

# LITERACY AND READING IN NIGERIA

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*edited by*

Ralph A. Omojuwa  
Yemi Aboderin  
Joseph S. Aliyu



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**Teaching Reading Skills in the Junior Secondary  
School**

***Imelda Icheji Udoh***





### Abstract

This paper attempts an analysis of the reading faults of students in the Senior Secondary School. To what extent do such issues retard learning and personality? These two effects are treated with a view to making a case for the teaching of reading skills in the Junior Secondary School.

### Introduction

This paper is basically concerned with the formal teaching of reading skills in the Junior Secondary School (from now on JSS) level. Reading here refers to silent reading. The volume of work and the levels of difficulty in the different subjects handled at the JSS level increase as the students move on to the next stage. Besides, the number of subjects is increased as the students go even higher. What happens to some of the children who cannot read when they get into the JSS? How do they cope with their reading materials in different subjects and other extra-curricula activities within the limited time available?

These problems get worse as the students move on to higher levels like the Senior Secondary School (henceforth SSS). At the tertiary level, "The Use of English" course tries to remedy some of these problems. But at the SSS, the students are more or less left to fend for themselves. Considering that the students are at their most receptive stage of development, and are still forming habits, would it not be best if some techniques of reading are continued through the JSS?

Adolescence begins at about 9-12 years in girls and about 12-14 years in boys. Intellectually, at this age, children begin to understand the abstract and handle better formal instruction, they have a better understanding of signs and symbols (like words) develop a sense of criticism with a more prominent aptitude (Pinsent, 1941: 44). This period of adolescence is a period of transition, a highly volatile period. The children therefore require a lot of tolerance and guidance on how to handle the different subjects. Being so unsure of themselves, they can pick up a lot of inefficient reading habits which might end up frustrating them. This calls for a lot of guidance with regard to reading.

It is widely agreed in academic circles that reading proficiency is equated with scholastic excellence. Strang, MacCuller and Taxler (1967: 4) are of the view that reading is essential to success in academic pursuits, and that the ability to interpret what is printed on a page not only accurately but fully is the basis of learning. Keppel (1964) associates all learning problems with reading difficulty. Karlin (1964) equates scholastic excellence to reading proficiency



and failure to inefficient reading. Unoh (1985) very appropriately sums it up thus:

The evidence that reading is a tool of effective learning carries with it the implication that educational wastage and underachievement is likely to occur among potentially able students, unless and until reading skills are effectively identified and taught and unless reading difficulties are remedied ... no psychological theory of learning can be considered completely valid unless it takes the complex nature of the reading process, or the factors involved in learning to read and reading to learn into account.

All these researches show that achievement in reading spells achievement in learning. This implies that the poor reader is left behind entirely and ultimately frustrated into failure.

In the same vein, reading proficiency gives wide reading interest. This in turn can influence personal and social adjustments of people for good or for bad depending on the situation. Unoh (1985) quoting Krugman (1956: 10) says that:

A reading disability or severe retardation in reading has the same profound influence on educational growth as a severe emotional involvement. Both limit successful functioning, cause feelings of inadequacy and frustration, bring about disturbed relationships, influence outlook on life and result in a variety of undesirable behaviour manifestation.

In short, reading is a very effective means of developing attitudes and personality attributes in schools. Personality attributes particularly intelligence can be enhanced by reading speed. Fast reading associated with healthy reading habits to high intelligence, quick and sound judgements, sensible inferences among others. On the other hand, slow speed reading leads to average or low intelligence. Such personality disorders like inattention, inferiority complex, laziness, day-dreaming, to name but a few are very much associated with slow reading (Unoh, 1973).

Learning habits and personality development are in their formative stages in the Secondary School. This statement is made under the assumption that the students here are between 9 and 14 years (the adolescent age). Therefore, like all other learning aspects, good reading habits should be formed at this stage. At the end of the JSS level, the students should be highly proficient in reading.



### Reading Faults

A major reading fault found at the secondary school level is slow reading. From my experience as a teacher, this shows variously as:

- a. slow word recognition, which involves excessive word analysis and lack of skill in using and recognising context clues. This leads to constant interruptions of reading to refer to the dictionary;
- b. word by word reading, sometimes associated with finger pointing;
- c. vocalization and sub-vocalization, largely induced by oral reading and involving articulation;
- d. excessive eye fixation and difficulty with the return sweep;
- e. regression and lack of comprehension;
- f. lack of motivation or interest, leading to lack of concentration and consequently, to a drop in comprehension and reading rates;
- g. inflexibility, which involves reading all materials at the same rate irrespective of purpose of reading and the level of difficulty of what is read;
- h. lack of basic linguistic skills;

Attempts at correcting the fault should start with developing speed in silent reading, training the eye as well as flexibility in reading.

