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# TEACHING AND LEARNING READING IN DISTANCE-LEARNING PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA

*by*

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## INTRODUCTION

Different forms of distance education have existed in Nigeria. In 2001, the Government partially abolished the satellite campus system of distance tertiary education and proposed a kind of open university system in order to meet the ever-increasing demand for tertiary education in Nigeria. This open university is a welcome development. Indeed, a functional distance education system will give added impetus to higher education in Nigeria; it will especially benefit many of the youths who have been striving without success to gain admission into the university. It will certainly ease the admission pressure on the existing universities in the country which do not admit one-third of all the students that apply and qualify for admission every year.

However, this learner-centered programme cannot significantly achieve its desired objectives in the present literacy situation in the country. This is due to the fact that the group for which the programme is intended lacks effective reading ability on which the success of such a programme largely hinges. This group is made up of the teeming young men and women who have completed their secondary school career. The majority of these youths have keen appetite for tertiary education but lack the linguistic capability to masticate, swallow and digest what university education offers. In assessing the reading ability of these youths vis-a-vis the importance of distance-learning programme in the overall development of tertiary education in Nigeria, the paper examines the concept of reading in English in a second language

milieu and the inevitable role of reading in formal education, especially in distance education. The paper also discusses the reading skills which distance learning students must possess in order to succeed in the programme. Finally the paper offers some recommendations to ameliorate the situation.

## THE CONCEPT OF READING

No one would have bothered oneself about defining "reading" if the language in question were one's mother tongue. In that case, reading would simply mean the interpretation and vocalization of the graphic symbols, whose meanings and some semantic import are already known to the reader. Reading in English, in a second language teaching and learning environment, is much more involved and problematic; and this explains why some attention should be given to its definition.

In the first place, reading in English does not mean mere verbalization of the graphic symbols or reading aloud. Crystal (1987:209) believes that even a "suitably equipped automatic machine" can do that with much clarity. He goes ahead to state that "reading crucially involves appreciating the sense of what is written". In the same line of thought, the *New Standard Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14 (p.104) asserts that, "The reader must know not only the meaning of isolated words, but their meaning when combined in phrases, sentences and longer groupings".

The foregoing points to the conclusion that both the interpretation and comprehension of the graphic symbols are integral components of the same complex process of reading; it is not that comprehension is a consequence of the interpretation of the graphic symbols, as some people believe. The two activities happen simultaneously, and cannot possibly be separated. To loudly read a piece of writing perfectly well but without understanding amounts to no reading for the reader. We can, therefore, define reading as a complex activity which involves mental or verbal interpretation of graphic symbols in isolated or group units and the ability to derive meaning from those symbols. With this definition

in mind, we shall look at the role reading can play in distance-learning programmes in Nigeria.

### THE ROLE OF READING IN DISTANCE LEARNING

The definition of reading proffered above has clearly underlined the centrality of effective reading in the entire business of formal education, and more especially in distance learning. *Grolier Family Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15 (p.399), puts it beautifully thus: "The ability to read enables a person to satisfy both personal and functional needs and to participate fully in contemporary society. It is a basic skill necessary for success in other areas of study, and it can lead to a lifetime pursuit of learning, critical thinking, and enjoyment. The ability to read, therefore, is a fundamental goal - as well as a basic tool - of education". The *New Standard Encyclopedia*, vol. 14, (p.104), also sees the ability as "one of the most important human accomplishments". It is obviously a great accomplishment, for with it, as a tool, one can attain any height in learning, irrespective of the field of study, with little or no assistance from teachers.

Educationists have long recognized the fundamental importance of reading in the process of education and have, accordingly, been fashioning means and methods of inculcating the skill to learners as early as possible. In the United States of America, an educationist, Betts, in his *Foundation of Reading* (1946), introduced a method of teaching reading called Directed Reading Activities (DRA). Later in 1969, Russel Stauffer proposed a modified DRA styled Directed Reading Thinking Activities (DRTA). Both DRA and DRTA were guided reading methods. Hammond (1994:378) notes that these guided reading methods became "a staple of American education for almost fifty years", after which more educational researchers continued to probe the subject of reading and to discover better strategies for inculcating reading skills. The rewarding result of this recognition of the importance of reading is the almost total eradication of utter illiteracy in America, as only 10% to 20% of American population are "functionally illiterate" (Crystal, 1987:272).

