

## Factors Responsible for Poor Reading Habits in Nigerian Primary Schools

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### Abstract

It is no longer news that in place of a reading culture, Nigerian students have a television-watching and a disco-going culture. This ugly trend, is without doubt, one of the major reasons responsible for poor academic performance and the stagnation of the country. What factors are responsible for the absence of a reading culture in Nigeria? In this paper we identify such factors and at the same time proffer solutions. The factors are

many and varied, they are also personal and external. They range from lack of libraries and qualified reading personnel to home and environmental as well as school-based factors. The paper draws attention to the fact that of all the language learning skills reading is the most important as a literacy skill and governments and educationist should ensure that reading is deeply entrenched in the school curriculum.

### Introduction

Every now and then, great concern has continued to be expressed about the falling standards of education in all tiers of the nation's educational system. Underlying this concern is the assumption that this situation is largely responsible for economic, social and political stagnation in Nigeria. This stagnation could also be attributed to the absence of a reading culture in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, it will not be out of place to say that the information technology, with all its numerous benefits, is partly responsible for the absence of a reading culture especially among Nigerian youth. Perhaps, this point needs some clarification. Turn everywhere, at home, in the classroom, at the market, even in the library; you see young men and women each with an earphones or headphones nodding, absent-mindedly, to the rhythm of music. You visit the library on Nigerian University campuses and you find the place empty. But if you visit a nightclub or a public square where a musician is performing at night you will be astonished by the huge turn-out of young Nigerian men and women.

This ugly situation has apparently become an issue calling for attention as well as a problem demanding a solution.

In this paper, we have established that economic, technological, social and political development can take place only where a reading culture and scholarship exist. But more than that, the paper identified some of the problems responsible for the absence of a reading culture in Nigeria. Among these factors are environmental, social, home and personal problems. It is hoped that through this attempt and many others we shall restore or cultivate a good reading culture in Nigeria.

### Factors Responsible for a Poor Reading Culture in Nigeria

#### *Reading in a Second Language*

In studies such as those by Andzayi and Umolu (2001), the point is made that many Nigerians are not avid readers because they are often confronted with the difficulty of reading in a foreign or second language (English). Accordingly, these scholars suggest that it is ideal to teach reading in the mother tongue or primary language. Reading in our indigenous languages may sound patriotic but it is certainly not the solution especially in a multilingual society like Nigeria where the English language has assumed the position of a link

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language. As a matter of fact, the issue concerning the use of English or indigenous languages in Nigeria has divided scholars into two groups. The words of Doki (2018) provide an illuminating explanation:

The debate concerning the language of African literature is as old as the literature itself and has, since it started in 1962, divided writers and critics into two opposing camps. On the one hand are the nationalists who despise the English language in the heroic aim of preserving our mother tongues. This group, led by Obi Wali, pulled the carpet from under the literary feet of those who gathered at Makerere in 1962 by declaring that:

The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration (Wali, p. 282).

Andzayi and Umolu (2001) have demonstrated the importance of experience, cultures and values in the hierarchy of reading in a second language in the diagram below:

