AN INVESTIGATION INTO SOME READING PROBLEMS OF STUDENTS IN AWKA SOUTH JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

ABANA, IFEOMA B. (Ph.D)
Department of English
Madonna University, Okija,
Anambra State, Nigeria
ifeomaaban@gmail.com
+2348065136688.

Abstract:
In Nigeria inefficiency in reading continues to be an endemic educational problem, often resulting in mass examination failure and incessant outcries against the falling standard of education in general and English in particular. The vital position of reading in all learning situations makes it imperative that for the child to succeed in School, he must learn to read well. Unfortunately, junior secondary school students are still challenged by a number of problems in an attempt to attain this goal. This work seeks to identify some of these problems and then proffer some solutions to alleviate them. The cognitive theory of language learning and the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis will be adopted in this study. Secondary schools were used as examples while simple percentages were adopted in the research analysis. The Government, parents, teachers and even the students, all have roles to play in fighting this monster.

Keywords: Regression, cognitive, phonic, proficiency and vocalization.

Introduction
Reading is one of the four primary skills, in language acquisition. The four language skills are speaking, listening, reading and writing. While speaking and writing are encoding skills, listening and reading are decoding skills. Of these four reading is perhaps the most employed skill in the literate society (Ekpunobi, as qtd in Abana, 1). Obanya (1987,70) supports this views as he opines that reading is important because it is used as a tool for study, for creating awareness for future employment and for recreation.

In Nigeria most students are not exposed to reading aids, yet they are expected to read and compete with their counterparts in other parts of the world. According to psychologists, for a child to learn and develop logically and comprehensively, he should be able to extract knowledge from books, map, pictures, charts, computers, newspapers, journals, signs and so on.

Learning to Read:
There has long been controversy among teachers of reading over the primary means by which children learn (or should learn) to read. Some teachers favour one approach over the other, while many favour a compromise that allows a judicious use of elements from both approaches. MCArthur (1994:765) posits that “attitudes and policies tend to vary between a whole language, whole word, global, wholistic or look and say approach on the one hand (in which word are minimal units to be learned as gestalts) and a symbol based, atomistic or phonic approach in which reading is like cracking a code that consists correspondences between speech sounds and graphic symbols with letters and graphemes as the prime units on the other hand.

Some other teachers also make a distinction between a whole approach in which children work from the so-called real book’ (as opposed to specially prepared readers) and the older ‘look and say’ method that is closely associated with readers reading schemes, Flash cards and other aids. There is some evidence that concentrating or the atoms of reading in the early stages leads to higher rate of word recognition, global comprehension through the quality and interest of what is being read. On the contrary, Dallman (1971:31) posits;

“Some children acquire the necessary skills without formal instruction. Given the various conditions described earlier in this chapter and an environment that is in
every respect conducive to reading growth, they learn from the beginning to get meaning from the printed page and almost unconsciously develop the habits of word recognition and comprehension of sentences and longer units. For such children the analytical reading skills can be more harmful than helpful.

However, most children can be materially aided by specific instruction and reading skills. They can make rapid improvement if they can be shown how to recognize letters and phonic elements, how to discover familiar structural elements in the longer unfamiliar words, how to use context clues, how to note details, how to find the main idea of a long passage, how to compare, to evaluate and visualize the author’s intended message, to locate and utilize needed information, how to adapt rates of reading both to the nature of the materials read and to the purpose of the reader. These skills can be learnt through guided practice. In no case must there be neglect of either the factor of interest or the factor of skill in reading. Fortunately, the two can go hand in hand since skill development is affected favourably by motivation.

Problem:
It can be observed that many students in Junior Secondary School do not read as efficiently as they should. There is an urgent need to solve this problem. However, it cannot be solved until one finds out why JSS students read poorly. What are the factors that contribute to JSS students’ poor reading? Can these students be helped to overcome such problems?

