

## IMPACT OF EFFECTIVE READING ON LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE

UMAR FATIMAH ABEDO

LIBRARY DEPARTMENT

FEDERAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, OKENE, KOGI STATE

[umarfah1972@yahoo.com](mailto:umarfah1972@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

*Reading, which denotes a process of deciphering meaning from visible conventional markings and symbols, is a complex mental exercise that requires a systematic approach in order to achieve the desired result. To make reading effective, therefore, a number of strategies have to be observed in the reading process. The paper focuses on the positive impact of effecting reading on language competence and performance of learners. The investigative study revealed a number of factors that militate against effective reading such as issues with first language reading ability, low level decoding skills, lack of cultural/background knowledge of the material, over dependence on the teachers and a concomitant lack of learner's autonomy, lack of diversity in teaching materials, among others. But with appropriate and effective reading strategies like undertaking reading practice regularly, starting with simple to complex materials, reading in a relaxed atmosphere, inferring meanings from contexts rather than always resorting to dictionary etc. would help overcome limitations to effective reading. Therefore, it is the conclusion of this paper that, although readers may be challenged by some factors in the reading process, the applicable of relevant reading strategies outlined in this study would go a long way in resolving most of the challenges. It is the hope of the researcher that, this paper would add a good value to the body of knowledge in the field of reading generally while future researchers are encouraged to further advance the frontier of knowledge in the field.*

**Keywords:** Reading, Effective reading, Language competence, Performance, Strategies

### Introduction

Reading is one of the most important academic tasks performed by students and the business world. Reading is the active process of understanding print and graphic texts. It is a thinking process. According to Wikipedia, reading (process) is the cognitive process of decoding symbols to derive meaning.

Grabe & Stoller (2002:9) define reading ability as the efficiency of the reader "to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately". The purpose of reading is to connect the new ideas on the page to what you already know.

We read for different purposes. We read academic materials such as textbooks, journals, etc. to interpret and analyze but not

to judge. This is the more general theme of learning development; to develop thoughts, to incorporate new ideas into existing understanding, to see things from different angles or viewpoints, to develop knowledge and understanding. We read to gain factual information for practical use. We also read fiction in order to be entertained; in this context, the analysis of the author's writing style, motives etc. is imperative. To achieve the aforementioned motives behind reading of various texts, effective reading is the key.

Several barriers hinder the objectives of reading which include inability of the reader to understand a word and relationship between sentences as well as lack of interest or concentration which in turn impede language competence and performance.

## Effective Reading

Effective reading requires adequate attention, participation, motivation and preparedness to learn or gain ideas from a text. Effective readers know that when they read, what they read is supposed to make sense. They monitor their understanding, and when they are reading, they often unconsciously select and use a reading strategy (such as re-reading or asking questions) that will help them reconnect with the meaning of the text. Reading skills and strategies can be taught explicitly while students are learning subject-specific content through authentic reading tasks. In order to read effectively, readers need appropriate reading strategies. Urquhart and Weir (1998:95) define reading strategies as “ways of getting around difficulties encountered while reading”.

Several studies, e.g. Oxford et al (1993), have shown the importance of reading strategies and language proficiency in successful reading performance. With regards to the reciprocal effects of lower level (e.g. word processing) or higher level (e.g. use of reading strategies for text comprehension) processing on each other in reading comprehension, there are different views. Some researchers, e.g. Perfetti & Hart (2001) suggest that inefficiency in lower level processing inhibits higher-level processing in reading comprehension and, therefore, observed that as readers employ strategies for processing, inefficiency in lower-level processing does not normally hinder reading difficulties and achieving comprehension goals. Research in the past three decades has shown the positive effects of comprehension strategies on reading performance.

Koda (2004) posits that strategic reading would compensate for learners' comprehension problems and develop their critical thinking. Mokhtari & Perry (2008) state that it was likely that, greater

awareness of reading strategies would lead to better reading comprehension. Other studies, Anderson (1991); Brantmeier & Dragiyski (2009) also argue that the use of strategies would differentiate between good and poor readers. However, in order to use reading strategies effectively, readers should reach a certain level of linguistic proficiency. In fact, many studies, e.g. Aldernson (1984); Koda (2005) conclude that lack of linguistic proficiency would short-circuit effective strategy used. Many studies have been carried out on the relationship between language proficiency and strategy used. For example, Liu (2004) and Nisbet et al. (2005) find that more proficient language learners used a wider range of language learning strategies.

