INTEGRATING EXTENSIVE READING IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM: AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR ENHANCING AND SUSTAINING LITERACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nations of the world invest heavily on literacy programmes to ensure that illiteracy rate is either minimized or completely eradicated. In all fairness, Nigeria as a nation, over the years, has made some commendable efforts towards eradicating the rate of illiteracy. For instance, there have been such programmes as Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Basic Education (UBE), Adult Literacy Programmes, Nomadic Education Programme and so on. In addition, some states of the federation have introduced free education up to tertiary level. Also, the government, both state and federal, communities, churches, and individuals have continued to establish new educational institutions, ranging from nursery to tertiary. In spite of all these intervention measures, the level of illiteracy in Nigeria is yet not tolerable. Besides, there is indication that some people who have passed through or benefited from these literacy intervention measures cannot still read and write. This is a pointer to the fact that something is fundamentally amiss. It is against this background that this paper took an incisive look at extensive reading and argued that integrating it in the primary and secondary school curricula would turn out to be an effective strategy for enhancing and sustaining literacy in Nigeria. The paper expounded extensive reading, pointing out the features, benefits and how it could be effectively implemented in the classroom setting.

Keywords: integrating, extensive reading, curriculum, literacy

Introduction

Traditionally, literacy simply means ability to read and write. But over the years, following developments and advancement in technology, the concept of literacy has gone beyond the ability to read and write. For instance, in contemporary time, one reads or hears such expressions as “computer literacy”, “mathematics literacy”, “technology literacy”, “visual literacy” and so on. It is in attempt to capture the extended meaning of literacy that UNESCO (1962, p. 18) states that:

A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic makes it
possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and community’s development and for active participation in the life of his country.

Furthermore, UNESCO (1965) threw more light on the extended meaning of literacy by stating that:

It is a way of preparing man for social, civic and economic roles, especially when this goes beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training of reading and writing but embraces, general knowledge for work, increased productivity, a greater participation in civic life, better understanding of the surrounding world and ultimate openness to basic human culture (p. 3).

In line with UNESCO’s concept of literacy, Okedara (1981) defines a literate person as one who has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to participate in all literacy based activities and whose attainment in literacy skills facilitates his use of these skills for his own and community development.

The extended meaning of literacy as stated by UNESCO and corroborated by Okedara notwithstanding, for our purpose in this paper, we shall limit the concept of literacy to the traditional meaning, that is, the ability to read and write.

Literacy, from all indications, is a critical issue in the existence of the modern man. It is a skill that empowers an individual to cope with the sophisticated nature of the modern time that is driven by education, science and technology and contribute meaningfully to national development. As a skill, literacy is not an end itself but a means to an end. It is perhaps the most fundamental skill required for effective participation in education (formal and non-formal), a socialization process which refines an individual and equips him or her with the necessary skills that would enable him or her to overcome the overbearing influences of ignorance, superstition, and diseases that thrive in a state of illiteracy, and which have the capacity to stifle any effort geared towards any development agenda, be it individual, community or national. Literacy is an agent of civilization. It creates room for enhancement of income generation and by extension raises the standard of living of an individual and enhances economic growth and technological advancement of a nation, including
effective participation in civic responsibilities, agricultural practices and other human endeavours that promote human existence.

For the fact that literacy plays a significant role in the overall development of an individual and a nation, determined efforts are usually made by the nations of the world, Nigeria inclusive, to either minimize the rate of literacy or completely eradicate it. For instance, over the years, successive governments in Nigeria have come up with some articulated programmes geared towards eradicating literacy. Among the programmes are Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Basic Education (UBE), Adult Literacy Programme, Nomadic Education among others. Besides, some state governments have gone extra mile to institute free education at all levels. The idea behind these efforts is to ensure that the citizenry have access to quantitative and qualitative education, which is the indisputable process of acquiring literacy skills.

