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Making Omelette without Breaking Eggs: Improving the Reading Comprehension Skills of English as a Second Language Teachers in Nigeria's Secondary Schools

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Abstract

One of the important language skills teachers are expected to master and teach their students is how to develop comprehension skills and comprehend whatever they read, be able to recall information and apply such-appropriate comprehension skills later in life Unfortunately, teachers in secondary schools in Nigeria do not seem to have fully mastered the skills and techniques of impacting appropriate comprehension

knowledge and skills into their students. Thus, most secondary schools students are not able to comprehend effectively, do not perform well in comprehension tests and subsequently do not do well in most situations where comprehension skills are required. Asking teachers to facilitate the acquisition of comprehension skills by students when they themselves do not know whether to teach or test comprehension skills is akin to wanting them to make omelette without breaking eggs. Therefore, in order to have a firsthand information on strategies teachers adopt in impacting the knowledge of comprehension skills into their students, this study, through observation and verification, examines what teachers of comprehension actually do in impacting the knowledge of comprehension in their students in selected secondary schools in Ibadan, and makes recommendations on what should be included in the curricula of teacher preparation programmes in Nigeria with a view to helping teachers of English as a Second Language to acquire appropriate strategies of handling comprehension lessons and ultimately facilitating, in their students, effective acquisition of comprehension skills.

Introduction

The official status of English language in Nigeria as the official national language makes it the foundation on which almost all educational growth and development are built from the kindergarten to the tertiary life of an individual. The practice of teaching the various segments of English language such as grammar, comprehension, oral and vocabulary development in Nigerian secondary schools has been the focus of many scholars because of the high rate of failure by students in the subject in public examinations, (Kolawole, Adepoju and Adelore 2000; Abimbola 2004; Adebile 1999 & 2007; Ogunsola 2011). The findings of most of these researches reveal that the inability of teachers to help students to acquire comprehension skills through the way they handle the teaching of the concept invariably results in the poor performance of learners in English language tests and by implication, in other school subjects. For some years now, the abysmal failure of secondary school students in public examinations has remained a cause of concern to stakeholders in the educational sector. Many reasons are adduced for this poor performance of students. Primarily emphasis is, however often placed on the nature of pedagogy (Ojo 2003; Oredein & Oloyede 2007; Adebile 2012; Tabulawa 2013). This is because teachers play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning process and their qualifications, training, experience and motivation contribute to making them one of the primary determinants of students' academic and lifetime achievements (Abimbola 2004; Ayodele & Adebile 2007).

English language teachers have a lot of responsibilities and challenges as they are in the forefront of those 'to inculcate in learners permanent literacy in English and help them to lay a solid foundation for academic success at higher education level' (FRN, 2004:9). The second language (L2) status of English in Nigeria makes it imperative

for its pedagogy, in the Nigerian context, to engender a teaching and learning style that will transcend developing students language skills to building their comprehension abilities in other fields of study that use English language as the mode of transmission. The successful implementation of the Nigerian *National Policy on Education* as well as the West African Examinations Council's English language teaching objectives is therefore hinged on the production of individuals with good comprehension abilities in whatever they encounter in the English language and teachers hold the ace in achieving this.

Students interact with all other aspects of the language they learn through comprehension where they utilise their linguistic and lexical knowledge of the different structures and aspects of the language they have learnt. Reading comprehension texts serve as the foundation for the development of the critical skills students need to negotiate their ways with all other tests in fields that are different from languages, hence, reading comprehension lessons have to be handled in ways that students will acquire comprehension skills.

A review of literature shows that the purpose of teaching reading comprehension skills and strategies is to stimulate the understanding of every element of language that makes a print text and a teacher expects a learner to have the ability to decode the words on the page and to extract meaning from it. This invariably presupposes that the teacher has prerequisite knowledge of necessary skills and strategies to transfer to the learner. But scholars have provided divergent opinions about the pedagogy of reading comprehension. For effective and competent reading comprehension to occur, teachers must teach certain skills and strategies through the text instead of just making the students answer comprehension questions. Thus, the central role of teachers in students' ability to comprehend is emphasised as many factors that could aid students' reading comprehension are within the teachers' control (Closs, 2007; Pardo, 2004). In laying further emphasis on teachers' responsibility, Pardo states:

Once teachers understand what is involved in comprehending and how the factors of reader, text, and context interact to create meaning, they can more easily teach their students to be effective 'comprehenders' (p. 1).