## Strategies for Effective Reading

For reading to be meaningful and produce the desired result, certain variables must be observed in the reading process. No doubt, the object of any reading exercise is comprehension or textual understanding. Therefore, reading should be systematic in order to achieve its cognitive ends.

In this context, Abdullahi et al (2001) observe that reading as a process of deciphering meaning from visible conventional markings and symbols is a mental activity. To improve reading effectiveness, competence and comprehension, they suggest the following strategies.

- (a) Undertake reading practice regularly: That is it should be a constant exercise rather than a casual activity.
- (b) Start with simple material (in both language and ideas). It is never in doubt that, a complex reading text with abstract concepts would put off an average reader.
- (c) Be flexible – skim and scan (skip unnecessary details or information not required or not relevant): or

- repeat a phrase, a sentence or a paragraph, or any other details you want to master, two or three times if necessary especially in more difficult material.
- (d) Avoid mounting pressure on yourself i.e. piling up reading until it is close to examinations and then you start rushing. As much as possible, discard the crash programme syndrome in order to maximize the benefits of meaningful reading.
  - (e) Space your reading always so that you do it in a relaxed atmosphere or situation devoid of needless distractions.
  - (f) Always have a general idea about what you want to read from the table of contents, blurb, preface, back of the book, comments or any other information, as the case may be.
  - (g) Familiarize yourself with the author's style and use of language. The quicker you do this, the better for reading comprehension and effectiveness.
  - (h) Try to guess/infer meanings from the contexts in which they are used. Do not always resort to dictionary. Note, if possible, mark the words which meanings are difficult to guess from contexts and look them up in the dictionary later.
  - (i) Engage in active dialogue with the author (active reading), always trying to predict the author's mind, forecasting the next idea to follow in a reading text.
  - (j) Avoid sub-vocalization (sounding words or reading with your lips): finger-pointing the words you read; and regression, moving your eyes to and fro, i.e. backward order to re-read what you have just read. They are bad reading habits that slow

down speed and even comprehension.

### Language Competence

Linguistic competence is concerned with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning. It is mostly referred to as i-language (internal language). According to Wikipedia, it is the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language. The language user knows the rules governing his native language and he can 'apply' them without paying attention to them. The native speaker has an intuitive grasp of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and socio-cultural meanings expressed by language forms. Thus, linguistic competence involves knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure, and linguistic semantics. We can conclude, then that a learner who is able to list, orally and in writing, the objects in a bowl, such as an apple, an orange, two bananas, and a bunch of grapes, has developed the ability to select specific vocabulary and know its pronunciation and graphic forms.

A learner who can add prefixes correctly to 'perfect', 'legal', 'happy', 'pleasing', and 'audible' to make the negative equivalents, has achieved competence in using word-formation rules correctly.

According to Chomsky (2006), competence is the ideal language system that enables speakers to produce and understand an infinite numbers of sentences in their language, and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences. This is unaffected by "grammatically irrelevant conditions". In Chomsky's view, competence can be studied independently of language use, which falls under "performance".

A learner who can describe recent events by using 'have/has' and the past

participle of the main verb has attained grammatical competence in forming the present perfect tense. In these various ways, the learner is acquiring linguistic competence in the second language.

### **Language Performance**

The term linguistic performance (language performance) was used by Noam Chomsky in 1960 to describe “the actual use of language in concrete situations”. It is used to describe both the production, sometimes called parole, as well as the comprehension of language. Performance is defined in opposition to “competence”. The causes of distinction between the two concepts are speech errors.

Language performance is the actual behaviour when we use a language. This output has been called external language (E-language), or any specific data we can gather from actual language use, such as the sentences from a conversation.

Linguistic performance can also be seen as the ability to produce and comprehend sentences in a language.