Despite all the efforts of the governments as well as the contributions of private institutions, individuals and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN), there are indications that the rate of illiteracy is still intolerable in Nigeria. According to UNESCO (2005), illiteracy rate in Nigeria is as follows: Men: 25.6%, Women: 40.6%; Ages 15-24: Men: 9.3%, Women: 13.5%. These statistics are not in any way cheering news for Nigerian nation, especially considering her ambition to be one of the leading 20 economies in the world in 2020. Still worrisome is the fact that many Nigerians who have had the privilege of benefiting from the literacy programmes including attending primary and secondary schools hardly read and write effectively. It is no longer news that some Nigerian primary and junior secondary school graduates hardly write their names correctly, how much more constructing a simple sentence either in their first language or English Language. In fact, without exaggeration, the same could be said of some graduates of senior secondary schools and tertiary institutions. A case in point is a show of shame displayed by a primary school teacher in Edo State Nigeria recently. According to Musa (2013), the Governor of Edo State, Comrade Adams Oshiomhole had visited the centre for the verification exercise for the State teachers unannounced. The Governor, on getting to the venue of the verification, had the shock of his life
when he noticed that a primary school teacher with many years of teaching experience could not read the content of an affidavit she purportedly deposed to at a law court. The visibly enraged Governor, according to Musa, was compelled to ask the teacher: “If you cannot read, what do you teach the pupils? What do you write on the board?” The fate of the unfortunate pupils who are being taught by the said teacher is better imagined than described. The likes of the Edo State teacher abound in the school system as well as in the offices and all other sectors of the Nigerian economy. This episode is concrete evidence that point to the fact that the problem of literacy in Nigeria is very critical. If a trained teacher were unable to read, what about many who were not privileged to attain the educational level the teacher had?

Although many reasons could be adduced for being responsible for illiteracy and lack of sustenance of literacy in Nigeria, it is our opinion in this paper that irrelevant and inadequate curriculum is partly the greatest bane of education and by extension acquisition of literacy skills in Nigeria. Supporting the fact that the school curricula in some subject areas are inadequate in Nigerian education system, Udosen (2004) maintains that reading has no place in the school curriculum at the secondary education level and argues that this has a carry-over effect on student literacy level and teacher practices in the classroom. The author further states that there is a complete partial loss of reading and writing skills among secondary school children in Nigeria and attributed it to lack of practice among students and the instructional methods adopted by teachers. Omojuwa (1991) also states that since there are no adequate reading instruction books, course books for the teaching of general language skills are used for reading instruction in schools.

It is in attempt to address the inadequate curricula in the school system in Nigeria that have not created room for effective acquisition and sustenance of literacy skills, that we have set out in this paper to insist that integrating extensive reading in the school curriculum, especially at the senior primary and secondary school levels, is an effective strategy for enhancing and sustaining literacy in Nigeria. In doing so, we shall give a detailed explication of extensive reading, stating the meaning, the characteristic features and its benefits, especially with regard to reading and writing.
We shall also suggest how extensive reading can be effectively implemented in a classroom setting.

**What is Extensive Reading?**

Extensive reading simply refers to the kind of reading students do on their own with no help or guidance from the teacher. It is “an approach to the teaching and learning of second language reading in which learners read large quantities of books and other materials that are well within their linguistic competence” (Bamford & Day, 1998, p. xiii). As an approach, teaching extensive reading “is based on the belief that when students read for general comprehension of large quantities of texts of their own choosing, their ability to read will consequently improve” (Aebersold & Field, 1997, p. 43).

According to Susser & Robb (1990), ‘extensive reading is reading (a) of large quantities of material or long text; (b) for global or general understanding; (c) with the intention of obtaining pleasure from text, because (d) reading is individualized, with the students choosing the books they want to read, (e) the books are not discussed in class” (p.157). The definition of extensive reading as stated by Susser & Robb (1990) is very much comprehensive. For one thing, it gives details about the issues that are involved in the process of extensive reading thereby drawing a line of demarcation between intensive and extensive reading.

Lituanas, Jacobs & Renandya (1999) states that extensive reading can be defined as the reading of large quantities of material for information or pleasure. According to the source, many names have been given to extensive reading programmes, including Book Flood, Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Silent Uninterrupted Reading for Form (SURF), and Extensive Reading and Information Literacy (ERIL).
Features of Extensive Reading

Day and Barnford (1998, pp. 7-8) lists the following ten characteristics found in successful extensive programmes:

(i) Students read as much as possible, perhaps in and definitely out of class.
(ii) A wide variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available so as to encourage reading for different reasons and in different ways.
(iii) Students select what they want to read and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them.
(iv) The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding. These purposes are determined by the nature of the material and the interests of the students.
(v) Reading is its own reward. There are few or no follow-up exercises to be completed after reading.
(vi) Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Dictionaries are rarely used while reading because the constant stopping to look up words makes fluent reading difficult.
(vii) Reading is individual and silent, at the students’ own pace, and, outside class, done when and where the student chooses.
(viii) Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower as students read books and other materials that they find easily understandable.
(ix) Teachers orient students to the goals of the programme, explain the methodology, keep tracks of what each student reads, and guide students in getting the most out of the programme.
(x) The teacher is a role model of a reader for students – an active member of the classroom reading community, demonstrating what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.