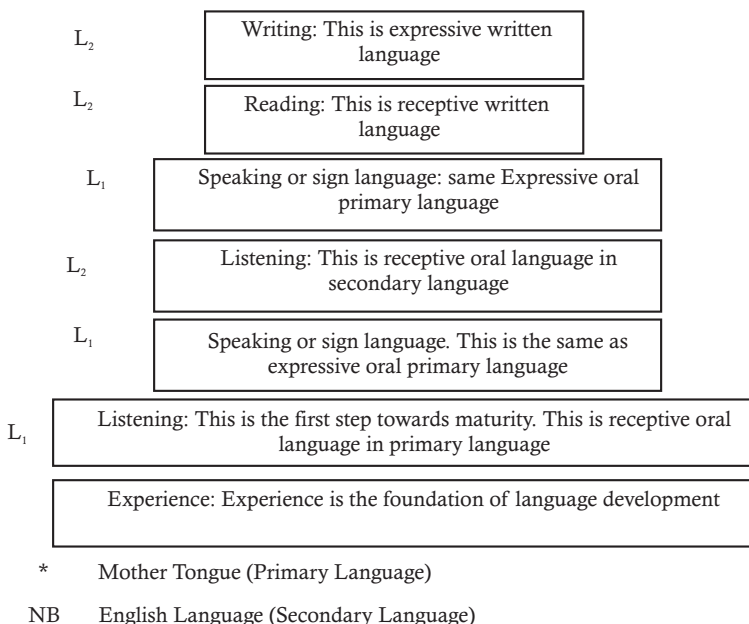


Figure 1: Element of Language

Adapted from Andzayi & Umolu (2004)

The diagram seeks to explain one fundamental thing central to learning skills namely: the element of language. Accordingly, the diagram shows that there are four learning skills in a language: writing, reading, speaking and listening. In the Nigerian context, experience which arises from an acquaintance with our cultures and values is a necessary condition for reading and by implication communication. In other words, the two scholars support the view that reading should be taught in indigenous languages.

On the other side of the debate were writers and scholars who took a more elastic approach by insisting that European languages, though foreign, could be bended and manipulated to reflect or suit the African sensibility and philosophy. It is this very difficulty that led to the emergence of pidgin in Nigeria as a medium for communicating to the not-too-literate classes. Truth is that why reading or teaching in indigenous languages could help to transmit and promote our values and culture, it is not the best option for a society like Nigeria with about three hundred and sixty-eight ethnic groups speaking about two hundred and fifty languages. Given this kind of linguistic complexity, the English language as an official language bridges the communication gap amongst the numerous indigenous Nigerian languages.

### Personal-Based Problems

Apart from the issue of learning to read in a second language, there are personal-based problems associated with poor reading culture and these problems are intrinsic to the learner. In the case of disadvantaged students, these problems

may include minimal brain dysfunction or minimal brain injury. Sadly, the class teacher can do very little about these problems. The solution is treatment or special attention by professionals in Medicine (Oyetunde & Umolu, 1991, p.198). But there could be other personal-based reading problems as well. These may include inattention, hyperactivity, low tolerance, frustration and perceptual coordination problems.

There is also the problem of nonchalant attitude towards reading among Nigerian primary school pupils. Truth is that Nigerian students neither read to find out information on day-to-day events nor read for pleasure. Reading is done only during the examination period. In other words, Nigerian students read only to pass examinations and after that reading is no longer essential to them. This factor, more than anything else, is partly responsible for low academic performance and the general falling standards of education in the country. In order to overcome this problem, reading should be carried out as a pleasurable activity just like watching a movie.

### **School-Based Problems**

Some of the problems associated with reading in Nigerian schools and colleges are inherent in the school system itself. Umolu (2001) has written that:

The majority of cases of reading failure in Nigerian schools can be attributed to a number of extrinsic factors which emanate from the school. The school based reading failure can be traced to the main school variable, and the classroom teachers. Majority of the teachers especially in primary schools also have difficulties in reading (56).

What this means is that primary school pupils are not only functionally illiterates but in many cases they are taught by unqualified teachers who can hardly read themselves. This view is supported by a research finding which showed that only about seven thousand out of 180,000 teachers employed

to teach in the schools in Plateau State can read and write. To this must be added the fact that this problem is not peculiar to Plateau State but Nigeria as a whole.

Another problem associated with school-based problems is non-availability of reading materials, especially for beginning readers. Many scholars and researchers lament the fact that many primary schools in Nigeria have little or no pupil's literature books. Perhaps, this explains why many teachers often do not attach any importance to reading skills. The end result is that the classroom story programme suffers.

### **Environmental-Based Problem**

The other significant factor responsible for poor reading habits in Nigerian schools is environmental problems. In other words, the learner's home environment in association with the socio-economic background of the parents, the language spoken at home and around the pupil is crucial to reading abilities. A critical look at the elements of reading that is presented in a hierarchical order (see Fig. 1 above) shows that experience is the basis of all other reading achievements expected from a learner. Thus, an enriched environment that gives ample opportunities to the pupil to interact will give a wide range of experiences needed for future reading comprehension. Homes where pupils can watch movies, listen to news and interact with adults and good language models tend to produce efficient readers.

