

**IMPROVING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: A
CASE FOR FREE VOLUNTARY READING.**

Ogundepo Abimbola Olusola

School of Education, Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo, Lanlate Campus, Oyo State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: *Free voluntary reading is just as its name states. It is free reading; free in the sense that students chooses what material they want to read, choose to read or not to read and to report in class on the reading they have done or not. It is purely reading with no strings attached. This is a strategy voiced by Stephen Krashen and quite a good number of language educators have decided it is worth a shot. Research reports support the assertion that those who read more do better in a wide variety of tests. They become better users of language and have a wider horizon of life. They are also reported to have a greater general knowledge. It is in view of these that this paper recommends FVR as a probable solution to the lamentably poor standard of English in schools and the general poor academic outcomes.*

KEYWORDS: Language, Free Reading, Literature, Student, Academic Outcomes, English

INTRODUCTION

English language is today fast becoming a universal language of the world, so much that whoever hopes to fulfill his roles effectively and live a worthwhile life should take the learning of English language very seriously. Foyewa (2015) observed that there are 196 countries in the world out of which 83 countries have English as their official language while 104 more countries use English language as either a second or foreign language. In effect, English language is used as either official, second or foreign language in 187 out of the 196 nations of the world.

In Nigeria, besides being the official language English language is also the language of instructions in schools. It is the language of commerce and industry, language of law and governance as well as the language of religion, foreign diplomacy and science and technology. (Banjo 1971, Aremu 2015, Olatayo 2011, Foyewa 2015).

However, in spite of these important functions of English language in Nigeria socio-economic and political terrains, evidence abound that the standard of English language in use in Nigeria is lamentably poor. (Akere 1995, Omole 2008 Olatayo 2012, Akindele and Adegbite 2002 and Ogundepo 2014)

Viewed against the premise that English language, as predicted by Foyewa (2015) may soon attain the status of a world language and the very important roles the language plays in Nigeria, an average Nigerian who fails to learn the language well and acquire more than just a working knowledge of the language does that at his own perils. To fulfill ones roles effectively in Nigerian and benefit from the new world order, one has to take English language as a worthy companion.

Researchers have suggested various ways of remedying the lamentably poor standards of English language use especially in Nigerian schools one of such remedying strategies is the teaching of extensive reading. This is because a student who lacks communicative competence in the language of instruction is not likely to benefit maximally from the teaching/learning process.. Teaching is basically communication. If the language of communication is not mutually understood, then communication breaks down. This presupposes that if the students cannot understand the language of instruction learning can never take place. In view of this, teachers as facilitators of knowledge should not be concerned only with the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of the teaching learning process, but also with their students' proficiency in the use of English as well. The proficiency being suggested here is what Chomsky (1983) describes as one's competency in communicating ones ideas effectively in realistic, meaningful situations both orally and in written.

Reading

Reading is the third of the four basic language skills in order of acquisition it forms part of a complex information processing system through which most formal learning takes place. Little wonders why Unoh (1979) describes reading as an indispensable tool of learning in various hierarchies of modern educational systems.

Several definitions of the concept reading, has been volunteered by different scholars who have taken interests in the subject. It is pertinent to consider some of these so as to put the concept in a proper perspective.

Parents and educators agree that reading is the key to success in school (Marson 1997). Reading, as observed by Ogundepo (2011) is an information gathering process. It is an essential tool for the acquisition of all kinds of human knowledge; a means whereby information locked up in books can be obtained and used by skillful readers. James (1984) described reading as the process through which most formal learning takes place. In a similar vein, Bond, Tinker and Wason 1979 submitted that:

Reading is the recognition of printed or written symbols which serve as stimuli to the recall of message built up through the readers' experiences.... In short, the reading process involves both the acquisition of meaning intended by the writer and the readers' own contribution in forms of interpretation, evaluation and reflection of these meanings.

Lapp and Flood (1978) cited in Adebajo 2003 observed that reading is basically a process of perceiving, interpreting and evaluating printed materials. In a similar vein, Unoh (1972) cited in Alabi 2003 opined that reading is essentially a cognitive learning activity consisting of perceiving, processing interpreting, comprehending and synthesizing information that is converged by written or printed language. This is perhaps why Hilldredth (1965) as cited by Ajala (1988) described reading as a mental process involving the interpretation of signs perceived through the sense organs. Adebajo (2004) seems to capture the concept aptly when she says:

Reading is an information gathering process. It can be viewed as a dialogue between the author and the reader through the medium of writing. It involves mental ability such as retention and recall.

These bring into focus the major/basic goal of reading which comprehension is. Reading must be complemented by comprehension, which is the ability to understand the meaning beneath a succession of printed words (Olowonmi and Falade 2004)

Olatayo (2006) asserted that reading can be regarded as deliberate and meaningful interpretation of what is graphically represented by hand or through printing. He argues further that it is a mental process through which materials that are encoded in written or printed forms are meaningfully decoded.