Benefits of Extensive Reading

The specific benefits of extensive reading are manifold and wide-ranging. They have been cited by many scholars, researchers and teachers who have been deeply involved in this instructional approach for a very long time. From Nation (1997), Waring (2007), Bamford & Day (1998), Hill (2001) and Prowse (2003) the following benefits of extensive reading are reported:
(i) Extensive reading builds automatic word recognition.
(ii) Automatic recognition of words allows lexical access – the automatic calling up from memory of a word’s meanings and its phonological representation.
(iii) Extensive reading builds vocabulary knowledge.
(iv) Comprehension and fluent reading depend on automatic word recognition and vocabulary knowledge, and thus are advanced through extensive reading.
(v) Fluent reading allows the reader to move from word-by-word decoding to the processing of ideas, which is essential to higher level reading and thinking skills.
(vi) Extensive reading builds awareness of grammatical structures and the ability to quickly and accurately process sentence structures.
(vii) Extensive reading enhances learners’ background knowledge.
(vii) Extensive reading promotes learners’ positive attitude toward reading. It fosters their confidence and motivation to read.
(viii) Extensive reading promotes learners’ positive attitude toward reading. It fosters their confidence and motivation to read.
(ix) Extensive reading increases exposure to the target language.
(x) Extensive reading reinforces a grasp of language that is taught in class. It provides students with an excellent opportunity to consolidate what they have learned, which is an essential aspect of foreign language learning.
(xi) Research studies also show that extensive reading improves learners’ writing skills, listening and speaking skills and examination results.

For the fact that the school curricula at both primary and secondary school levels in Nigerian context are devoid of adequate provision for extensive reading, learners at those levels have never been privileged to have a feel of the numerous benefits of extensive reading as highlighted above. No wonder, therefore, some learners at those levels are struggling readers and writers. In fact, that the standard of Nigerian education at all levels is on the downward trend is partly as a result of the fact that the learners are not exposed to extensive reading at the formation stage (primary and secondary levels). It is not unlikely that the Edo State teacher as cited above is a product of this circumstance.
How to Implement Extensive Reading in Schools

Although extensive reading is a life-long exercise that is suitable for all levels of education and all ages, it is strongly believed that the foundation should be better laid at the primary and the secondary school levels. This proposal is informed by the fact that language is the medium for literacy acquisition, and linguistic scholars have contended that language acquisition/learning is an exercise in which age plays a vital role: “with increasing age there is a decreasing capacity for language learning” (Wilkins, 1972, p. 185). Brumfit and Roberts (1983) are also in support of the age factor in language learning because according to them, age is the most important factor in language learning in the sense that young children acquire foreign languages at least under natural conditions, in the same way they acquire their mother tongue. Where this is the case, it goes without saying that the primary and secondary school age is the ideal age for the formation of language skills that are indispensable for literacy acquisition (Ihejirika, 2007, p. 27). Also, “literacy can and must begin properly in early years of childhood, so as to set off the whole process of educating everyone for their self-fulfillment and for the advancement of the society” (Babalola, 1999, p. 58). Besides, the best predictor of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in an increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing.

For the implementation of the extensive reading curriculum at the senior primary and the secondary school levels, we propose the following guidelines:

**Extensive Reading as a Core Subject in the Curriculum**

The objectives of the extensive reading cannot be fully realized if it is handled as a mere reading for pleasure, where the learners may opt to read or not. Experience has shown that Nigerians are inclined to what has been described as “compulsory reading”. That is to say that they only read when it is obvious that something is at stake. In fact, that Nigerian pupils and students read at all is that they are afraid to fail examinations. If examination, for any reason, is de-emphasised, only very few would bother to read. Therefore, for the implementation of extensive reading to succeed at the classroom level, it should be made to have the status of a core subject as English
Language and Mathematics which should be compulsory at all levels. It should be assigned periods in the class time table as any other core subject.

**The Role of the Teacher**

The success of the implementation of any curriculum in the classroom setting depends to a large extent on the teacher, who is not only certificated in the specified discipline but also competent and dedicated. In Nigeria at present, many teachers do not have professional training specifically on reading. What is mainly on ground are teachers who specialise in either vernacular or English Language who might have had a mere cursory look at reading as a component of the courses in the languages or those who specialise in other subjects but are recruited for whatever reason to teach all subjects including English Language and vernacular, especially in primary schools. This practice has been fingered as one the worst banes of education in Nigeria in the present time. Thus, for extensive reading to be effectively implemented, efforts should be made to ensure that the teachers who will be charged with the responsibility are those who have professional training on reading. The implication, therefore, is that the “departments of English in collaboration with faculties of education in Nigerian colleges of education and universities should design academic programmes that would produce high calibre of NCE and degree reading teachers for our schools” (Ihejirika, 2011, p. 186).