The importance of teachers in the drive for competent reading comprehension abilities can therefore not be over emphasised as they have the privilege to deliver effective instruction that would engender positive literacy skills. Good instruction handled by expert teachers is the most powerful means of promoting the development of proficient reading comprehension experts and preventing reading comprehension problems.

Several studies (Akande, 1993; Presley, 2000; Closs, 2006; Dewiiz, Jones, & Leahy, 2009) have shown that there exist many critical components of text comprehension,

which are necessary in reading comprehension lessons. These components include vocabulary instruction or vocabulary learning strategies; and prior or background knowledge. Thus, in order to develop strong comprehension competence, these strategies and others such as word recognition, fluency, knowledge development, and vocabulary, need to be taught to students, (Dewitz, Jones & Leahy, 2009; Pressley, 2000). Many studies have endorsed important instructional strategies that teachers should use to teach reading comprehension skills and strategies during reading comprehension lessons. These multiple-strategy instructional routines include reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984), and transactional strategies (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Sehudler, 1996). Teachers are expected to use these strategies to teach students reading comprehension skills such as predicting, making inferences, summarizing, evaluating, self-questioning, comprehension, monitoring and asking questions. A good teacher is expected to teach and model these strategies and make use of practices that employ his or her knowledge about the complex and fluid interrelationships among readers, texts, purposeful activities, and contexts to advance students thoughtful, competent, and motivated reading and reading comprehension abilities.

In some English language textbooks in Nigeria, the modules on reading comprehension are usually made up of passages which could be narrative, expository, argumentative or descriptive and they are aimed at exposing the students to sustained reading. The passage embodies many other aspects of the English language that students have learned over time and questions are attached to them to measure students' levels of understanding of the overall passage. Studies have, however, shown that some internal and external factors are responsible for bringing about understanding. Some of these include the way reading comprehension lessons are handled, teachers' knowledge of what they are expected to do and non-availability of text materials among others. Primarily, the success of the external factors hinges on the extent to which teachers have taught the rudiments of reading to the students before students are made to answer questions.

The situation of inadequate teaching is further accentuated because most teachers of English as second language, either due to their orientation, training or educational background, handle reading comprehension lessons with emphasis on testing because students are made to read and answer questions which follow the passages they have read, sometimes badly. Some teachers are also fond of making students use comprehension questions to trace answers, thus circumventing the purpose for which the passages have been included in comprehension lessons. Ultimately, most teachers are in the habit of combining testing and teaching with either of the skills not being given the needed attention that will help secondary school students master the subject and perform well in it in their academic endeavours. This is why most of our students manage to pass reading comprehension tests/examinations and most fail woefully to

acquire the necessary reading comprehension skills that would facilitate and promote better comprehension skills in later life.

Research findings on the influence of teachers' years of experience, sex, age and educational qualifications on students' academic performance have been largely inconclusive. This is because such findings have tended to show that the roles of these variables vary from study to study. For example, Sparks (2000) noted that the most important factor affecting students' academic performance is having qualified teachers in the classroom while Hanushek (2000) has also found no positive correlation between students' academic achievement. Hanushek finally concluded by noting that there is no relationship between teachers' teaching experience and students' achievement after a review of 71% of studies in that area. Paul (2014) shows that though there is a relationship between teachers' teaching experience and students' achievement in prose literature, the relationship is weak. Similarly, Obi-Okoye, (2002) pointed out that research has shown that teachers knowledge supersedes their years of experience. Thus, it can be stated that irrespective of teachers' age, experience on the job, qualification and sex, there is no difference in their handling of reading comprehension in secondary schools in the study area.

Another crucial component to understanding reading comprehension is its assessment or measurement. There exist many different methods of testing students' reading comprehension. But many teachers engage in the practices of testing or assessing students' reading comprehension ability instead of teaching the students how to acquire reading comprehension skills. Reading comprehension lessons entail measuring the students' level of comprehension in order to identify students' strength and build on their weaknesses after the teaching of reading comprehension has been properly handled by teachers. Thus teachers' practices of testing or assessing students instead of teaching them contribute to students' poor performance in reading comprehension tests (Shih, 1992; Kolawole, Adepoju and Adelore, 2000).