From all these submissions, it is clear that reading as a communication process is a means through which a replica of the information possessed by the author and graphically represented in written or printed form is harvested and reproduced in the mind of a reader who employs his language experience to interpret, analyze, comprehend and react appropriately to the piece of information. It is a meeting of minds; the minds of the writer and the readers.

Improving academic performance through the teaching of reading

As established above, reading is an indispensable tool for anyone who hopes to succeed in his educational pursuits. After having learnt to read, a student needs the reading skills to learn several other new skills, ideas and concepts that will catapult him to the realm of a successful scholar

Krashen (2003) in his input Hypothesis of second language acquisition states that we acquire language by being exposed to input (written or spoken language) that is comprehensible to us. In this hypothesis now called comprehension Hypothesis, Krashen states that learners acquire language when they are exposed to input at $i+1$ where i is the current state or stage of language proficiency. He claims that learners use their existing acquired linguistic competence together with their general world knowledge to make sense of the messages they receive in language just beyond where they currently are.

Research evidence abound in support of the proposition that students who read more tend to perform better in language use and general knowledge than those who do not. Lee Krashen & Gribbons 1996, Stokes and Kartchner 1994, S.Y. Lee 2001

Krashen (2004) reports that his own and others' research has led him to the following conclusions:

- Students who read more do better on a wide variety of tests
- Reading is the most significant factor in the development of vocabulary
- Reading is the major factor in the development of writing competence
- Students who read widely have a greater general knowledge

These agree with Ajala's (1988) view that the most natural way of increasing vocabulary is simply through meeting words in use. She argues further that if a student has a reading experience and frequently encounters new words, he will learn them. Corroborating this view,

Ogundepo (2011) remarked that reading serves as a means of developing one's vocabulary. It is often said that reading makes one a good writer. This perhaps is borne out of the fact that when one reads good writers, one comes across new words and even new usages for old words and use such words and expressions in one's subsequent write-ups. Adetunji (2000) agrees too, when he opines that words are raw materials for vocabulary development.

Reading proficiency correlates so highly with academic success that every effort should be made by teachers to inculcate a reading culture in their students. Justifying this claim, Pretorius (2000) says:

Research findings in applied linguistics and reading research consistently show a strong correlation between reading proficiency and academic success at all ages, from the primary school right through university level: students who read a lot and who understand what they read usually attain good grades. In fact, the relationship between reading and learning begins even earlier in the pre-primary school years-children who are exposed to story book reading before they go to school tend to have larger vocabularies, greater general knowledge and better conceptual development than their peers, and in addition, they learn to read and write more easily and quickly:

Still emphasizing the value of reading, Krashen in Pilgreen (2000) asserts that "we learn to read by reading", or more generally, that comprehension of messages is the essential ingredient in the development of language and literacy. Since reading is a skill, it is convenient to assume that like other skills, practicing reading will result in growth and development. The growth envisaged is not only in language competence but also in other learning areas where the acquired reading skills are applied. It is in view of the above that one is recommending the free voluntary reading approach as a means of engendering desirable academic outcomes.

Free Voluntary Reading

Free voluntary reading, free reading, book flood, reading for pleasure or extensive reading is a way of language learning through large amount of reading. According to Wikipedia, as well as facilitating acquisition and learning of vocabulary, this type of reading is also believed to increase encounters with unknown words bringing, learning opportunities by referencing. The learners' encounter with unknown words in specific contexts will allow the learners to infer and thus learn the meaning of such words.

Free voluntary reading is the reading of any book (newspaper, magazine or comic) that is chosen by the students themselves and is not subject to any follow-up work such as comprehension questions or summary. Krashen (2003) claims that Free voluntary reading may be the most powerful educational tool in language education. according to him, it serves to increase literacy and develop vocabulary.

Students are free to choose the book they like and are allowed to read at their own pace just to make them enjoy reading. They are at liberty to drop a book before they finish reading it if they do not find it interesting. Reading materials are normally for pleasure, information or general understanding. It is individual and silent and requires few or no follow-up exercises after reading.

Optimizing free voluntary reading for excellent performance in school

If free voluntary reading is to achieve the set goals, the teacher should as a matter of fact expose the students to sublimed message that reading is highly enjoyable and rewarding as it is a very effective way to become an interesting and knowledgeable person. Students should be encouraged to read as much as possible. The teacher should ensure that the class is stocked with reading materials that are well within the readers' grammatical and vocabulary competence and that such materials are varied in subjects matter and character

When free voluntary reading is incorporated into the school daily schedule and has its own time on the school time table, it is otherwise known as Sustained Silent Reading. At the appointed time students are allowed to read whatever they like (within reason) and are not tested on what they read. Reading is its own reward.

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