

READING PROBLEMS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: SOME OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

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Abstract

In this paper, ten typical reading problems in secondary schools and six possible sources of these problems are discussed, with particular reference to Nigerian secondary schools. The discussion is based mainly on the evidence obtained by observation and research findings. The importance of teaching reading as a subject in the secondary school curriculum is indicated, and recommendations are made to ensure the provision of facilities for both remedial and developmental work in Nigeria's primary and post-primary institutions of learning, as a means of minimizing the problems and facilitating communication and learning.

Introduction

The importance of reading to students in secondary schools cannot be over-emphasized. Reading is an indispensable tool of learning in the various hierarchies of modern educational systems, and even though it is possible for people at various rungs of the educational ladder to get on without possessing advanced reading skills, effective learning at schools and more advanced educational institutions demands the possession and application of at least minimum skills required for specific reading tasks. We need not necessarily agree with Keppel's view that: "Every examination of the problems of our schools...every question raised by troubled parents about our schools, every learning disorder seems to show some association with reading difficulty". However, few educated people, if any, would disagree with Karlin's (2006) view that "The relationship of reading ability to scholastic success is not open to dispute". Achievement in reading is necessary to achievement in school, and when no provision is made for achievement by the poor reader, that student eventually is frustrated into a miserable state of failure.

Apart from being an important tool of learning, reading at secondary school level, as well as at other educational levels, is certainly an important means of developing other language or communication skills; of achieving emotional stability and resolving emotional conflicts, of enjoying leisure and sharing vicarious experiences, and of developing the various attributes of the human personality. These considerations account for the enormous investment that is being made, in terms of money, research efforts and time, by more literate countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Canada, in the study and teaching of reading at various educational levels, particularly at the secondary school level. The enormous activities and publications of the International Reading Association and the College Reading Association in the U.S.A., and a similar association in Canada, testify to the importance these countries attach to reading as a subject in the curriculum. Ironically, in less literate and less developed countries, such as Nigeria and other African countries, little or no importance is attached to the teaching of reading after the primary school level. The existence of serious reading problems in secondary schools, in both first and second language situations, and the importance of reading provide a strong case for focusing some attention on reading problems in secondary schools, with particular reference to Nigeria.

Typical Reading Problems in Secondary Schools

An intelligent combination of the findings and observations of competent researchers, teachers and students will reveal that the typical reading problems of students in secondary schools, particularly in a second language situation such as ours, are many and varied. An investigation of the reading problems of 450 students from selected secondary schools in the three South Eastern States of Nigeria viz ; Anambra, Imo and Enugu yielded the following data:

Type of Reading Problems

1.	Slow reading rate;	94.4
2.	Slow comprehension rate;	94.0
3.	Difficulty in distinguishing main ideas from relevant or irrelevant details;	91.0
4.	Difficulty in reading for gist and making good summaries;	90.4
5.	Ineffective recall of what is read;	90.3

6.	Uncritical reading behaviour;	90.2
7.	Difficulty with creative reading;	96.0
8.	Difficulty with intensive (study-type) reading	80.5
9.	Inadequate vocabulary or word power; and	85.0
10.	Inadequate reading interests.	96.5

Slow reading rate among secondary school pupils often manifests itself in various ways, including: a tendency to read word by word; a tendency to vocalize and sub-vocalize every word read; a tendency to make prolonged eye-fixations or pauses on each line read; a tendency to make habitual or compulsive regression; and a tendency to fail to complete reading assignments, even when they are few and not really time-consuming. In brief, the slow reader reads easy reading materials almost at the rate at which he speaks and sometimes at a much slower rate. In an investigation with 450 Nigerian Senior Secondary Schools, final year (SS3) pupils, using easy reading prose passages which have been shown by means of Fry's readability formula to be of appropriate readability indexes for that level, it was found that the average reading rate was eighty words per minute, which is about two-thirds of their average speaking rate (120 words per minute). This is surely, an undesirable state of affairs, since we can read easy materials at about thrice our speaking rate.

Slow comprehension rate manifests itself by a slow reading (efficiency) index, in spite of their slow reading rates, which are often wrongly but understandably associated with maximum comprehension. Secondary school students, particularly in several Nigerian schools where we have had privilege to carry out research show a tendency to make poor or inadequate comprehension of what they read. Using the much-publicized and very useful concept of a reading efficiency index, and the following formula:

$R.E.L. = \text{Average Reading Rate} \times \text{Average Comprehension (per cent)}$, it was discovered that reading efficiency indexes of the 450 secondary school pupils referred to earlier was forty-eight words per minute, because their average comprehension (percent) was 60/100 while their average reading rate was 80 w.p.m. Even though a standardized test would probably have yielded a more reliable reading efficiency index than the test administered, it has been shown that informal reading inventories or tests, such as the one reported here, do sometimes yield more reliable and accurate evidence than the evidence obtained from standardized reading tests, particularly when the tests are not culture-free. Clearly, a slow comprehension rate, which ties up with slow reading habits, is a serious problem in secondary schools, particularly in our situation where students are required to read in a second or foreign language, rather than in their mother tongue.