Reading comprehension tests are measures of identifying specific challenges of students after the teacher has taught the students. Thus testing should only take place after the teacher has successfully taught the students and if a student who, despite being a good reader/speller, has difficulty in answering certain type of questions from narrative texts, it is recommended that the teacher uses the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability or the York Assessment of Reading and Comprehension to provide a full assessment of such students' reading skills, their prose reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension (ESRC 2002).

The situation in most secondary schools in Nigeria is such that most teachers of reading comprehension do not show that they are aware of this important fact; namely that reading comprehension lessons should help students to master comprehension skills if they are properly taught. They therefore, handle the teaching of reading

comprehension in ways that students are not helped to acquire the necessary comprehension skills of predicting, self-questioning, and evaluating, summarizing, clarifying and vocabulary development.

Teachers in Nigerian educational system use one of three major instructional modes which have been identified as teaching, testing alone and questioning to facilitate their classroom practices. Each of these instructional modes determines the extent to which students would be helped to develop life-long reading comprehension skills. But there is a difference between teaching, testing, and teaching and testing comprehension. When a teacher of reading comprehension reads a passage or asks students to read a passage and attempt the questions that follow, he/she has not taught but tested. When a teacher teaches learners through modeling and calls into play the learners' knowledge, such a teacher is engaged in teaching and when the students are evaluated, the complementary teaching and testing paradigms reveal the appropriate mode of teaching. The major reason for mass failure of learners in public examinations in reading comprehension in Nigerian secondary schools can, therefore, no doubt be attributed to a weak foundation in reading comprehension competency in English language. Since English language is the medium of instruction in all other subjects in Nigerian secondary schools, learners' deficiencies or inability to acquire necessary reading comprehension skills tend to affect their performance in other spheres of their studies and later life after school.

Teachers' practices in reading comprehension lessons have been the focus of many scholars who have revealed that several factors influence teachers' practices in reading comprehension lessons. Some of the factors are teachers' beliefs and their practical knowledge about the purpose and goal of reading comprehension lesson and the strategies that are adopted during lessons. Teachers' knowledge and beliefs are important determinant of their classroom practices, (Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991; Mcijcr, Verloop & Beijaard 2001). In their study, Richardson (1996) investigated the influence of teachers' beliefs on their practices in reading comprehension lessons and observed that:

The variance in teachers' beliefs is typically described as falling somewhere between the belief that reading is a skill that begins and ends with decoding and the belief that reading is a transactional process between a reader and a text within a social context (p. 564).

Researchers have revealed that reading comprehension is often tested instead of being taught by teachers. But it is crucial that teachers teach students the importance of getting meaning from reading and for them to understand that the reading process transcends decoding words before students are made to handle test-tasks.

The reports on teachers' practices during reading comprehension or the combination of their practices are largely inconclusive because there is no clear cut way of teaching reading comprehension skills in literature. For example, some scholars like Akande (1993), Lawal (1993), Shih (1992), Richardson, Anders, Tidwell & Lloyd (1991) have focused on teachers' practices in reading comprehension instruction from varying angles and with divergent results. These scholars reveal the important role of the teacher in reading comprehension instruction. While some focus on the factors that contribute to teachers' engagement with certain practices or approaches, the majority reveal the inadequacies of teachers' practices in reading comprehension instruction.

A major obstacle, however, that hinders the effective teaching of reading comprehension is the lack of expertise by teachers on how to teach it, conceptual knowledge, and vocabulary effectively (Murnane, Sawhill and Snow 2012). While some teachers have prerequisite teaching qualifications, they lack the skill to teach reading comprehension due to a lack of current knowledge of reading comprehension instruction as well as the underlining factors of teaching reading comprehension. Meijer, Verloop and Beijaard (2001) investigated the nexus between teachers' practical knowledge and their practices in reading comprehension lesson, the study revealed that despite the qualification of the teacher:

A relatively large number of teachers appeared to focus on small components of teaching reading comprehension while a relatively large number of teachers appeared to consider reading comprehension as not being very important, (p. 182).