As far as distance learning in pursuit of tertiary education in Nigeria is concerned, effective reading ability remains the only tool for the success of the programme and its students. Since it is learner-centered programme, the students will have to encounter large volumes of texts of varying degrees of difficulty and complexity. Chall *et. al* (1995:284) notes that, at this level, the texts are bound to contain "rare, difficult, abstract and technical words; complex syntax, involved sentences and paragraphs.... The materials also assume that the reader has a greater background of knowledge." Chall *et al.* capture the exact boulder of reading task the learner faces, as he is expected to read those tough texts in order to educate himself, almost independent of his lecturers and other members of his class. For him to accomplish this task successfully, "he would not only have learned to read, but should have gone through a step-by-step development of efficient reading skill that is commensurate with his needs and intellectual sophistication" (Onuigbo, 1990:116). If the reading skills are not at the appropriate level of sophistication, the distance student will make little or no progress at the beginning of his programme and this will adversely affect his total performance in the programme if he is able to continue with the programme honestly.

That step-by-step approach to the development of efficient reading skill is yet to be entrenched in our education system. Onuigbo (1990:115) laments the utter neglect of the reading skill in language studies at primary and secondary school levels. He warns that the neglect threatens Nigeria's civilization. Onuigbo's outcry was over a decade ago. Today, the situation is still the same; instead of improving, it has degenerated and has constituted a stupendous obstacle to the development of higher education in Nigeria. Due to myriads of problems in the education system, public primary and secondary schools, especially the ones in the rural communities, have continued to churn out "educated" youths who cannot literally write their names correctly.

We can, therefore, state that a strong foundation has not yet been laid for a functional distance-learning programme in the

manner of open university in Nigeria. This is because most of the prospective students of the programme lack the basic tool to cope with the intellectual rigours inherent in distance-learning enterprise. The students will surely face more academic problems than many of the present regular university students who merely pass their courses by reading their lecture notes only, and consequently graduate without really educating themselves. It is pertinent to observe that a good number of regular undergraduates and students of some quasi distance-learning programmes are simply not interested in knowledge but in certificates. These are the students who, with great zest, resort to unacademic and unfair means of writing their assignments, term papers, theses and examinations. Ab initio, students of this sort lack the capacity to read, and as such, they remain semi illiterates in spite of the bogus certificates they obtain at the end of the programme.

In view of this discouraging situation, there is a relevant question that must be answered. This question borders on whether Government should go ahead and establish new distance-learning programmes and also allow the operations of the existing ones or do otherwise. Our candid opinion is that new distance-learning programmes should be put in place and the existing ones encouraged to grow for the sake of the few Nigerians who are genuinely searching for knowledge and for whom these programmes will provide the only opportunity to satisfy their educational ambition. This opinion, it must be noted, logically leads to its obvious, crucial, and pedagogical implication. The implication is that all freshmen of the programme necessarily require to undergo intensive remedial courses in reading. This measure will not only confer credibility on the programme but will make the programme's goals and objectives achievable.

Having underscored the ability to read effectively as the inevitable foundation for functional and successful distance-learning programme, we need to examine the elements that constitute appropriate reading skills at this level. In other words, it is necessary to itemize and discuss the components or contents of a reading

course for distance learning students. These components are briefly reviewed below.

## RELEVANT SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE READING

Many linguistic and non-linguistic skills intricately combine to make reading a success. That is why the teaching and learning of reading should start early and should be systematic, methodical and based on sound pedagogical principles. *Reading and Thinking in English* (1997:XI) maintains that efficient reading in English requires the knowledge of how the language is organized in "academic writing". This knowledge, according to the text, includes:

- a. "a knowledge of language itself, its grammatical structure and vocabulary;
- b. a knowledge of how these features of language are exploited in the presentation of information."

Thinking and writing along similar lines, Hedge (1985:32) examines various skills which, she believes, good and fluent readers should possess, and arrives at the conclusion that "success reading depends on the interaction of reading strategies for processing the text, background knowledge and linguistic competence".

Reference to those two authorities is made to buttress up the point that efficient reading is a product of the interaction and combination of distinct skills. These skills can be classified under semantic, writing, phonological, and study skills. They are the skills students of distance-learning should be exposed to, and they are simply outlined below.

## SEMANTIC SKILLS

They include the ability to "guess the meaning of words from contextual clues or by applying knowledge of how words can be formed from others"; the ability to "distinguish fact from opinion and statement from example"; the ability to "read between lines and work on the meaning of the text at different levels, understanding information, making inferences and critically evaluating ideas". Hedge (p.32) identifies and discusses these skills

as distinct skills. But here, they are classified as semantic since each is an attempt at understanding the exact meaning of lexical items in single units and in combination. These skills are logically enhanced by massive vocabulary building through extensive reading.

### WRITING SKILLS

They refer to the ability to detect the structuring and development of ideas in books and paragraphs; a knowledge of punctuation marks and orthographical conventions; a knowledge of the different parts of a book and their functions. A knowledge of the organization of a book and the mechanics of paragraphing and paragraph development, for example, is very essential for effective reading because organization and paragraphing concern the conscious installment packaging and delivery of ideas to the reader by the writer. Knowing the art of this packaging will certainly make the comprehension of any short or large discourse much easier. The same applies to the knowledge of punctuation mechanism which, in most cases, clarify meaning.

