

## IMBIBING READING CULTURE TO FURTHER ENHANCE NIGERIAN STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN SCIENCE

**Catherine Omole**

**Halima Ladan**

*School of Science and Technology*

*Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnic, Bauchi, Bauchi State, Nigeria*

*E-mail: catieomole@gmail.com*

### ABSTRACT

*Reading is a necessary skill to possess in order to excel in academics. Students need reading skills in careers, households, in citizenship, and in their personal lives. The reading and literacy development of adolescents prepares them for success and learning in school and throughout their lives and beyond. It is necessary for learning, yet students may not be obtaining the reading help that they need to be successful. There is no doubt that the reading culture among Nigerian children is tragically deficient in comparison to those of the Western nations. Meanwhile, little advancement is being made in developing the reading skills of secondary school students. This puts them at risk for reading failure. Failure to learn to read has contributed to students' alienation from education. As students move from primary to secondary school, demands on literacy skills increase, and students must become more adept at meeting the challenges of sophisticated content area reading and information. Whereas reading in primary schools focuses on learning to read, secondary and content area reading focuses on reading to learn, and they begin to struggle with reading comprehension. Students must be able to learn from the language of expository texts, even when the topic is unfamiliar and the reading is demanding and discern the worthwhile information. Less skilled readers may require adaptive techniques to help in comprehending expository texts.*

**Keywords:** *Imbibing, reading culture, achievement, science*

### INTRODUCTION

Reading is obviously one of the basic things a child begins to do in the early stages of formal education, within the school system. Some children also learn to read from their parents even before they start schooling. It is through reading that children broaden their understanding of life. It opens up a whole new world from which to see themselves and others. Reading enables creativity to blossom in the child. It gives them the tools to explore their talent while learning about themselves and their societies. Great readers have always made great writers as history, autobiographies and biographies of great men have taught us. Great novelists in Nigeria such as Wole soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and the young Chima Manda Ngozi Adichie, to mention but few are home grown examples of great readers and writers. It is therefore quite obvious and, proper to say that those who can read definitely have an advantage over those who cannot.

## **READING: COMPREHENSION AND PROBLEMS**

Adolescents need to have strong reading skills so they can excel in academics, create meaning in their environment, and productively function in society (Meltzer, 2001). Students need reading skills in careers, households, in citizenship, and in their personal lives (D'Arcangelo, 2002). The reading and literacy development of adolescents prepares them for success and learning in school and throughout their lives and beyond school (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000; Vacca, 2002). Students need reading skills to analyze and comprehend the plethora of knowledge and facts available through the Internet and other media (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw and Rycik 1999; Swafford & Kallus, 2002). Good readers can internalize information, make critical decisions, and form opinions (D'Arcangelo, 2002). Building students' literacy skills empowers students to grow, improve, and develop; yet most secondary educational systems are not adequately preparing students to develop the types and levels of reading and literacy necessary for success. Reading is necessary for learning yet students may not be obtaining the reading help that they need to be successful. There is no doubt that the reading culture among Nigerian children is tragically deficient in comparison to other Western nations (Onwubiko, 2010). Nigerian students compare poorly with their counterparts in other developed countries, especially where content knowledge and literacy are central to the curriculum. This lack of reading and comprehension ability in Nigerian schools translates into failures later in life because students are unprepared for the academic language encountered in college (Wright, 1998). Little advancement is being made in developing the reading skills of secondary school students (Snow, 2002).

Educators are making little advancement in teaching students how to comprehend and apply text, especially for struggling readers (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001). One aspect of reading is the construction of meaning from text (Snow, 2002). Yet, fewer than five percent of adolescents, students in grades eight through twelve, can extend or elaborate the meanings of materials they read (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw and Rycik, 1999; NCES, 2001, 2003). This means that secondary school students cannot combine information from their own background knowledge or information in other texts with material that they are currently reading in order to construct meaning and solve problems, they cannot generate new knowledge from text, and finally they cannot construct meaning from text. This puts them at risk for reading failure. Failure to learn to read has contributed to students' alienation from education (Vacca, 2002).

The children most at risk for reading failure are the poor and otherwise estranged from school (Cappella and Weinstein, 2001; Zimmerman and Brown, 2003). While a portion of students lack the basic reading skills and are alienated from school, almost all students need support in learning vocabulary, managing reading styles, developing a positive attitude toward literacy, and learning and applying reading strategies independently (Meltzer, 2001; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw and Rycik, 1999).