However, pupils with limited development of sight vocabulary may fail to become efficient readers in spite of all the advantages of television and adult models. This may be largely because of their inability. Again, students from a lower socio-economic background may have difficulty if instruction presumes middle-class experience. This invariably means that many students especially in beginning reading classes in Nigeria have double challenges in learning to read. Their first challenge is the mastery of English which is the language of instruction. The second challenge has to do with the presence of learning disabilities. The last challenge

is peculiar only to disadvantaged students.

Studies have shown that reading problems are among the best known and most serious of all learning problems. This is because reading is considered to be the gateway to learning. This has prompted researchers to look seriously into the causes of the problem. For example, it has been discovered that some pupils begin with difficulty identifying differences and similarities of letters. Consequently they are confused between the ones that are very close. For example pupils have been known to confuse *d* and *b*, *m* and *u* and so on.

Furthermore, in reading English as a second language ( $L_2$ ) some pupils have difficulty discriminating between sounds, letters and words, due to poor auditory perception or interference between the first and second languages. For example, a pupil may have problems with the sounds which occur in English but not in his own mother tongue ( $L_1$ ). Accordingly, such a learner may substitute long vowel sounds in English for short vowels e.g. beat/*i*:/ for bit/*i*/ or barn/*a*:/ for ban/*æ*/. The learner may end up with writing down the way he/she perceives and pronounces words in the same manner if left unchecked. Again, it is possible that the learner may sometimes develop emotional problems related to reading as a result of poor adjustment to the whole phonological and pronunciation process. The learner could also have difficulty making associations between speaking and reading because both skills are related in two different languages. The pupil often has no motivation towards reading because he is forced to make fine distinctions on the written page in a strange language without adequate preparation for it (Oyetunde, 219).

All the environmental problems could simply be reduced to intellectual, physical, home background and educational factors. But other factors come into play as well and they include lack of interest by the pupils; overcrowded classrooms and poor teaching methods. Other scholars like Ihenacho (1988) have insisted that other factors like (a) poor instruction (b) lack of interest and motivation (c) limited opportunity or general depression should also be classified under

environmental problems but it is safer to treat them under different sub-headings.

### Home Factors

Education scholars generally agree that the home is the starting point for reading. The truth is that under normal circumstances, pupils will learn to read if they are adequately prepared for it from the very beginning. This is to say that the foundation for a reading culture is laid at home. Right from infancy parents need to inculcate in their children the readiness and enthusiasm to read and love books. Like the old saying goes: teach the child the right path and the child will not depart from it. The parents are the first teachers of the child. The child's experiential background, his language facility and interest in reading or writing all begin at home. Pupils will have great difficulty learning to read if they do not have the necessary background experience. The background for understanding all the concepts expressed by the words used by the teacher is provided by the home and pupils or children with a poor home background will have difficulty learning to read those words. It is, therefore, important that at infancy pupils/children should learn to recognize words and concepts before they meet the teacher in a formal school environment. In this regard, it is the responsibility of the parents to ensure that their children approach the reading task with a rich background of experiences which they can use to make sense of what they read. Besides, the child's oral language facility is another key factor that parents must consider when teaching their children to read. Parents should be consciously aware that children whose oral language base is very limited will have difficulty learning the written form of language. It is therefore important that before we begin to teach reading to children, we must ensure that they can already understand and speak the language in which they are learning to read.

Additionally, children's attitudes towards reading is another important influence on the extent to which they will learn to read. It is for this reason that every effort must be made by parents to motivate their children to want to learn to read. A desire to learn to read grows and develops when



pupils are placed in situations where they see the value of reading in their daily experience. Pupils whose family members tell stories or read to them are more likely to be motivated to learn to read than pupils who have not had such opportunities. This is where the pupils' early home environment is of great importance (Kwekowe, 1999).