Hypotheses
This study was designed as a preliminary investigation into the reading problems, in Awka South Local Government Junior Secondary Schools. The following research hypotheses were formulated:
1. Students from literate homes read better than their counterparts from illiterate homes.
2. Lack of adequate library facilities in the JSS retards reading.
3. Poor methods of teaching, reading results in poor reading.

Purpose of the Study
The researcher intends to use some schools in Awka South L.G.A as sample so as to find out the causes of these problems. Are the problems from the students or from the teachers or from the Government? Are there reading aids in the schools? What are these aids and how are they used? If they are available, how can these students be helped? Is there any special time allotted to reading on the school time table?

Significance of the study
This study will be quite beneficial to the students because reading is a tool for study, for creating awareness for future employment and for recreation.

Scope and Limitation of the Study.
This research work is expected to concentrate on the problems JSS students encounter during their reading activities. Emphasis will be on the causes and how to remedy the situation. The researcher could not reach all the schools in the area as a result of financial and time constraints.

Review of Related Literature
Reading is largely taken for granted, particularly at the Junior Secondary School level. Some language teachers hardly think of it as a basic skill that requires the mastery of the skill of reading without which the rest of his other education is either a failure or only a limping success. Ekpunobi (2003) opines that many scholars have commented on the importance of efficient reading both at the primary level and post at the primary school levels. They see reading as a liberating exercise that frees one from ignorance and superstition, giving one a place among the educated and the informed in the society. Bond and Tinker (1973:70) expressed this view clearly when they stated:

*The ability to read constitutes one of the most valuable skills a person can acquire. Our world is a reading world. It is difficult to discover any activity whether in business, in the professions and even in recreational pursuits, that does not demand some, and often considerable reading. In many situations, reading constitutes an indispensable channel of communication.*

One is surprised that even though teachers are aware of reading defects such as pointing, head movement, vocalizing, sub-vocalizing, too many eye regressions, word-by-word reading, inflexibility, passivity in
reading and even lack of interest, they seem unable to solve them for their pupils (Mcswain 1975:5) explains why this is partly so:

_In the absence of a prescribed course of study, reading is by far the most part couched in English lessons to the neglect of reading skills systematically taught. Reading is taught therefore, incidentally perhaps even haphazardly._

It thus follows that children fail to learn reading because teachers have not mapped out sufficient time to teach them this important skill. Ojo (1989:22) also stressed this fact when she indicated that the amount of time given to reading in the school time-table affects the reading habits of students.

Unoh (1969:19) seems to view the problem not just in terms of insufficient time, but poor teaching methods as well. He thus comments.

_The undue emphasis on words and their sounds, which characterize the teaching of reading by the look-and-say or the phonic method as well as the teaching of oral reading, does contribute, in no small degree, to such signs of reading backwardness as word-by-word reading, vocalization, sub vocalization, regression and poor comprehension._

Moreover, poor methodology constitute a lot of problems for the learner. It should always be remembered that the learner is being equipped to be efficient in reading materials from different disciplines. It is unfortunate that “most teachers lack necessary training and interest required of a successful reading teacher (Omojowa 1985:108). An ill-equipped teacher cannot impart the skills that she does not have, so the reading programme under such a teacher is bound to suffer. Davis states:

_Since learning to read is a life-long exercise, it cannot be mastered in the elementary school, so high school and college instructors have the responsibility for helping students to continue their growth in reading skills (295)_.