The need to teach reading to aid comprehension. Reading in secondary schools and content areas is vital to students' development of comprehension skills. Yet many students lack the requisite skills to understand and apply meaning from texts. Therefore they disengage with reading in the content areas and for pleasure. Further, content area texts often contain complex and difficult vocabulary, structure, and concepts (Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek and Wei, 2004). The reading activities are also demanding and involve problem solving and critical thinking. Teachers are often unprepared to teach reading strategies and do not employ reading on a regular basis (Bintz 1997, Cresson 1999, Digisi 1993). As the context of reading in secondary schools shifts with each passing period, students are required to shift knowledge, thinking skills, and contexts in order to comprehend coursework. Additionally, students often fail to realize the connection between reading in content areas and applications in their personal lives. Readence, Bean and Baldwin (1989) proposed assumptions and misconceptions about reading in content areas that must be overcome for learning to take place. These assumptions and misconceptions include that:

- Students have learned to read in elementary schools.
- Students have sufficient prior knowledge to cope with important information in content text.
- The processes involved in efficiently reading and comprehending in content texts are identical to those utilized in reading in elementary school.
- Remedial reading classes will provide struggling readers with the necessary reading skills for success in subject-matter reading.
- Content reading means teaching skills not directly related to subject areas.
- Subject matter specialists are information dispensers.

As students move from primary to secondary school, demands on literacy skills increase, and students must become more adept at meeting the challenges of sophisticated content area reading and information (Baer and Nourie 1993, Jacobs 2002, Meltzer 2001, Musthafa 1996, Snow 2002, Tomlinson, 1995). Whereas reading in primary schools focuses on learning to read, secondary and content area reading focuses on reading to learn (Baer and Nourie 1993; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw and Rycik, 1999). Although students have learned to read, they begin to struggle with reading comprehension. After primary school reading courses, students receive few opportunities for intensive instruction in reading and comprehension in secondary school (Durkin 1978, Forget and Bottoms 2000, Meltzer 1999, Snow 2002). This lack of instruction contributes to the widening gap of reading abilities among students and their subsequent alienation from reading (Bryant 2003, Baer and Nourie 1993, Tovani and Keene, 2000). These struggling alienated readers develop a downward spiral of reading experiences (Cibrowski 1995; Readence, Bean and Baldwin

1989). They expend more time and energy in constructing meaning from text and exhibit a labored and choppy reading style that strains their attention and interest (Cibrowski, 1995). Struggling readers over attend to individual words and are unable to use context to predict meaning and develop comprehension. In essence, their mired attempt at comprehending text elicits poor performance and poor attitudes toward reading, resulting in less time spent reading. For students who struggle with reading, school becomes a period of life to endure, rather than a pathway to success (Bean, 2001).

### **IMPORTANCE OF TEXTBOOKS**

The structure and syntax of texts become more complex and demanding in content areas (Allington, 2002). According to the Strategic Literacy Initiative in 2001, reading is a different task when we read literature, science texts, historical analyses, newspapers, tax forms, [which is why]. Teaching students how to read texts in academic disciplines is a key part of teaching them these disciplines. While textbooks are the predominant form of reading material in classrooms, teachers also rely upon technical and trade books, magazines, newspapers, the Internet, and other electronic texts (Vacca, 2002).

Understanding the language of content areas is essential to student comprehension and achievement. If students fail to grasp the language, then they fail to grasp the concepts in the language (Meltzer, 2001). Students must be able to learn from the language of expository texts, even when the topic is unfamiliar and the reading is demanding (Alexander and Kulikowich, 1991; Barton, Heidema and Jordan, 2002). Content area texts are conceptually dense and organized for information, thus demanding special reading skills for inference and critical thinking (Allington, 2002) and to discern the worthwhile information (Bean, 2001). Less skilled readers may require adaptive techniques to help in comprehending expository texts (Horton, Lovitt and Bergerud, 1990). With the variety and difficulty of text materials, navigating these challenging texts may be nearly impossible for some students without teacher assistance.

### **READING CULTURE**

Reading culture can best be explained as a learned practice of seeking knowledge, information or entertainment through the written word. Such practice can be acquired by reading books, journals, magazines, newspaper, etc. Having a reading culture has become imperative in the 21st Century for everybody, especially our children, the future of the nation. To participate effectively in our children is a task that we must take very seriously. This should be the primary goal of institutional heads, teachers, parents, and our communities at large. The declining interest in reading exhibited by our children today is a cause for alarm and a challenge to all (Onwubiko, 2010).

## **READING CULTURE AMONG CHILDREN IN MODERN NIGERIA**

There is no doubt that the reading culture among Nigerian children is tragically deficient in comparison to those of the Western nations. One can even say that the past generation of Nigerians, our fathers and grandfathers had a remarkable thirst for knowledge through education despite the scarce resources that they contended with. They had a better appreciation of the value of education as a status symbol. There are examples of parents who deprived themselves of everything to see to the education of their children, a situation that was also economically and financially viable or rewarding. Thus, to know how to read for its own sake is an invaluable asset.