The situation created thus far shows that there is no clear-cut way through which reading comprehension skills are being taught or can be taught in secondary schools. Similarly, there seems to be an agreement in literature that if students' problems with reading comprehension are to be solved, teachers who teach the skills have to devise better ways of handling their tasks in order to help students to acquire this important language skill. In order to improve the teaching of reading comprehension in secondary schools in Nigeria, this study examines how secondary school teachers handle, through their classroom practices, the teaching of reading comprehension skills in secondary schools in Ibadan, Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

Since the situation in secondary schools in Nigeria when it comes to the teaching of reading comprehension skills is such that teachers test reading comprehension in the guise of teaching and that is largely responsible for students' poor performance in the skills and generally in English language, it is important, therefore, to actually find out how English as Second Language teachers in Nigerian secondary schools handled the

teaching of reading comprehension in their classes. The current study therefore, in its concern at helping teachers to teach comprehension skills successfully, sought to identify the patterns of teachers' practices in reading comprehension lessons in secondary school in Ibadan, Oyo State. Ibadan is the third largest city in West Africa and is the political and business epic centre of the southwest, Nigeria excluding Lagos. There are several secondary schools in Ibadan out of which the sample size in this study is drawn.

Procedure

A descriptive survey research design was used. Forty-five teachers of English as Second Language (ESL) were observed in eighteen secondary schools in the study area which is Ibadan metropolis. The study lasted eight weeks. Five research questions were raised and answered namely:

- (1) What practices do English teachers engage in during reading comprehension lessons?
- (2) What is the pattern of English reading comprehension teachers' practices based on their age?
- (3) What is the pattern of English reading comprehension teachers' practices based on their experience?
- (4) What is the pattern of English reading comprehension teachers' practices based on their gender?
- (5) What is the pattern of English reading comprehension teachers' practices based on their qualifications?

Instruments

Teachers' Comprehension Teaching Observational Schedules (TCTOS), an instrument adapted from Graham Reichmann's Teaching Style (1996) was used to gather information. The instrument met face and content validity and have reliability co-efficient of 0.72. It helped the researchers to identify secondary school teachers' practices in comprehension lessons range from teaching, testing and a combination of teaching and testing reading comprehension skills.

Results

Research question 1: *What practices do English teachers engage in during reading comprehension lessons?*

Result from data analysis shows that 5(11.1%) of English reading comprehension teachers practice teaching, 25(55.6%) of them practice testing while 15(33.3%) practice a combination of teaching and testing while teaching reading comprehension in schools.

Research Question 2: *What is the pattern of English reading comprehension teachers' practices based on their age?*

Table 1: Teachers' Pattern of Activities based on Age

Practices	Age				Total
	20-30 years	31-40 Years	41-50 Years	>50 Years	
Teaching	-	-	5 (100.0%)	-	5 (300.0%)
Testing	3 (12.0%)	9 (36.0%)	10 (40.0%)	3 (12.0%)	25 (100.0%)
Teaching/Testing	-	7(46.7%)	8 (53.3%)	-	15 (100.0%)
Total	3 (6.7%)	16 (35.6%)	23 (51.1%)	3 (6.7%)	45 (100.0%)

The figures shows that 3, 9, 10 and 3 teachers whose age ranges between 20 -30, 31-40, 41-50 and above 50 years test reading comprehension, 5 teachers within the age bracket of 41-50 teach reading comprehension skills while 7 and 8 teachers between the ages of 31-40 and 41-50 years adopted the combination of teaching and testing.

Research Questions 3: *What is the pattern of English reading comprehension teachers' practices based on their experience?*

Table 2: English Reading Comprehension Teachers' Practices based on Experience

Practices	Years of Experience					Total
	1-5 Years	6- 10 Years	11-15 Years	16-20 Years	21-25 Years	
Teaching	-	-	3 (60.0%)	-	2 (40.0%)	5(100.0%)
Testing	3 (12.0%)	9 (36.0%)	10 (10.0%)	-	3 (12.0%)	25(100.0%)
Teaching/Testing	-	7 (46.7%)	6 (40.0%)	2 (13.3%)	-	15(100.0%)
Total	3(6.7%)	16 (35.6%)	19 (2.2%)	2(4.4%)	5(11.1 %)	45(100.0%)

Table 3 shows that 3 of 11-15 and 2 of 21-25 years of teaching experience teach reading comprehension skills, 3 of 1-5, 9 of 6-10, 10 of 11-15 and 3 of 21-15 years of experience test reading comprehension skills while 7 of 6-10, 6 of 11-15 and 2 of 16-20 years of teaching experience adopted a combination of teaching and testing practices in their reading comprehension classes.