Abana (2014:54) emphasized this when she asserts;

_Most teachers do not have the inclination or experiential background to reflect appropriately on their own methods. Such teachers create problems rather than offer solutions to the reading problems of their students. It has been observed that “good reading habits are formed with regular application of good reading skills and attitudes (Obah 1980: 6); and where teachers lack these, they have little or nothing to offer to their students. Little wonder the reading programme suffers under such teachers. A teacher’s incompetence can muddle up her methodology. Reading instruction at JSS therefore demands a special approach because it should emphasize a different goal, employ different instructional arrangements and strategies, focusing on different materials and calling upon different teacher competences. In essence, in Junior Secondary School, the major goal should be to take readers and turn them to students. That is, they should be thought how to study their subject matters and how to turn reading into enjoyable leisure activities. According to Abana (2005.9), reading instruction at JSS should therefore serve three purposes_

1. To repair whatever deficiencies children might have brought from the primary school. This can be achieved through a direct reading programme.
2. To develop children’s primary reading skill so as to enable them cope with the academic work required of them at school.
3. To develop good reading habits.

Stevens (1977:15) insists that the best way to teach reading to children is to read interesting books aloud to them ever before they can read on their own.

Bessette follows up on the issue of timing and approach, arguing that:

_Books are to be read to children to get them familiar with the language of books, the development of ideas, familiarity with direction ion which pages turn. I addition, children learn to expect that they will soon have the pleasure of reading for themselves (Bessette as qtd in Abana,17). Hanis and Sipang (1976) asserts that_

_Until children are able to use tools of learning such as text books, reference books and library books their educational opportunities are limited (27). The National Policy on Education (1981) states:_
The junior secondary school curriculum will be both prevocational and academic, and that it will teach all the basic subjects and enable pupils to acquire knowledge and develop skills. (5)

Theoretical Framework
Rational philosophers in their Cognitive Theory of language development hold as their central, controlling argument that knowledge comes through ligico-mathematical reasoning. They also stressed the importance of practice. The learner should be made to practice what he hears and by regular practice, he would perfect in the acceptable habits of the new language. The junior secondary school students should therefore be subjected to constant reading exercises and practice. This should also be followed up by their parents and guardians at home. With this the students will now derive the joy found on the printed pages and they can also read on their own. This now brings the issue of having qualified English language teachers to the fore. These teachers will be the guides to the students but when the teachers are incompetent, the desired goals will not achieved. It then boils down to the blind leading the blind.

According to the cognitivists, trace decay and interference are the two factors that can impede the processing of new information (As qtd in Abana, 55). The suggested attitude is rehearsal of an impute. This work concurs with the idea of rehearsal. Since practice makes perfect, our JSS students must endeavour to always practice good reading habits. A lot of interesting books should be made available to them so as to achieve this laudable objective. The fundamental difference hypothesis stipulates that some people are very talented language learners, others hopeless, most fall somewhere in the middle. “Success may depend on a range of factors, including age, talent, motivation and whether you are in a country where the language is spoken or sitting in a classroom, five mornings a week…. learners spend time and energy to acquire them. Consequently, a lot of effort, practice, patience and resilience are needed in grooming the JSS students for proficiency in reading. The peculiar personality trait of each student should be taken into consideration. This is in consonance with the stipulation of the fundamental difference therists. The individual difference factor must be taken into consideration.

In summary for efficient reading to take place, these demands must be met. i. Good visual perception.
ii. A reader must read for thoughts and ideas to form proper gestalts.
iii. Reading techniques must show flexibility
iv. Libraries should be stocked with interesting books.
v. The reader must be highly motivated and should read more books to increase his vocabulary.
vi. Teachers should be friendly, patient and committed.
vii. They must as far as possible be free from any personality defects.
viii. Individual differences should be taken into consideration.
ix. Parents should provide the recommended texts and also help the students at home.

Design of the Study
Stratified random sampling was used to select ten schools out of about forty Secondary Schools in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. The selected schools are
- St John of God secondary school, Awka (Girls)
- Girls Secondary School, Amaenyi, Awka (Girls)
- Netherlands secondary School Awka (co-educational)
- Capital City Secondary School, Awka (Boys)
- CSS Amawbia (Co-educational)
- Boys High School Amawbia (Boys)
- CSS Umuokpu (Co-educational)
- Ezeike High School, Nibo (Co-educational)
- Holy Cross Secondary School, Umuawulu (co-educational)
- Emeka Aghasili Secondary School, Nise (Co-educational)

Only the JSS were subjected to balloting, a sample of twenty students was obtained from each of the selected junior secondary section of the schools. A total of 300 students constituted the samples. Ninety one were boys while a hundred and nine were female students. Only the JSS students were used as it was
observed that most of them still found it difficult to read their notes and textbooks silently and efficiently. All the teachers of language and arts subjects in each school were also chosen and a total of one hundred teachers were gotten as samples.