Difficulty in distinguishing main ideas from subordinate details is also widely prevalent among secondary school pupils. Investigations carried out by Chapman-Taylor (2010) and Unoh (1989) among post-secondary school students (i.e, university undergraduates) showed that this was one of the most significant difficulties of the students. Obviously, such difficulties were carried over from their secondary schools, where apparently little or no attention was paid to the development of this and allied reading skills.

Difficulty in reading for gist and making good summaries usually results from difficulty in distinguishing main ideas from relevant or irrelevant details. When reading for gist and making summaries, we are mainly interested in extracting the main ideas conveyed by topic sentences in each paragraph, and in relating these main ideas to one another in a meaningful and intelligent combination. Answers given by eighty English teachers in secondary schools in the Anambra, Imo and Enugu states indicated that over ninety percent of their pupils experience serious difficulties in this regard. This impression was also confirmed by results of reading tests specifically designed and administered by this researcher for the purpose.

Another serious reading problem in secondary schools is ineffective recall of what is read. This problem is by no means peculiar to secondary schools, but it is perhaps significant that both the English teachers and the secondary school pupils whose opinions were sampled in the study already referred to, felt that this was one of the most serious reading problems at the secondary school, and that it affects, to an appreciable extent, over 90 percent of the students. While it could be argued that this is a general problem, it must also be recognized that reading problems such as those

mentioned earlier, and failure to develop appropriate reading comprehension skills, are contributory factors in either creating or worsening such problems.

Uncritical reading behaviour is another well-known reading problem in Nigerian secondary schools. Thorndike's (1987) often-quoted view that "Reading is a very elaborate procedure, involving a weighting of many elements in a sentence, their organization in the proper relations to one another, the co-operation of certain forces to determine the final response" is strongly supported by many reading specialists, including Betts, Smith, and Pratt (1989). Indeed, the critical reader must exercise sound critical judgement over what he reads: he must carefully scrutinize all statements with a view to determining their accuracy, validity and consistency, and recognizing facts, opinions, propaganda, distortions, half-truths, generalizations, the use of emotive words and similar features, if and when they appear. Experience, research evidence, and self-reports by students in several Nigerian secondary schools, all testify to the prevalence of this problem in Nigerian secondary schools.

The problem of uncritical reading is very much related to yet another problem-- uncreative reading behaviour. The distinction between critical reading and creative reading is subtle but by no means pointless. If critical reading is "reading between the lines", creative reading can be regarded as "reading beyond the lines". As Huus (1990) correctly points out, a reader who has learned to judge what he reads, still fails to obtain the greatest pleasure, enjoyment, and even knowledge from his efforts, unless in doing so, he gives something of himself. He must assimilate the total verbal stimuli into his own background of experience and information, and reorganize his ideas to accommodate his new learnings, his new attitudes, or his new feelings. Creative reading thus requires certain skills of comparison and synthesis; comparison to see relationships between parts of sentences, paragraphs and longer selections in order to arrive at the total picture; between accompanying results; between juxtaposed events, and between the actions of a character at different times, and comparisons of time and space, place and sequence. Creative reading certainly calls into play the reader's imagination, his ability to see comparisons where no obvious ones exist, his ability to create an "apperceptive mass" through the integration of vicarious experiences into his own background of experience, or the ability to enrich and be enriched through the time-honoured psychological concept to "transfer of learning"

When viewed from this complex but meaningful angle, creative reading represents a very serious problem at all educational levels, but perhaps much more so at the secondary, where mature reading habits are in their formative stage than at higher educational levels. In our secondary schools, reading comprehension tends to be more at the literal levels, which involves faithful reproduction of what is read, understood and retained, than at the critical and the creative levels, where great demands are made on the reader's perceptual-cognitive and other psycholinguistic abilities. Yet another serious reading problem at the secondary school level is the one concerned with intensive (study type) reading. Secondary school pupils frequently lack the skills or fail to employ reading strategies that are required for intensive study-type reading tasks. Such skills or strategies include: reading flexibly by skimming and scanning, reading slowly and thoughtfully, making end-of-sentence and/or end-of-paragraph pauses for reflection and greater evaluation and assimilation of relevant facts and information; under-lining intelligently and meaningfully; making helpful notes or summaries; and incorporating psychologically sound techniques of spaced rather than massed learning; of active repetition of what is learned and of overlearning so as to ensure greater retention, recall and transfer of what is learned from study-type of reading materials.

