



# Overview of Teaching Reading Skills at Public Basic Levels of Education in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *The paper is an overview of teaching reading skills at the basic education level in Nigeria. Basic education is education given to pupils from the ages of 5 to 15 years. It looks at the educational system where private and public educational systems are practiced. At the public basic education level, the teaching of reading is not properly conducted due to the lip service paid by the government. The situation has translated into the overall education sector of the country, whereby a mass failure in the educational system is recorded annually. The calibre of graduates produced in the country cannot meet the needs of the labour market. The concepts of reading and effective reading skills were discussed in the paper. The challenges of teaching reading skills at the public basic education level in Nigeria were outlined. These are the violations of the principle of progression from known to unknown, the culture, and the failure to conduct a needs analysis before supplying books to the pupils. The different methods employed in teaching reading, from letter identification to word recognition and passage-building cards, were streamlined. In conclusion, the teacher factor in terms of knowledge of what to do and how to do it carries a greater percentage in making reading appealing to the children and, subsequently, building a reading culture in the children. The paper recommends ten suggestions as a solution to the teaching of reading in Nigerian primary schools.*

**Keywords:** *Reading, Effective Reading, Teaching Reading, Factors Affecting Reading*

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## Introduction

Literacy is the ability to read and write in any language. It involves mental and mechanical factors that have to do with the processing of information for communication. It is the first language skill that one has to develop before beginning to think about writing. A child who mastered reading skills, therefore, can be a literate person that is more entertained, more informed, more enlightened, and more knowledgeable than an unlettered child. This is because he glances at other people's thoughts displayed on the paper, using signs, symbols, graphics, and illustrations to convey meaning. Out of these graphical representations, the person can

understand the message, get the knowledge the writer tries to pass across, identify the mode of the writer, be persuaded, enjoy some aspects of the message, be on the side of the writer, or disagree with the writer's points on the proposition. Hence, reading is an important skill that should be developed, especially for young students who are at the human developmental and preparatory stages of lifelong learning.

Reading is one of the language skills that deal with literacy. It is loosely defined as a passive language skill because it occurs in a calm environment without nodding head, regression, finger pointing, and vocalizations. Yet, it was agreed by linguists is an active skill that involves the mental processing of written symbols to arrive at the message that the writer tries to pass across to the readers. This mental processing entails the sensitive representation of written symbols on the eyes, the glancing between lines through sounds, words, sentences, and sometimes paragraphs to the human memory, which processes each of these components to interpret both situational, contextual, and linguistic relationships between them and what the reader has in mind to arrive at the writer's intentional meaning. These and many activities make reading an active skill. Therefore, reading is an active language skill that teachers need to introduce pupils properly to for them to become effective readers who can derive meaning from the scripted symbols.

Reading is seen as an activity of grasping meaning from written symbols. It is a key to knowledge instilled in children at the basic level of education. In Nigeria, developing reading skills in English is necessary for its status as a medium of instruction right from post-basic to tertiary education levels. Introducing pupils to effective reading skills in basic education is believed to expose them to the skills of deriving meaning from printed words, interpreting the writer's ideas, determining essential details from the passage, the contextual meaning of individual words, the rhyme, the proverbs, the anagram, and other linguistic features that they to come across in any of their subject of study. Though the National Policy on Education (NPE) requires the use of First Language (L1), Mother Tongue (MT), or the Language of the Immediate Environment (LIE) as media of instruction in Early Child Care and Development Education (ECCDE) (Nursery School) as well as early and middle basic education (Primary 1-3), the policy statement has been ignored in educational settings. That causes many pupils to struggle to read in the target language. This can be for the simple reason of being strange to reading skills. Hence, reading skills are devalued in basic education in the country. The paper is useful in informing English language teachers of an overview of reading practice at public basic education in Nigeria through the path of the concept of reading, problems confronting the teaching of reading skills and proposing some solutions.