Sadly enough, this is not the case among many Nigerian children in the 21st century. The importance of reading for its own sake has taken a bad hit, and reading culture has steadily declined over the years (Onwubiko, 2010). Where do we look for the source of this problem? Who do we blame? Our parents, the children, the educational system, the nation! What has happened to the Nigerian Child of old and that love for reading so well exemplified by the past generation? Why is the Nigerian child no longer interested in reading except when he/she is sitting for an examination? Why the lack of interest in knowledge for knowledge sake? Indeed, this poses a problem for the future of this nation. How can a nation sustain itself in the future without great readers and writers with the imagination and creativity that characterized the Shakespeare's, the Achebe's, etc.

### **FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR POOR READING CULTURE**

***Lack of motivation to read among children:*** It is my belief that the Nigerian child is presently lacking in the motivation that creates a strong reading culture in the nation. There is a general apathy or loss of value for reading. The youth is distracted by the fall outs from technological innovation in the world today. Taking into account our educational system in the pre-war era (discipline/morality and focus) and post civil war (take over of schools by the military, lobby for admission, corruption, mass promotion, slummy from our national educational policies, sorting, etc).

It is not out of place to state that the present cream of Nigerian leaders/policy makers are products of our present models. These include the easy availability of entertainment media, games and gambling. Rather than read a good novel or biography they may prefer to play card games or indulge some other pastime outside of reading. Students may realize they are poor readers but lack the knowledge of strategies to improve their reading abilities (Forget and Bottoms, 2000). Many secondary students are at risk of reading failure and need reading instruction to continue to build their reading skills. They do not know how to read for comprehension and have not developed the skills necessary to learn effectively from text (D'Arcangelo 2002, Forget and Bottoms



2000). Many older students do not receive the support needed to help them grow from fluent decoders into strategic readers (Vacca, 2002). Teachers must "adopt strategic teaching practices that will help students acquire both concepts critical to curricular content and learning strategies they need to be independent learners and processors of information.

***Lack of parental guidance and encouragement:*** Parents do not encourage children by providing them good books to read at home, to improve their reading skills. A lot of children are not introduced to Internet or electronic books. However, parental guidance is advisable at this point as some children are easily distracted.

***Poor economy and low standard of living:*** Due to the harsh economy, many parents find it increasingly difficult to cater for their children's book needs even at the foundation level. This results in a grassroots problem sowing the seed of reading problems as the child is left behind from the very beginning.

***Child Labour:*** Children in some families engage in economic activities to sustain the family. This is a major distraction as the child has little time for academic activities and is easily fatigued. Sometimes it leads to abuse of the child which may be unknown to the parents. These are all detractors and do not augur well with academic activities.

***The Examination Code:*** Nowadays, many children are worried only about passing their examinations - without acquiring the basic knowledge that comes with education. They feel they have no need to study their books. Examination malpractice is the order of the day as parents, school teachers; head teachers alike are all guilty of this offence. If this trend is left unchecked, it could increase the unproductive work force which the country is already witnessing.

***Inadequate funding of educational institutions/Community Libraries:*** The government can help by assisting schools with functional local and mobile libraries (which are repositories of knowledge) that children can borrow books from and read at leisure. The community libraries are another target for improving reading culture. Existing public libraries are another target for improving reading culture. Existing public libraries should aim to update their collection; their services should be made pleasant enough to attract children of all ages to read outside of their teacher-assigned texts.

There should be availability of the Internet and our library systems connected to the electronic libraries to expose our children and prepare them to relate to their peers from all over the world and keep them current with world events. Indeed, going to a library should be a pleasant experience for every child interest in reading. Ogunrombi and Gboyega (1993) suggest that there is a great shortage of books at all levels of education, but the most acute being at the tertiary level due to an overwhelming dependence on imported books. It was further revealed that libraries promoting scholarship are limited to elite and private schools which are models which cannot be replicated on a

national scale. However, Communities can be called upon to help in building up their libraries for their children's sake.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers can help arrest the situation by adopting strategic teaching practices that will help students acquire both concepts critical to curricular content, and learning strategies they need to be independent learners and processors of information. Parents can encourage children by providing them good books to read at home, to improve their reading skills. Less emphasis can be laid on examinations and results and more attention paid to acquiring the necessary skills so they can excel in academics, create meaning in their environment, and productively function in the society. However, Communities can be called upon to help in building up their libraries for their children's sake.

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