The summary of what we have in Table3 and Figure 2 is that 5(11.1%) of the sampled teachers teach reading comprehension skills, 25(55.5%) of the sampled teachers test reading comprehension skills while 15(33.3%) of the sampled teachers

adopted a combination of teaching and testing during reading comprehension lessons. This clearly shows that more teachers do not actually teach reading comprehension as expected.

What is the pattern of English reading comprehension teachers' practices based on their gender?

Table 3: English Reading Comprehension Teachers' Practices based On Gender.

Practices	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Teaching	2(40.0%)	3(60.0%)	5(100.0%)
Testing	11(44.0%)	14(56.0%)	25(100.0%)
Teaching/Testing	8(53.3%)	7(46.7%)	15(100.0%)
Total	21(46.7%)	24(53.3%)	45(100.0%)

From Table 4, 2(40.0%) male and 3(60.0%) female teachers teach reading comprehension, 11(44.0%) male and 14(56.0%) female teachers test reading comprehension while 8(53.3%) male and 7(46.7%) female teachers adopted a combination of teaching and testing in their reading comprehension classes. Thus 11(44.0%) male teachers and 14(56.0%) female teachers test reading comprehension instead of teaching it.

Research Question 5: What is the pattern of English reading comprehension teachers' practices based on their qualifications?

Table 4: English Reading Comprehension Teachers' Practices based on educational Qualifications

Practices	Educational Qualification				Total
	B.A	B.Ed	B.A-/M.A.	B.Ed/M,Ed	
Teaching	2 (40.03%)	3 (60.0%)	-	-	5(100.0%)
Testing	6 (24.0%)	13 (52.0%)	-	6(24.0%)	25(100.0%)
Teaching/Testing	2 (13.3%)	11(73.3%)	1(6.72%)	1(6.72%)	15(100.0%)
Total	10 (22.2%)	27 (60.0%)	1(2.2%)	7(15.6%)	45(100.0%)

Table 4 shows that 2 (40.03%) teachers with B.A. and 3(60.0%) with B.Ed degrees teach comprehension skills, 6(24.0%) teachers with B. A. and 13(52.0%) with B.Ed and 6(24.0%) with B.Ed./M.Ed degrees test reading comprehension while 2(13.3%) teachers with B.A., 11(73.3%), 1(6.72%) and 1(6.72%) of teachers with B.A/M.A and B.Ed/M.Ed degrees adopted a combination of both teaching and testing in their reading comprehension classes. This information is aptly shown in both the table and

the bar chart below. This also shows that irrespective of teachers' educational qualifications, testing is the dominant practice in reading comprehension lessons. This is the major cause of students' poor performance in the very important language skill.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions of findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- English reading comprehension teachers should teach reading comprehension skills instead of testing comprehension without teaching. This will help the students to acquire the necessary skills for reading in both English and other school subjects in order to pass well.
- The excuse of lack of recommended textbooks which the English reading comprehension teachers often give has to be promptly attended to because they cannot be expected to teach the skill of reading comprehension without textbooks. There is no way teachers can make omelette without the students having eggs.
- On the job training, seminars, workshops and conference should be organised for teachers reading comprehension in order to acquaint them with current information on best practices in the teaching of reading comprehension and other skills in schools.
- Government should reduce the current over-populated class size for effective teaching and make provision for ICT equipment to cater for large reading comprehension classes. It is evident in this study that teachers' qualifications and experience do not contribute significantly to their practices in reading comprehension lesson. Thus, teachers need to undergo professional development programmes regularly as well as on-the-job training that would lead to effective instruction and sustained the desired change in their practices in reading comprehension lessons in particular and English language in general.

Conclusion

The present study has established English comprehension teachers practices in their efforts at teaching reading comprehension skills in selected secondary schools in Ibadan. It has shown that comprehension teachers adopt three different strategies namely, teaching, testing and teaching/testing in their efforts at promoting the acquisition of reading comprehension skills by students. What is clear from this

observation is that the strategy of testing students instead of teaching them those skills first before they are asked to apply the skills in answering selected questions on passages read has been a major problem of students. Based on the findings of this study, therefore, appropriate recommendations that would improve teachers' classroom practices in reading comprehension lessons have been suggested. It is the belief of the researchers that government would take adequate steps to address the present problem in the teaching of reading comprehension skills at the secondary school level in Ibadan in particular and Nigeria in general.

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