### **Concept of Reading**

Reading means different things to different authors, but all agreed towards arriving at the message from the written signs. Thus, it is very important in the educational system. For instance, Yildiz and Okur, (2013) conceived reading as a vital skill that involves choosing wisely

from piles of information presented in several forms in an information society. In this selection, the reader decodes and arrive at the meaning presented in the script. This conception concentrated on the two major activities involved in reading. In the view of Ari (2017), reading is described as a complex process that cover cognitive and physical attributes that reader acquire the world and academic knowledge, thinking and problem-solving skills, individual and social skills. According to Ezeifeka and Ogbaji (2011), reading is a mental process that entails reasoning, speculation, guesses, interpretations, and evaluations of an author's point of view as contained in the reading passage. The above conceptions of reading show that when one is reading, one is sensing the scripted passage, decoding the messages, guessing the answer or the direction of the message, reasoning with the writer, interpreting the message from the word's compositions or experience, evaluating the passages, and arriving at the intended meaning of the writer. It, therefore, contains a lot of sub-skills, as Cross, *et. al.*, (2021) opined that reading involves a sequence of sub-skills ranging from decoding, sight word reading, reading comprehension, and rapid automatized naming.

Reading can be done aloud or silently. Reading aloud deals with newscasts, recitation, miming poems, or presenting a speech before the audience. In this reading, the focus is on the sounds, registers, sentence structures, fluency, accuracy, discourse, and the overall message read to the audience. Where the reader demonstrates competence in these sub-skills, he is an effective reader. In silent reading, reading is only effective if there is comprehension. To read with comprehension, one needs to first understand what reading is not. Reading does not involve the vocalization of words, head-turning, finger-pointing or explicit eye movement. It is an act of constructing meaning from printed materials using the information in the text and one's experience. The fact here is that understanding effective reading gives way to effective strategies for teaching reading skills because when reading is misunderstood, it will be wrongly taught by the teacher. The consequences of this are felt at all levels of the learners' academic pursuits. This is because alongside the world knowledge, academic knowledge and problem-solving skills are reinforced with reading (Cross, *et. al.*, 2021). In other words, it is crucial to learning because it exposes readers to a wide range of information and knowledge.

At the basic levels of education in Nigeria, pupils must be introduced to reading through print awareness. Students who have been properly drilled in letter and word recognition will be aware of the print materials and will read them. Those with print awareness can do things like hold a book correctly and understand that books are read from front to back (Lefebvre, Trudeau, & Sutton, 2011). They also realize that sentences are read from left to right. Hence, print awareness is a critical pre-reading skill without which reading might not be possible. A basic education level is a level at which a proper reading foundation should be established for the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills. These skills dictate the performance of students in other subjects. A child who has print awareness and can read through them understands that print represents words that have meaning and are related to spoken language. With consideration of these features of prints such as typeface colours, lines, and orientation, pupils' literacy would be enhanced.

## **Reading Skills**

Reading is a language skill, embedded with a series of sub-skills. This article has limited the collection to Longe in Adebajo (2013), who classified reading skills as the basic education levels into three: recognition of stylized shapes, correlation of shapes, and identification of ink marks. The ability to recognize stylized shapes involves illustrations in the form of figures on the ground, curves and lines in patterned relationships-in other words, the recognition of ink marks on a passage. The correlation of patterned shapes or ink marks on paper is concerned with the development of the ability to derive meaning in a specific case. The identification of the ink marks is a formal element of language-say sounds or word-with the meanings they symbolize (Adebajo, 2013).

At the intermediate level of reading, Carrol in Adebajo (2013) identified eight skills which are necessary for readers to acquire. They are the acquisition of basic knowledge of the language to be read. That is the ability to speak and understand in that reading language; the ability to correlate spoken words with their sound components; and the ability to recognize and discriminate between the letters of the alphabet in their various forms (capitals, lowercase letters, among others). There is an acquisition of knowledge of the progression in which words are spelt and put in order, in continuous text. There is an acquisition of knowledge of patterns of correspondence between letters and sounds. There is recognition of the printed words from whatever clues one can use. There is also the awareness that printed words are signals for spoken words and that they convey meanings. And there is the ability to think and reason about what one reads. In reading, all these skills and many others merge to become one as they are practised simultaneously (Adebajo, 2013).