Of the 200 students used as samples 120 of them were estimated to have come from illiterate homes while 80 were estimated to have come from literate homes. In making this demarcation, the researcher relied much on the observation of the class teachers and questions asked the pupils. Samples whose parents could neither read nor write in English were categorized as coming from illiterate homes.

Two different reliably tested and validated 12-item questionnaire were administered to the students and their teachers. The teachers were also interviewed orally to confirm the information already supplied in the questionnaire, simple percentages were used to analyze the data to determine the significance of each hypothesis tested.

**Findings**

The following findings were made in the study

*Hypothesis 1:* Students from literate homes read better than students from illiterate homes

The following reading defects were observed, vocalizing and sub-vocalizing pointing, head movement, eye regressive among the total of 80 samples from literate home, 15 cases of reading defects were observed (19%) on the other hand, out of the 120 samples from illiterate homes, 168 instances of reading defects were detected among them, showing that some children had more than one defect. Hypothesis 1 is thus upheld.

*Hypothesis 2: Lack of adequate library facilities in the JSS retards reading. This following options were given in the questionnaire for teachers.*

- Lack of text books/library
- Poor visual perception
- Lack of instructional materials
- Lack of dedication by teachers
- Lack of motivation from teachers
- Attitude of illiterate parents
- No time is allotted to reading on the time-table.

There were 100 responses from 100 teachers and of these (65%) accepted that lack of good facilities was the greatest factor retarding reading. This ranks first in the number of teachers choosing it. The next highest factor was (lack of dedication by teachers) was picked by only 16 teachers. The hypothesis is therefore upheld, hence lack of library facilities retards reading.

*Hypothesis 3*

Poor methods of teaching reading results in poor reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency percentage</th>
<th>Responses shown in frequency and percentages</th>
<th>Positive response</th>
<th>Negative response</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective methodology of teaching in schools</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should use instructional aids in the teaching of reading.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers who teach reading in schools should be well trained.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSS teachers/students should be constantly supervised</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same teachers were asked to select from a given list the one factor that most adversely affects reading.
The factors listed were:

- Parents socio-economic status
- Poor teaching method
- Inadequate textbooks and teaching aids
- Poor teaching in their junior classes.
- Lack of basic foundation in previous classes
- Lack of foreign texts
- Lack of practice
- Problem encountered because English is not our mother-tongue
- Lack of motivation
- Poor treatment of new words
- Lack of adequate training for teachers

Of all the factors listed above, teachers indicated that poor teaching method affects reading most adversely. This had the highest percentage of 67%. Hypothesis 3 is thus upheld.

**Discussion of Findings**

Judging from the results of the responses administered, it was revealed that some of the factors that affect reading competence emanate from students themselves. They vocalize, sub-vocalize, exhibit too many eye regressions, move their heads from side to side, point at the material while reading and read word by word instead of in phrases, and all these hinder their readability.

As a great majority of the children come from illiterate homes, they are disadvantaged in so many ways. First, they do not have good foundation before coming into the secondary school, second, the rate of their poverty is so high that they cannot even purchase the recommended texts and they have little or no time to read at home as they constitute the hawker's along the streets.

These findings agree with Krashen’s (1971:345) observation that the home has a lot of influence on children’s reading. Only 75 out 300 students in the study came from literate homes, which is about 25% of the students population, while 225 came from illiterate homes which is about 75% of the students population. It is therefore not a surprise that the majority of the children read poorly.