### **The Effects of Effective Reading in Developing Language Competence and Performance**

According to Krashen (2004:226), effective reading is the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar competence, and the only way we become good spellers. Readers attain competence in rich language styles and trends, such as, grammar and vocabulary with effective reading. Effective reading is defined by Maley (2005:354) as “the single most effective way to improve language proficiency”. Research has shown the learning gains of effective reading in the areas of writing, vocabulary, syntax, listening, speaking, reading, and general language proficiency.

The general impact of reading is encapsulated in the statement of The International Reading Association (1996:19) thus:

*Reading is a wonderfully rich and complex human activity. It provokes reflection, introspection, and imaginative thinking and allows us to create and explore new ideas. It introduces us to different representations of the world. It fills our needs for information and communication and enables us to learn about different subjects, perform various tasks, participate in the workplace, and understand and evaluate our place in the world. It also gives us the intrinsic pleasure of linguistic and imaginative activity.*

### **Barriers to Effective Reading**

Many scholars have identified lack of effectiveness in reading as a barrier to learning comprehension generally. This can be a problematic process and many learners experience considerable difficulties in developing their expertise in reading for several reasons including:

- (a) Issues with first language reading ability: This has to do with readers who are reading a language text as a second language learner. Second language learners find it difficult to grasp the rudiments of those languages because of their different cultural background.
- (b) Low level decoding skills: Some readers lack adequate skills to infer or decipher meanings from reading texts. This limits their reading competence and comprehension.
- (c) Lack of cultural knowledge of the material: For a reader to grasp the true import of a text, cultural

- background knowledge would be a boost. Where this background knowledge is lacking, reading effectiveness is jeopardized.
- (d) Lack of motivation to learn: Most reading deficiencies are the result of the absence of motivation to learn such language texts. With the right atmosphere and encouragement, reading competence and effectiveness would be facilitated.
  - (e) Lack of diversity in teaching materials: When reading text is monotonous, it becomes boring and unattractive. Thus, resulting in ineffective reading and low level of competence and comprehension.
  - (f) Overdependence on the teacher and a concomitant lack of learner's autonomy: The inability of learners to engage in independent learning affects the rate of competence and effectiveness of a reader. For reading to be effective, learners should not always depend on what the teacher can offer.
  - (g) Inadequate exposure to reading materials: To achieve competence and effectiveness in reading and acquiring adequate competence in a language, the learner should have access to diverse reading materials. But where this is lacking, the gains of reading and learning would not be attained.

Classroom pedagogies can also impact on reading comprehension. (Nuttall, 2005). No doubt the choice of appropriate teaching method in the teaching and learning process affects the rate of competence and understanding attained by learners positively. Where this is lacking the reverse is the case.

### Recommendations

1. As a parent, you have an incredible opportunity to lay a solid reading foundation for your child. One effective means of doing this is exposing your child to new and "bigger" words very early in life. Do not underestimate your child's ability to comprehend words.
2. Effective reading strategy should be introduced by language teachers to inculcate the habit in the minds of the students. Reading should be supervised, and adequate corrective measures should be applied where and when the need arises.
3. Students and the people generally read for one reason or the other. The purpose of reading should be set clearly and the reading text should unconditionally be connected to the idea(s) already established.
4. Adequate reading materials should be provided to students which will enhance their chances of effective developing reading habit, right from the beginning. Lack of this foundational development can have grave effect on readers' competence generally.
5. Reading is a thinking process, so, adequate attention should be paid to it for effectiveness.
6. Lastly, motivation is a reinforcing factor. Readers should be motivated to read a particular piece or work. This is possible by establishing the goals of reading from the start.

### Conclusion

Undoubtedly, reading is a highly complex cognitive process which involves intentional interactions between the reader



and the text to create meaning. Therefore, readers should purposefully work to create meaning from what they read and construct mental representations of a reading text in order to achieve accurate comprehension. Effective reading strategies can help students develop language competence and performance. Through effective reading, learners become better able to master the textual and grammatical structures which they can later use in their own writing. Furthermore, effective reading helps students to improve their reading skills, enlarge their vocabulary storage, and develop general language proficiency.

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