### Developing Speed in Silent Reading

There are two main forms of silent reading practice. The machine-centred which is a kind of laboratory affair with the use of machine gadgets like reading pacers, accelerators, films, eye-span trainers etc, and the book centred practice which involves timed reading and comprehension exercises.

Oral reading on the other hand involves reading a text aloud. One could either read to himself aloud or to a group. This type of reading characterizes most language lessons on reading in our secondary schools. The teacher either reads to the students, or one student reads to the hearing of all the other students with the teacher interrupting occasionally to correct a wrongly pronounced word or grammatical category. Such faults as vocalization and sub-vocalization are based on oral reading. The student is so used to reading aloud that to him comprehension must go with some form of oral act. This implies that every word in such a text must be read.

Reading conditions and materials available to students in Nigeria generally tilt the scale in favour of book-centred silent reading. The uses of reading are numerous and varied. So are the reading materials to which students are exposed. Speed is therefore very important with such a volume and variety of materials to be read. It is important to note that at this stage, while silent reading is recommended for the few reasons given above, the call is for a judicious mixture of



both silent and oral reading. The following hints (see Buzzan, 1971 & Wainwright, 1972) are recommended for reading at this level:

1. Read phrases not words, and try to push up your speed with a flowing eye rhythm movement. (see Section 3.2).
2. Be more concerned with meaning rather than words.
3. Do not point at words.
4. Do not say the words.
5. Never go back on what has been read. Always force yourself to go on reading. If the habit has already been formed, cover what has been read with your hand or a card.
6. Avoid any form of tension and relax when reading.

These hints will definitely improve reading speed. If students get such instructions, bad reading habits such as vocalization and subvocalization will not be formed at all. But where these two habits have been formed, make an effort to correct them. Conscious speed and eye rhythm should help here. Sometimes, a fault like subvocalization is very persistent, and in some cases, it cannot be completely eliminated. Rather than frustrate the student into losing interest in reading, get him to accept it and to become less dependent on it, until this habit becomes unconscious. Speed in reading will also take care of such faults as backskipping and regression, finger pointing, word by word analysis, excessive eye fixation; and it has been proved that these bad reading habits do not aid comprehension.

#### Eye Movements

The eyes do not glide smoothly over the lines when reading. They take in information only when still. They move in small jerks pausing (fixation) to take in a word or two before moving on and in that order, thus forming a kind of rhythm.

With regard to reading speed therefore, what to do is two-fold:

1. Spend less time on each pause;
2. Have as few fixations as possible.

Number one is straightforward enough. In number two, one should avoid extra fixations by taking in phrases not single words. The more words one can take as a group, the better. This is not something that can be developed overnight, but practice will help.

Widening of the visual span will take care and eliminate such faults as finger-pointing, and word by word analysis. Eye fixation exercise should be done along with the return sweep.

#### Flexibility

It is important to cultivate fast speed reading for the number of reasons given



in the above discussion. This does not mean that all materials should be read at the same speed. The speed in reading should be determined by: the level of difficulty of the material; the purpose in reading the material.

Difficulty in reading a text can be caused by: the vocabulary i.e. varied vocabulary registers/technical terms; the subject matter; (subjects concerned with abstract ideas and specialized areas are more difficult than concrete and more down-to-earth issues).

Different purposes guide our reading like: reading for pleasure, practical application, to locate specific information, to critically evaluate, among others. It is important to have a purpose when reading. If there is none, create one/some (see the Question step).

The determination of the level of difficulty and purpose makes for flexible reading. Flexibility simply involves the use of a particular reading technique. Four main techniques are very popular and should be introduced to students at the JSS. They are: study reading, slow reading, rapid reading and skim reading (see Adams, 1974 & Wainwright, 1972 for more details).

### Study Reading

This type of reading is used mostly on difficult materials like textbooks. Naturally it is associated with a high percentage of comprehension. The speed here can be slow. It involves a little bit of planning. The famous formular SQ3R involves five main steps: S for Survey, Q for Question, R<sup>1</sup> for Read, R<sup>2</sup> for Recite and R<sup>3</sup> for Review.

The Survey or Preview is to help focus your attention on the material. It prepares you for what you are about to read, shows you how much you already know about the subject and how much time you need for the length of the material. Finally, it gives you purpose and direction. The following steps are important. Read through the:

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| 1. preface          | 5. visual aids (pictures, graphs, etc) |
| 2. introduction     | 6. references                          |
| 3. table of content | 7. glossaries                          |
| 4. summaries        |  |

The Question step focuses attention on the subject matter in providing a personal purpose for reading. Looking for answers helps to control the mind from wandering. Questions should be asked based on what was surveyed in step I. Such questions as: What does the title mean? What do I already know about the subject? etc should characterize this step.