Studies have demonstrated that children from educated homes who live under a conducive and a comfortable environment tend to develop more interest in reading than children who live under abnormal home conditions with its attendant problems like poor hygiene, inappropriate clothing, unattended physical problems, consistent hunger, underweight and malnutrition. Indeed poor motivation from parents and other adults, home influence, disrespect for books, inability to purchase books, broken marriages, etc. are contributory factors to a poor reading culture. What all these amount to is that children from educated homes will likely receive more motivation and encouragement to read because they will have enough materials to develop reading readiness skills. In contrast, pupils from uneducated homes such as farmers, artisans, brick-layers, laborers and night-watchmen will have little or no help in terms of motivation and materials and will develop little or no reading readiness skills before school age.

It follows, therefore, that reading is not just an activity that is limited only to the classroom. A child's home background can thus determine to a great extent whether he/she will be a good or poor reader. If the pupil receives motivation, it will create a lot of impact in school progress in terms of better reading.

But apart from the parental role of complementing the classroom teachers' efforts in teaching reading, parents are expected to do the following:

- i. Love the pupil and appreciate any demonstrated little effort to read;
- ii. Look for the pupil's strength and interest to compensate for any limitation or disabilities;
- iii. Provide toys, games, motor activities and any other opportunities that could stimulate pupils in their development;
- iv. Accept the pupil for what he/she is and for

his/her human potential for growth and development. Parents should be realistic in their expectations and demands.

### **Lack of Qualified Reading Personnel**

The lack of qualified reading teachers is also responsible for the absence of a reading culture in Nigeria. The government and curriculum planners may take the blame in this regard. In Nigeria, there is another form of corruption known as nepotism. Nepotism makes it possible for the wrong people to get employment in schools and colleges. In other words, most teachers in Nigeria are employed not on merit but on the basis of 'man-know-man'. The end result of nepotism is that unqualified teachers who cannot read and write are employed to teach reading in Nigerian schools and colleges. Many teachers do not know how to teach reading or help pupils overcome their reading problems. Pupils in schools today are promoted from class to class without acquiring adequate reading skills, but the school curriculum is not adjusted by using relevant materials that will suit the levels of each pupils.

Corroborating the issue of unqualified personnel in Nigerian schools, Abiri (1977) writes that "primary school teachers including the professionally trained ones have little or no guidance in the teaching of English reading"(p.78). The obvious implication is that the reading problem has its foundation at the primary school level especially in the public schools, where there is abundant evidence that the pupils are not functionally illiterate but in many cases are taught by unqualified teachers. In other words, so many primary school teachers because of poor training are confused as to which method to use in teaching reading and, therefore, do not possess the prerequisite or reading skills for advanced work.

In a study conducted by Etim, it was discovered that teachers teaching reading are inadequate and the few available ones lack basic training in reading instruction in their preparatory programme. As a result of this, we have in the system many teachers who are not qualified to teach reading. It is only when teachers are better prepared to deal with peculiar reading problems of readers in early education that cases of reading problems can be

overcome or reduced to the minimum.

### **Teaching the Pupil to Read in English when he/she is not ready**

The other problem related to teaching readers in primary schools is the lack of readiness on the part of the learner. Again, research has shown that many underage pupils are enrolled into schools and they get moved automatically along the educational ladder irrespective of their level of attainment. Consequently, the pupil is rushed to begin reading in English when he/she cannot understand and speak the language. In a large number of cases, the pupil's first contact with English is via reading. Unfortunately, this creates reading and comprehension problems for the pupil because the speaking and listening skills which ought to have been developed before reading were ignored.

### **Absence of Libraries**

All the problems identified and discussed so far are compounded by the absence of libraries in Nigerian cities, schools and colleges. Again, the government may take a proportionate part of the blame in this respect. In Nigeria, government and the political class are interested in building hotels, pubs, parks and recreation centers. There is a total absence of libraries in our towns and cities. On many schools and campuses, there are no libraries and the basic characteristics of the few available ones is the dearth of books. This constitutes great reading problems among students and pupils. Scholars generally agree that in terms of reading failure or difficulties, the library has a dual purpose: its non-availability and the ineffective use to which it is put.