At the advanced level, reading skills involve survey reading, phrase reading, inquiry, speed reading, close reading, aesthetic reading, and critical reading (Adebajo, 2013). These forms of reading skills were used by secondary school and university students. It is also done by adult readers with an orientation to formal education.

## **The teaching of Effective Reading Skills at Public Basic Education in Nigeria**

Effective reading depends on several different skills. Because printed materials are read on the page from left to right and top to bottom, and images and printing on the page are used and organized together, printed materials such as language cards, short narrative passages, book reading, and environmental prints improve print awareness (Cress & Fry, 2015). The pupils should learn to read from the first to the last page of a book, and from the top and bottom pages to improve their print awareness (Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). They should also learn the differences between print and pictures, where to begin reading on a page, and the relationship between pictures and print (Gee, 2018). Hence, as an initial stage of learning to read, print awareness is defined as the development of cognizance of the form and function of print. In the Nigerian context, reading in the English language is targeted at the basic education level. It is

highly essential to teach pupils different skills of reading available in English to get pieces of information, understand the ideas of others, modify our work and that of others, and acquire knowledge (Enighe & Afangideh, 2018).

At the basic education level, the purposes of getting information and understanding others' ideas are common in the upper classes. In the lower grades, however, common features are letter identification, word reading, and sentence reading (NTI, 2013). These and other reading sub-skills should be developed for the inculcation of permanent literacy in Nigerian children. In teaching reading in Nigeria, there are different strategies, methods, and techniques that English language teachers employ. For example, there is the phonic method. This is a method in which students are taught the letters of the alphabet first through the sounds they make. This letter-sound approach is believed to give way to the traditional English alphabet system because of mismatches in one-on-one correspondence between letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds in pronunciation. Once they have learnt letter sounds, they are expected to start blending two letters to construct simple words of three, four or more letters. The "look and say" approach is another approach that is recognized as helpful to English language teachers in teaching reading. Others are whole words or sentences rather than individual sounds. Pictures and short sentences should be used to teach for proper understanding.

Some English language teachers, on the other hand, used a language experience approach. This is the practice of using the child's own words to help him read. This is informed by the generative learning proposition where the child's experience is built upon in reading, especially comprehension. This approach supplements children's concept development and vocabulary growth while offering many opportunities for meaningful reading and writing activities (Adebanjo, 2013).

### **Problems of Teaching Reading Skills in Basic Education in Nigeria**

Teaching English language reading skills in public basic education in Nigeria faces perennial problems. The child lacks the necessary skills to read effectively and comprehensively. This has been translated into the overall education sector in the country. Over the years, the students' performances in national and international examinations have been poor. The stakeholders in education complain about the poor performance of students in the English language and the overall school subjects. This is possible because the English language is the medium of instruction and one of the most important subjects both in internal and external communications and as a yardstick for gaining admission into institutions of higher learning (Ogwudile, 2019). Teaching English language reading skills at the public basic education level experiences the following problems:

1. There are insufficient professional English-language teachers of reading. This paves the way for the production of poor English language readers who read without comprehension. The problem of large class sizes also affects the ability of English

language teachers to get in touch with every pupil in the class. The problems of immediate correction, effective teacher-student relations, and coaching in reading instruction can be overcome in reading instruction. For this reason, the teaching of the English language should be given adequate support to make Nigerian pupils fluent in both spoken and written English.