The 3rd step - Reading - follows the questioning. This involves a close kind



of reading, with the main purpose of looking for answers to the questions raised in the last step. Care should be taken to read all underlined, italicized, bold printed words/phrases.

The 4th step - Recite - involves going over in your mind what was read in R<sup>1</sup> by either orally summarizing or making notes. This reinforces what has been read.

The 5th step - Review - is like surveying, but in this case, it is familiar material you are dealing with in that you have already read it. You will merely be checking to see what you remembered and fill in what you forgot.

### Slow Reading

This type of reading spells inefficiency when used on easy material and is characterized by many reading faults. The speed is as slow as 150-300 words per minute (Wainwright, 1972). But an efficient reader could use it on material that is fairly difficult like in the R<sup>1</sup> step discussed above.

### Rapid Reading

This can be acquired with controlled practice and it is the ideal type of reading, particularly with regard to easy material. It is characterized by a comprehension level of between 70 and 80% with a speed of between 300 and 800 wpm (Wainwright, 1972).

### Skim Reading

Skimming is a process of reading. Like fast reading, it requires some practice and it is a very useful skill as it can save a lot of time. It requires the ability to differentiate between main ideas and unnecessary details. The latter are skipped while keeping an eye on the text until you can resume reading.

In skimming, the eye movement is vertical, but there is no rhythm. While some move their eyes in a zig-zag fashion, others run their eyes diagonally from the top left corner to the bottom right, while yet others run their eyes straight down the middle of the page.

These different types of reading are necessary for any form of education and as has been shown above, can save a lot of time as well as make reading easier and more meaningful. Flexibility in reading will make reading more interesting and help create motivation and purpose in reading and this will improve concentration which is a major weakness in students.

### Recommendations

Mention has already been made of the necessity to continue to teach reading in all levels of the Nigerian educational system. Three years (JSS) of emphasis on flexibility, eye movement and speed in reading will rid the students of the faults outlined above.



While emphasizing these three strategies in reading, it is important to note that reading is based on a knowledge of the language structure. Therefore the importance of the linguistic structure of the language (in this case English) cannot be over-emphasized. Students should be exposed to as much structure learning and easy literary materials as possible. Exposure to such materials will help immensely, particularly in the reading exercises. Both Oral and Silent reading should be encouraged. The former is necessary to correct pronunciation and improve structuring of the language. It should precede silent reading, preferably in the primary school. The latter should involve instructions on and practice of self-directed private and uninterrupted use of texts for both study and pleasure reading. The students should be exposed to a very wide range of easy and difficult reading materials.

At the JSC level, the students should be made to eliminate as many bad reading habits as possible. This is easy considering the fact that the students have not really formed the habits, but are rather only just developing them. On the other hand, they should be made to practice more efficient reading habits as has been shown in the above discussion. Such practices should begin with timed reading passages under supervision, until there is evidence that students have acquired a higher speed in silent reading. (For some exercises on timed reading, see Unoh, 1972).

They should then be exposed to a variety of reading materials with different levels of difficulty and shown with controlled practice how to handle such reading tasks.

Healthy reading interests should be encouraged in students even at this level. This will provide enough practice for the different reading techniques.

The schools should provide adequate guidance with regard to intellectual learning generally and specifically reading. Correct methods of reading should be demonstrated in class and follow-up exercises given. Take-home exercises should also be given and pains be taken to supervise the students' work through suggestions, advice, recommendations, questions and discussions. Students should be made to think actively. This calls for the inclusion of a course on Reading Instruction in our tertiary level of education, so that JSS/SSS teachers would know how to handle reading skills. For a start, it can be a part of the Language and Education departments until it can develop into a separate course.

Finally, a more prominent place should be given to reading in the school time-table. The period which is presently assigned to the use of the Library (which is often misused) could be devoted to reading, but then, the students must be shown how to read.



If these recommendations are followed, reading will not pose such a problem as we now find in the SSS.

### Conclusion

There is need for an intensive cultivation of reading habits in our schools. The students' education depend very much on written materials. Although the teachers are there to help guide and instruct the students, the large population in the classes does not allow sufficient supervision.

Different aspects of reading should be introduced at the different levels of our educational system. This paper has tried to make a case for the introduction and emphasis on three aspects of reading: speed in silent reading, eye movements and flexibility, as these will take care of most of the reading faults found among SSS students. While students in the primary school should learn to read, the students in the JSS should begin to read to learn.

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