reading and writing are integrated skills that combine to achieve effective communication.

Causes Of Reading Failures

Certain factors can result to reading failures such as:

1. Lack of concentration: Reading comprehension is hardly attained where there is no concentration. Concentration involves developing initial interest and desire to read, curiosity to learn and the alertness to keep up with the reading speed and sustain interest.
2. Regression: This involves going back to re-read already read words or sentences. This affects reading speed and result in mixing up ideas. The reader should develop an onward attitude in the reading speed to avoid this.

3. Poor reading habits which reduces reading speed and comprehension. Habits such as sub-vocalization (whereby the reader vocalizes what is read) , pointing to words, and head movement (the head follows the eye-pace unconsciously).
4. Lack of Comprehension. : This is the reader's inability to comprehend basic elements that give the main idea of the text, both on the denotative or connotative levels of meaning.

5. Phobia for reading: Our society is an oral society. Nigerians have a culture of adopting oral means in the dissemination of information, shying away from any information represented on print. This is not the case in the Western world where there is a reading culture and children are encouraged to read from their earlier years.

6. Problem of cross cultural communication: Some readers bring their cultural dimensions (their native languages) to bear in the course of reading a text and this could lead to misinterpretation and distortion of the author's intended message.

Reading skills/techniques

Effective reading skills require more concentration and alertness and fast reading in a calculated and masterful pace.

This is acquired through practice and regulation.

The following techniques can facilitate faster reading.

1. Preview : This involves the examination of a material to be read before reading .The reader locates the date of publication ,table of content, length of material (number of pages).style of the writer (simple/complex). Preview determines Purpose ad purpose determines Pace. These are represented in the 3Ps (Preview, Purpose and Pace) which are important factors for faster and effective reading.
2. Skimming: This technique involves going through the written materials fastly in search of main ideas only. The reader looks for the headings , sub-headings, Tables and related information and quickly notes the main points.
3. Scanning: This involves flipping through the reading text for specific information. Once this information is accessed by the reader , he tries to understand the idea conveyed and takes down the major points in the desired information
4. Memory: This reading skill involves the storage of information in the reader's memory as a result of exposure to effective reading. This technique involves Learning, Retention and

Recalling; which enhances the understanding of a text. This is entirely different from Memorization which is an inefficient habit , devoid of understanding .

5. Note –taking : Note-taking is an important reading and study skill which aids the recall of materials read .It is a personal skill that varies from one individual to another. This technique involves jotting down the major ideas found in a reading text or simply paraphrasing the read materials in the reader's own words and understanding.

   Usually notes are grouped according to related subjects /disciplines and should be dated. Use of abbreviation is highly recommended because it is time-saving and enhances one's reading and note-taking speed. Examples of abbreviations include impt (important), b/c(because),misc (miscellaneous) Vol (volume .Simply put, Abbreviations are abridged forms of words, adopted for ease of writing and for speed.
6. Reading for Evaluation and Inference : This technique is often very tasking because the reader evaluates sentence structures ,and the technicalities of the vocabularies used in the text. Generally, the technique involves rapt attention from the reader and should not be done under time pressure in order to give the reader, ample time to assess the reading text for better assimilation, assessment and inference.
7. Exploiting the topic sentence for main ideas: The reader needs to identify the main idea expressed in the reading text. This can be found in titles, sub-titles,topic sentences and summary. The topic sentence simply brings out the summary of the idea expressed in each paragraph. This could be found either at the beginning or end of the paragraph in the midst of some supporting sentences or elaborations. The ability of the reader to exploit the topic sentence embedded in the text helps him to achieve a fuller understanding of the content of what is read in a short time.
8. The SQ3R Technique: This technique is used for reading so as to achieve maximum retention and recall.

   The SQ3R stands for :

   Survey- Looking through the reading material or book, to help the reader achieve better understanding and assessment.

   Question: The reader asks questions related to the surveyed passage to get a clearer picture of the book. Questions like how authentic the book is and its scope etc.

   Read- This step involves reading the text carefully for effective comprehension. At this point ,reading is done several times to achieve mastery .Re-reading aims at clarifying confusing

ideas ,asking questions ,making notes ,acquisition of new vocabularies and a general understanding of the text.

Recall- Recall involves careful reading with concentration as well as reviewing what has been read .Here, the reader recites from his memory and this helps to assess the reader's understanding of what has been read.

Review-This final stage entails going through the whole text over and over again while sorting out the major ideas and relevant details. Essentially, Review is the final scrutiny of the overall text.

Conclusion

Reading as a language skill is fundamental in human development. A prolific reader is exposed to diverse human experiences akin to an itinerant .However, a lot of factors hinder the acquisition of this skill especially in a second language learning situation such as lack of concentration; lack of comprehension; poor reading habits like sub-vocalization and regressions ; phobia for reading and a host of others. This has drawn the attention of applied linguists and the postulation of different theories to facilitate and improve the acquisition of this skill. Solutions advocated to ameliorate reading problems include : Intensive and extensive reading ; reading for evaluation and inference; effective note taking; use of abbreviation for a time- saving reading exercise that equally enhances speed in note taking; exploitation of topic sentences in the reading texts as well as adopting the SQ3R reading technique. All these remedial strategies to effective reading will place the learner in a vantage position to achieving good reading skills. Just like no one language skill can suffice in a communicative activity, reading synergizes with other language skills like listening, speaking and writing to achieve effective communication .

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