The school environment also affects reading as well as other areas of language instruction. Teachers were asked to choose one out of the eight given factors which they think affects reading most adversely. 62 out of 100 teachers chose lack of library facilities. This is 62% of the total number of respondents, the remaining 38 teachers distributed their choices among the other factors listed above.

This is in consonance with Omoguwa’s (1985:110) observation that lack of library facilities contributes to their reading problems. The teacher’s response show that they are aware that this is a major problem to reading and so would contribute to make sure that libraries are made available for their children. The findings that are related to hypothesis 3 show an important discovery. A list of ten variables that can affect reading adversely in the classroom were given to the teachers who were asked to pick one. It is gratifying they admitted that poor teaching methods also affects reading adversely. Though the percentage is not high (29%) it ranks highest when compared to a number of choices on the other items.

The fact that these teachers realized that they are major contributors to developing their students’ readability is encouraging and shows their willingness to take appropriate steps in helping their students read better. This shows that teachers should be constantly subjected to workshops and re-training programmes to improve their methods of instruction.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this research. The findings revealed that reading problems of children in the JSS can be traced back to the primary school and the home. The illiteracy and poverty status of most of the parents adversely affect the students’ education especially their reading. Many of these children lack the opportunity to practice reading at home and some do not even have the required texts to do this.

A lot of parents are still ignorant of the value of education. To them success consists only of amassing wealth and therefore do not provide materials that will help their children to read. Such parents should be tutored during PTA meetings and encouraged to buy materials for their children.

The government also has a role to play in aid of parents especially at a period of economic recession that Nigeria is passing through. Parents should be allowed to acquire books from government owned books shops and pay in instalments. Books such as children encyclopedias could be sold to parents under such a
scheme. Formation of book clubs in the pattern of developed countries where books can be sent to people to read and eventually own.

Non-availability of adequate reading materials constitute another major problem. Omojuwa (1985:10) observed, there are two ways in which library facilities contribute to the reading problem: namely, their non-availability and ineffective use of them”. In the case of JSS, both instances are rife. It is therefore important that well-equipped libraries be provided in all secondary schools. Even when they are provided they should not only cater for the senior secondary school (SSS) students. Moreover, when these books are available they should be assessable to the students, teachers should encourage them to go borrow and read. They should summarize the novels they read and submit same to the teachers. It was observed in this study that children were usually tied down to one class reader for an academic session and this tends to be boring and uninteresting to them. With the provision of a good school library, the teacher can vary what her pupils read without easing of the parents.

The most important factor in this study is perhaps the teachers method of instruction. Most teachers do not apportion time to teach reading. Reading is also not accommodated on the school time-table. Everything is so test oriented that the poor reader is soon left behind. This poor reading invariably affects his performance in every other school subject as he reads without understanding.

According to Ekpunobi (2001:5) the teacher of reading in our schools can improve their teaching if this is done in the context of “Language experience approach”. They should ensure that “the teaching of reading is carried out within the context of meaningful language comprehension activities, (ensuring that) reading skills are built on sound foundations of communicative and linguistic competence” (Unoh, 1985-6-7). The teachers should motivate the pupils to practice reading. Individual attention should be paid to pupils with peculiar problems and each child should be encouraged to develop at his own pace. All the reading problems in JSS were not exhausted by this study as it is a preliminary investigation. Only a few variables were tested. Other variables need to be tested and the scope of the study broadened to give a complete picture of reading in our junior secondary Schools. However, the task ahead is enormous and this study acts as a pointer to that.

A lot of improvement is needed in the study environment of our children. The teachers need to be trained through in-service workshops to be abreast of research findings that can assist them in the classroom. The generality of Nigerians should be aware of the importance of reading and encourage its effective teaching in our schools, because without it, learning is hampered and this will definitely plunge the whole society into the doldrums of illiteracy.

References