2. Most of the reading passages and pupils' reading books are not by the pupils' culture, environment, and experience. Students who grew up in rural areas must first conquer their native environment by reading about its values, culture, norms, farmland, social settings, and interactional forms before venturing out into the world. These are things that the pupils know and have to conquer before developing curiosity about other objects and social life elsewhere. It obeys the principles of language teaching-progression from known to unknown.
3. Most of the pupils' reading passages and books in public basic education are full of irrelevant examples that cannot be helpful to the younger ones. Most of the books have illustrations of certain objects that are far from the pupils. For example, a pupil of a village farmer in the remote Sahel savanna areas of northern Nigeria, characterized by hamlet living and only acquainted with cocks and cockerels, sheep, goats, huts and other countryside scrubs, cannot understand the vegetation of the mangrove swamp forest of southern Nigeria. The passage containing these features appears new and unknown to the pupils, who will soon lose interest in the reading.
4. The failure of the stakeholders to conduct a need analysis before supplying books to the pupils. Most of the pupils' reading passages do not cater for their needs. The passages and books to be introduced to the students have to obey the principles of linguistic ability, teachability, contextual, interest, motivational, relevant, available, etc. to the students. These are some of the challenges facing pupils' reading skills. Do the passages and books fail to understand who your target audiences are? What are their interests? This is part of what makes pupils' readers inefficient and makes learning overall unfriendly.
5. Failure to consider the cultural background of the target audience. This is what can also be called cultural sensitivity. Failures to understand the culture of your target audience will prompt the children's reading process to be ineffective.

### **Developing Reading Skills in Nigerian Public Basic Education**

To effectively and successfully develop and sustain reading in basic education in Nigeria, reading should be taught in stages and not a lump sum. To this end, the paper agreed with Oyetunde's (2015) five stages of teaching reading skills in the English language classroom. They are as follows:

### **Stages of Teaching Reading Skills (Oyetunde, 2015)**

1. **Oral language foundation stage:** this is a stage that is the foundation of reading success. At this stage, beginning readers are first of all given an opportunity to understand and speak the English language as a prerequisite to meaningful reading.
2. **Print awareness stage:** this is the stage where children who are beginning readers are taught that graphic symbols are meaningful and that books give meaningful and enjoyable information. Beginning readers are also taught that the pages of books are to be turned over from right to left and that books have a top and a bottom.
3. **Word recognition stage:** the beginning readers are assisted in learning sight words at this stage. In Oyetunde's (2015) words, "sight words" are individual words that pupils can recognize instantly at sight. This means that they can pronounce these words and they know their meanings (p. 95).
4. **Morphophonemic awareness stage:** At this stage, beginning readers are taught that letters represent sounds that are blended and that individual sounds and groups of sounds can be combined to form words.
5. **Comprehension stage:** At this stage, the learners are no longer learning to read but rather reading to learn. They are thus helped to understand and acquire specific comprehension skills such as understanding main ideas, making inferences, summarizing and the use of context clues. This way, the learner will be helped to appreciate reading as communication. For effective teaching of reading, children's books should capture the following principles of developing materials, especially at an early grade level.

These and other principles indicate how the reading process evolves and can be facilitated with teaching strategies that can foster the development of effective skills for pupils at basic education levels in the country.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, from the foregoing discussion, the paper looks into children's books and their challenges. Its analysis pointed out these challenges and pointed out possible solutions for effective teaching of reading skills at the early grade level of education. It is believed that reading failure is mostly caused by a failure to acquire phonological awareness and skills in alphabetic coding, which can be solved by having available and effective children's books. However, being able to read fluently depends on several different skills. Earlier reviews and opinions of authorities indicate that if children are exposed to meaningful literacy activities consistently, they will learn to read regardless of whether it is a first language or a second language situation. This is particularly significant and reassuring in the Nigerian situation, where

learning to read effectively is problematic for many children. The findings implicate the teacher factor in terms of knowledge of what to do and how to do it.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the above discussion, the following suggestions are hereby made:

1. Professional teachers should dwell wholeheartedly on writing and publishing children's books, given the fact that they know what is and what is not children's books.
2. Teachers need to adopt diversified instructional strategies in their approach to teaching reading, and this should be done at an early stage or the primary school level.
3. Parents should provide a stimulating reading environment for their children. They should provide books for them and encourage them to read at home. Their reading should be improved by providing them with books.
4. The conventional classroom method of teaching reading skills should be discouraged through the provision of reading materials and objects that stimulate learners' interest in reading.
5. Teachers, especially at the basic education level, should avoid wrong teaching practices and quickly correct learners with reading faults.
6. Individual differences in children's reading ability should be identified and properly addressed through differentiation of reading techniques.

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