Oyetunde and Umolu (1991) have written that the lack of recreational reading opportunities hinder pupils from reading properly. In other words, Pupils in Nigerian schools and colleges do not practice reading because only the subject textbooks are readily available for them. Again, only few schools have libraries and as a result the pupils do not have reading opportunities. This results in lack of interest in reading. Even if the hunger of pupils to read is there, there are no motivating books apart from the school library and learners are restricted to the few English textbooks they can lay their hands

on in classrooms. Their knowledge, vocabulary and horizon are therefore limited and their perceptions not widened.

What all these lead up to is the fact that a school or class library is a compulsory tool in promoting the intellectual development of individuals and the nation. Lamentably, the Nigerian government does not seem to bother about investing in the education sector. Closely related to the absence of libraries is the fact that adequate attention has so far not been paid to the issue of initial reading materials that are suitable for introducing young people into different strategies of reading particularly in Nigerian languages. It is important that at least one library should be built in every primary school in order to enable pupils pick up a textbook of their interest and choice. At the same time, efforts should be made to equip the existing libraries with suitable reading materials in order to stimulate a reading culture among the learners and make our pupils effective readers.

### **Lack of Adult Readers as Models**

Education scholars and teachers in general agree that one of the best methods of teaching is through imitation. In other words, as the children watch their parents in the act of reading, they become involved with imitation and identification behavior. Readers who have had pleasant experiences with reading at home will want to read at any time. When young ones see adults reading, they are naturally moved to do the same. Lamentably, most children have never had the opportunity of watching their family members read or hear them talk about what someone had read or share some stories and pictures from books. Consequently, the only pictures that hold their attention are on television and the life style of their families. Again, it is advisable that adult readers should help pupils and direct them on how to read well. Once children imbibe the habit of reading at an early age they grow up to become efficient readers. Parents and adults therefore are models that can stimulate the pupil's tendency to be a good reader.

But to all these must be added the fact that parents should also encourage their pupils by providing enough reading materials for them. This

way the children will learn through motivation and imitation.

### **Lack of Interest by Readers**

Closely related to the idea of parents and adults as role models is the issue of enthusiasm or the interest of the child or learner. This very factor will prompt very many questions: what are you reading? Why are you reading? Do you read only to pass examinations or you also read for pleasure? Most learners in Nigeria believe that reading is an activity that is required only for academic purposes. Accordingly, such learners read the relevant textbooks related to their subjects and courses in schools. Hardly do they read fiction, poetry or newspapers. The danger of this kind of reading is that the learner's intellectual horizon is limited and restricted.

It becomes very clear from our discussion that although it is better to teach reading in a language that is already familiar in speech to the learner, in our situation in Nigeria English is not only the official language, it is also a link language which has the capacity to weld all the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria together. This very function has given the English language a very prominent place in our national life and it also explains why the English language has become very pervasive in both our official and unofficial lives. Again, this very factor, more than anything else, explains why Nigerian learners must necessarily learn to read in English. At the same time, it is instructive to note that the adoption of the English language as the official language in Nigeria is done for very many reasons among them being the fact that the linguistic background of most pupils in their Nigerian languages is poor. English therefore remains the language of communication in schools and colleges. It is also the language of Law, Commerce, Transport, Judiciary and the Media. The English though a foreign language can be bended to reflect the Nigerian philosophy and sensibility. By and large, multilingualism in the Nigerian context has

affected learning to read in terms of the selection of language of instruction, materials, language interference, orientation, and, lastly, the problem of negative tonal transfer.

### **Conclusion**

The paper made the point that reading is an important language learning skill and development as well as success are dependent on one's ability to read. Lamentably, in our situation in Nigeria, there is a total absence of a reading culture. The reasons for this ugly trend are many and varied. We have identified nine of such factors responsible for poor reading habits in Nigeria. They, among others, include personal problems, school, environmental and home factors. Others include lack of qualified personnel to teach reading, absence of libraries and lack of enthusiasm on the part of the learner. Lastly, these reasons are by no means exhaustive since educationists are unearthing information every day concerning reading habits and various ways to become an efficient reader.

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