In a survey of the reading and study skills of pupils in Nigerian secondary schools, Prince (2008) found 90 percent of the pupils lacking in such skills and exhibiting what he calls the "brain- fog syndrome", what he says is characterized by failure to retain, remember and recall, as well as by a burning sensation in the head. In this investigation, the researcher found that 80.5 percent of the secondary school pupils in the schools referred to earlier were terribly deficient in such study-reading skills, and their teachers confessed that no conscious effort was made to help the pupils to acquire such skills, except incidentally. Systematic instruction in the application of study-reading strategies, such as the SQ3R by Robinson (1962) and OK4R by Pauk (1985) has been shown to be of great value in developing effective study-reading skills at the secondary school level.

A reading problem that is frequently overlooked at the secondary school level, particularly in a second language situation, such as ours, is inadequate word power or vocabulary. As Vick (2003) points out, students who are deficient in reading skills often lack an adequate vocabulary. For those with adequate word power (vocabulary) words are the building blocks, whereas for those lacking in word power, they are the stumbling blocks in efficient reading. Even

though researches among first-year undergraduates at the University of Ibadan by Chapman-Taylor (1995), McKillop and Yoloye (1991), and Unoh (1989) have revealed that post-secondary school students have far less problem with vocabulary than with the other reading skills mentioned earlier, it would be wrong to infer that Nigerian students are not deficient in word power at the secondary school level. These vocabulary tests were mainly tests of word meanings or of denotative meanings. The relatively poor performances of these students, and 85.5 percent of many secondary school subjects referred to earlier, in tests involving inferential reading, which demands the comprehension of the connotative and the situational meanings of words in context, show that word power deficiency is a problem to be taken into serious account in Nigerian secondary schools.

The problem of inadequate reading interests is also prevalent at the secondary schools. Reading interest surveys carried out have revealed that less than 5 percent of the secondary school pupils sampled engaged in extra-curricular reading (or reading outside the prescribed or recommended texts); that less than 2 per cent of the pupils were actually reading a novel for pleasure or recreation at the time of the investigation, and that only 3.5 percent made reading one of their hobbies. As in the case of other findings reported in this paper, more supporting research evidence is needed to strengthen the conclusions reached. Yet there is sufficient indication, from students' own self-reports, of inadequate reading interests in our secondary schools. These reports were also confirmed by their teachers' reports, which indicated that less than four per cent of their pupils show interest in extra-curricular reading.

Sources of the Reading Problems

Experience and research reports have shown that the sources of such reading problems include:

1. Poor language development and linguistic-cultural experiences;
2. Inadequate teaching of reading;
3. Unsatisfactory teaching methods;
4. Untrained or badly-trained teachers;
5. Absence of developmental and remedial reading programmes in schools; and
6. Inadequate facilities for extra-curricular reading.

Reading abilities and reading interests are inextricably tied up with language development and satisfactory linguistic-cultural experiences. As Russell and Ousley (1999) have pointed out: "Reading is one of the language arts, that important group of human activities concerned with the communication of ideas. Communication involves giving ideas to others, as in speaking, oral reading, and writing. It also involves receiving ideas from others, as in listening, observing, and reading silently... As one of the language arts, the child's reading is closely connected to his oral language, his writing, and his other work with words". The implication of this is that, if language skills in general are poorly or inadequately developed, and if pupils are deprived of rich linguistic-cultural experiences as a result of poor language training and inadequate verbal interaction within their cultural groups, reading problems are likely to arise. Reading problems in secondary schools can also be traced to inadequate teaching of reading in schools. In Nigeria, the teaching of reading is practically limited to the primary schools, whereas in the United States of America reading is taught at practically all levels of schooling. As the teaching of reading at the primary school level seldom goes beyond the teaching of word recognition skills of literal comprehension of easy materials, pupils find themselves ill-prepared for more complex reading tasks at post-primary and post-secondary school levels, when formal reading instruction is confined to the primary schools.

The problem of inadequate teaching of reading ties up with that of unsatisfactory methods of teaching reading. In practically all Nigerian primary schools, reading is first taught by the so-called alphabetic method (by teaching the identification of letters of the alphabet), then by the syllabic method (identification of syllables) followed by the whole-word method (identification of individual words, usually by the look-and-say approach). After pupils have learned to identify words correctly they are presumed to be able to combine those into larger units (Phrases, sentences, paragraphs and short selection) and to extract appropriate meanings from such units, by a trial-error technique.