In the classroom setting the teacher should assume new roles. His role should change from that of a traditional teacher in its strictest sense to that of a monitor, facilitator, motivator, enthusiast, administrator and supervisor. Apart from his professional training, the teacher should have a deep-rooted orientation on extensive reading. As a monitor and facilitator, the teacher should oversee the reading exercises by the learners and monitor their individual progress and directs where necessary. As a motivator and enthusiast, the teacher should serve as a model reader to the learners and demonstrate such attitudes that should portray him as a reading enthusiast. He should be familiar with the books and other materials being read by the learners and discusses the books and the materials with them when necessary. He should, as an administrator and supervisor, oversee the classroom procedures like borrowing and lending books and also filling of records. The team teaching approach should be
adopted by teachers in charge in order to effectively cope with the numerous classroom activities associated with extensive reading.

The Role of the Learner
The learner should be encouraged through guidance and counseling to develop a reading habit that would motivate him to take extensive reading seriously. It is hoped that if a learner understands the fact that extensive reading is a core subject that is compulsory at all levels, he would be encouraged the more to devote much time to it as he does for other core subjects. The principle of extensive reading is such that a learner has the liberty to choose the book or material he desires to read and should read at his own pace. Even though in an extensive reading programme a learner engages in self-class learning, he actually needs a lot of help if he is to successfully acquire the ability to read and work independently. Therefore, efforts should be made to ensure that the learner is given an accurate assessment of his initial reading level so that he can choose books of the right level. He should be assisted to develop the technique of extensive reading and given feedback on his comprehension and evidence of progress that gives him sense of achievement. The learner should be made to understand that extensive reading is a programme that should take place over a sustained period because studies which have shown very impressive results are studies which have devoted a serious amount of time to an extensive reading programme (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981).

The Reading Materials
In the extensive reading programme, the materials or books to be read should, as a matter of policy, be comprehensible. It is in recognition of this fact that Nuttall (1982, p. 185) opines that reading skills will develop much better if a student “reads a lot of books that are too easy rather than few that are difficult”. The books recommended for use in the class should be graded in a number of reading levels to cater for the varying reading abilities of the learners in the class. “By using graded readers that have been chosen to match the reader’s level, reading will no longer be viewed as a difficult task, and will help in building the reader’s confidence” (Clarity, 2007). Since the reading interests of the learners vary, the books made available in class should be of varied interest so that students can select books according to their reading interest.
and abilities. The follow-up tasks on the books should be short and easy. If the tasks are made difficult, many of the learners would lose interest. Each book should be provided with question and answer cards. The reading materials should not only be books but also newspapers, magazines, journals, cartoons, etc. written in the target language as well as the learner’s vernacular as Nigeria a multilingual speech community. The essence is to ensure that the learner is not only literate in the target language but also in his first language or language of immediate environment. Most especially, the reading material should be provided in large quantity because extensive reading is expected to be a “book flood”. It is hoped that when the learner reads large quantity of the materials, he will ultimately be immersed in the target language and the effect will be enhanced literacy.

The School

For extensive reading to be effectively implemented in the classroom, the school has a prominent role to play. The school should provide school block, classrooms and the necessary infrastructure and teaching aids that would create conducive environment for effective teaching and learning. Most importantly, there should be a functional school library stocked with numerous titles of varied interest and graded levels for the use of the learners. The school should create opportunity for the learner to have appropriate library orientation so that he can make adequate use of the library. The school should encourage the classroom teachers to update and upgrade their knowledge on extensive reading by sponsoring them for workshops and conferences and where necessary grant them study leave.

Conclusion

That the rate of illiteracy is still high in Nigeria in spite of the efforts being made by government, private institutions, individuals and NGOs is partly as a result of the fact that extensive reading has not been given a place in the curricula being implemented in Nigerian primary and secondary schools. In this paper we have strived to expound what extensive reading is all about, the characteristic features, its role in enhancement of literacy and how best to implement it in the classroom setting. We, therefore, call on the authorities, especially the ministry of education at the state and the federal levels to urgently review the primary and secondary school curricula and ensure that extensive reading is given the status of a core subject. This is a measure that has the potentiality to enhance and sustain literacy in Nigeria.
REFERENCES