### PHONOLOGICAL SKILLS

They embrace the skill to pronounce words correctly; a knowledge of intonation patterns, and word/sentence stress patterns.

We recommend that these skills be strongly stressed in the teaching and learning of reading in a second language environment like ours. This stems from the previous and recent experiences of this author, which clearly reveals that many undergraduates and students of other grades of tertiary institutions in Nigeria lack the skills to read out simple passages fluently and properly. Apart from this fact, the phonological or phonic approach to the teaching of reading has since been in use and has been regarded as "an essential feature of the process" of learning reading (Crystal, p.210). Crystal gave two reasons for regarding this approach as "an essential feature of the process":

- a. it is a "natural process which cannot be avoided when first learning reading";

- b. people vocalize or sub-vocalize when reading difficult texts in order to gain comprehension.

The *New Standard Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14, (pp. 106-107) has discussed six methods used in teaching reading in the USA. Three of them had some connection with phonology, and the three included synthetic or intensive phonics method, structural linguistics method, and word-in-colour-system method. The Encyclopedia (p.104) correctly observes that, "Reading is easier if the reader can also perceive the sounds of the letters and words." In our present situation, therefore, phonological skills will not only aid comprehension but will also make reading fluent and fast.

### STUDY SKILLS

The skills encompass the proper use of the dictionary, skimming and scanning techniques of reading, and a knowledge of good and bad reading habits. Also included are techniques of "managing time", "choosing a location", "developing concentration" and "developing memory" (Obah and Otagburuagu, 1992). The indispensability of these skills in the reading task cannot be stressed enough. The dictionary, for example, can assist a reader in fixing the meaning of words, proverbs, idioms and figures of speech; it can also help the reader to pronounce words correctly, and to identify the parts of speech of strange words.

One should note that these categories of skill can simply be called reading skills. This does not mean that the above categorization amounts to splitting hairs. On the contrary, it is a further illustration of the complexity of the subject of reading and also a demonstration of the enormous task facing both teachers and students of reading. The skills are for teachers to impart and for distance-learning students to imbibe. For the student who does not have a firm grip of these skills the enjoyable task of reading will be huge drudgery, and as a result, he has condemned himself to painful stuttering progress along the path of his academic endeavour.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend the immediate introduction of remedial

courses in reading in the existing distance-learning programmes and especially in the proposed National Open University. These courses should be compulsory for all freshmen and should run for, at least, a session; they should be intensive in implementation. Language experts should be contacted to design the syllabus, develop appropriate methodology and produce or select suitable materials for instruction. The syllabus should aim at including the skills outlined above. In consideration of the corrective posture the courses will take, they should be partially teacher-centered since the teacher has to do a lot of work in instructing the students, giving and supervising frequent exercises and projects. Active participation of the students is also required for the achievement of the course objectives. They have to engage in extensive reading, as directed by the teacher, and also perform class assignments and projects. This presupposes that teacher-student contacts for tutorials will be regular throughout the duration of the courses. In order to accomplish all this, it is further recommended that the duration of different programmes in distance learning be increased by one session, so that the remedial year will be totally devoted to the acquisition of language skills, since "reading ability is probably best developed not in isolation but in association with other communicative activities" (*Reading and Thinking in English*, p.XI).

The introduction of remedial courses in reading a the level of tertiary education is only an embarrassingly ad hoc approach to solving the basic problem of poor reading ability among the present generation of students in Nigeria and poor reading culture in the entire society. The problem must be tackled at its root. Its root remains the system of literacy education, which has been a nagging issue in Nigeria. We, therefore, stress and recommend that the teaching of reading should be taken seriously at primary and secondary levels of our education system. The teaching and learning of reading should be systematic and methodical in the manner they are done in other civilized countries of the world so that, at least, those who are fortunate to pass through primary and, or, secondary schools can acquire the ability to read efficiently and thereby become

well-equipped to pursue, on their own, fruitful distance or life-long learning.

## CONCLUSION

The paper identified poor reading ability as a problem which, if not solved, will continue to undermine the development of qualitative distance-learning programmes and the whole tertiary education in Nigeria. It strongly believes that the solution to this problem lies in starting remedial courses in reading for students of distance learning. The remedial courses are expected to remain in place until the root cause of the problem is tackled and destroyed. The root cause is our education system which lacks thoroughness, commitment and vision in its administration. So, a functional primary and secondary education system will provide a logical and lasting solution to the problem, for it will, among other things, recognize the primacy of literacy education, and the vital role of reading in the delicate process of formal education of the child. But when will the education system become functional?

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