Each of these so-called methods must be considered inadequate per se, since it cannot help the reader to acquire systematically the skills needed for more mature reading at secondary, college and more advanced educational levels. The methods which can meet such demands, if properly applied, are: the analytic, the synthetic or the analytic-synthetic methods. With the analytic method (also called the global method) the teaching of reading begins with the understanding, interpretation or analysis of larger and more meaningful units (viz; story, sentences, phrases and words) which are, in turn, further analyzed into smaller and less meaningful units (syllables, letters and phonemes). With the

synthetic methods, this order is reversed, and the teaching of reading begins with the smaller, less meaningful units and builds up into the comprehension of larger units. The analytic-synthetic method relies on use of useful elements in the methods which emphasize word recognition (viz: alphabetic, syllabic and phonic methods) and those that emphasize meaning from the beginning (viz: whole word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, and story methods). It is impossible to say which of these three methods is the best; each of them certainly has its merits and demerits. However, if consistently and systematically applied, each of the method is capable of helping pupils learn to read efficiently. Another factor that accounts for these reading problems is the quality of the teachers. Teachers of reading exist in Nigerian schools, and the teaching of reading in our primary schools is left to teachers of general subjects, who cannot claim to have been trained in the art of teaching reading and developing reading skills. Even though many of such untrained or inadequately trained teachers manage to do a somewhat satisfactory job, nothing short of rigorous training programme in the teaching of reading and other language arts will provide a satisfactory answer to the perennial problem of ineffective reading in Nigerian schools.

Yet another contributory factor in the prevalence of serious reading problems in our secondary schools is the absence of developmental and remedial reading programmes in such schools. In the United States of America, and Canada, facilities and trained personnel exist to help high school pupils develop mature reading skills and habits, and there are also Reading Centres, Reading Clinics or Learning Disability Centres to which pupils with serious reading problems can be referred for effective counselling and remediation. Practically all such schools have the services of trained reading teachers, reading specialists and diagnosticians, or reading supervisors, who help to ensure that this vital communication and learning skill is developed to the fullest possible extent among high school pupils. The absence of such facilities in Nigerian secondary schools accounts, in no small measure, for the prevalence of the reading problems highlighted earlier.

The last, but no means the least important, of the factors contributing to these reading difficulties is the scarcity of facilities for extra-curricular reading. Homes that have not formed the tradition of collecting and reading various materials, of developing reading facilities and regarding reading as a good hobby, cannot be expected to produce many generations of people with varied extra-curricular reading interests over a short period of time. The same is true of communities that have failed to provide for well-equipped public libraries, book clubs and reasonably priced reading materials that are within the easy reach of the literate community. It is common knowledge that such facilities of extra-curricular reading are grossly inadequate, even in the urban areas, and that less than fifteen per cent of the entire Nigerian population can boast of having a collection of books of current interest, for pleasure reading for the education and enlightenment of their families, and for stimulating the reading interests of their children who are of secondary school age.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, it is made clear that reading is an important language or communication skill, and it deserves to be accorded an important place in the secondary school curriculum. It also highlighted ten serious reading problems in secondary schools, with particular reference to Nigeria, a country that is as yet obliged to do most of its post-primary school reading in English as a second language. Six possible sources of these reading problems have also been indicated but the serious psycholinguistic problem of learning to read and reading to learn, in a language that is not one's mother tongue, deserves mentioning, at least in passing, until the complex nature of the problem is further unravelled by further research activities.

It is necessary at this point to make some recommendations for correcting or minimizing reading problems in our secondary schools. For recommendations arising from our discussion on the sources of reading problems in secondary schools, deserve special consideration. These are:

1. The improvement of facilities and methods of teaching reading at both primary and post-primary school levels should be regarded as a matter of top priority in educational planning and curriculum development.
2. Provision should be made for developmental reading programmes in all Nigerian secondary schools, with well-trained reading/language arts teachers to take care of them, and with emphasis on an integrated "language-experience" approach, which seeks to develop the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) concurrently and to enhance psycholinguistic abilities.

3. Extra-curricular reading at secondary school level should be encouraged by all means, including the provision of more school and public libraries, the establishment of book clubs, and the subsidizing or controlling of the prices of much-needed books, so as to make it possible for most secondary school pupils to have them.
4. Reading Clinics, Reading Centres or Reading Consultancy Services should be available to all secondary schools, as a means of providing guidance and counselling in reading and learning, and of remedying specific cases of reading difficulty which may arise from time to time.

Other recommendations relate to the implications of the reading problems discussed with reference to Nigerian secondary schools, for career guidance and counselling. An attempt should be made to determine the reading norms required for effective pursuit of certain careers, and the minimum reading grade required at secondary school for successful completion of certain training programmes in post-secondary institutions. This will not only provide additional incentives for students who are somewhat retarded or backward in reading to make use of available facilities in developing their reading skills to the required level, but also ensure that employers get the people who have the necessary reading abilities for certain key positions in the civil service, the public corporations, public administration, the local government, educational administration, the teaching profession, and similar situations which may occur from time to time. In the researcher's view, this and other recommendations made in this paper are among the crucial factors that should be taken into account when counselling secondary school students towards effective decision making.

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