

MAKING OMELETTES WITHOUT BREAKING EGGS: IMPROVING THE COMPREHENSION SKILLS OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: *Reading comprehension skill is an important aspect of language acquisition that has far-reaching implications on the life of any student. Weak comprehension ability invariably affects not only students' performance in English language, but it hinders competence in other critical fields. Reading comprehension skills are not being taught in ways to promote students' acquisition of the required skills. This study reveals the extent to which teachers impart comprehension skills to students by focusing on the teachers' practices during comprehension lessons. From the study, the majority of the teachers, rather than teach during comprehension lessons, test the students; thereby, depriving the students of having basic comprehension abilities. This study reveals that for teachers who lack the knowledge of comprehension skills to facilitate the acquisition of such to students is akin to making omelette without eggs. The study shows the need for the teacher training curriculum to be reviewed as the teachers' inability is traceable to their teacher training foundation. The study further remarks that there is the need to review teacher training curriculum so that emphasis can be laid on how to teach reading comprehension skills to students.*

Keywords: reading comprehension, teaching skills, teacher training.

Introduction

English language is the official language in Nigeria; thus, it is the basis upon which almost all educational developments are built for individuals from kindergarten to the tertiary life. English language is a compulsory subject in secondary schools in Nigeria, and it is a prerequisite for admission into higher institutions such as universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, but for some years there has been alarming failure of students in English language conducted by the regional body – West African Examinations Council (WAEC, n.d.).

Many reasons are adduced for this poor performance of students; primarily, emphasis is often placed on the nature of pedagogy (Adegbile, 2012; Ojo, 2003; Oredein & Oloyede, 2007; Tabulawa, 2013). This is because teachers play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning process; their qualifications, training,

experience, and motivation contribute to making them one of the primary determinants of students' academic and lifetime achievements (Abimbola, 2014; Ayodele & Adegbile, 2007). The findings of most of these researchers reveal that 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” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004, p. 9).

Comprehension and Competent Language Acquisition Skills

Comprehension lessons are integral aspects of English language acquisition; thus, they serve as a foundation for the development of the critical skills students need to negotiate their ways with all other texts in fields that are different from languages. Through comprehension

lessons students acquire comprehension skills of predicting, self-questioning, evaluating, summarizing, clarifying, making inferences, and vocabulary development. Several studies have shown the many critical components of text comprehension, which are necessary in comprehension lessons (Akande, 1993; Closs, 2006; Dewitz, Jones & Leahy, 2009; Presley, 2000). These components include vocabulary instruction or vocabulary learning strategies and background knowledge. 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 by teachers who themselves have acquired the necessary pedagogy and experience (Dewitz et al., 2009).

Teachers' Role to Promote Competent Reading Comprehension Skills

The importance of teachers in the drive for competent comprehension abilities cannot be over-emphasised. As teachers, they have the privilege to deliver effective instruction to engender positive literacy skills. Good instruction by expert teachers is the most powerful means of promoting the development of proficient comprehension and preventing reading comprehension problems. For effective comprehension to take place teachers are to teach certain skills and strategies through the text instead of just making the students answer comprehension questions. Many factors could aid students' reading comprehension skills and are within the teachers' control. The central role of teachers in students' ability to comprehend is undisputable (Closs, 2007; Pardo, 2004). In further assertion of teachers' responsibility in reading comprehension development, Pardo (2004) stated 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).

Many studies have endorsed important instructional strategies that teachers should use to teach comprehension skills and strategies during comprehension lessons. These multiple-strategy instructional routines include reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) and transactional strategies (Brown, Presley, Van Meter, & Sehuder, 1996). Teachers are expected to use these strategies to teach students comprehension strategies and skills such as predicting, making inferences, summarizing, evaluating, self-questioning, comprehension monitoring, and asking questions. Teachers are expected to have the knowledge and ability to teach and model these strategies and make use of practices that reflect their knowledge of the complex and fluid interrelationships among readers, texts, and purposes for which the text has been written.

Teachers' practices in comprehension lessons have been the focus of many scholars who have revealed that several factors influence these practices in comprehension lessons such as the teachers' beliefs and their practical knowledge about the purpose and goal of comprehension. Teachers' knowledge and beliefs are important determinant of their classroom practices (Meijeret, Verloop & Beijaard, 2001; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991). In their study, Richardson et al. investigated the influence of teachers' beliefs on their practices in reading comprehension lessons and observed

The variance in teachers' beliefs in 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)

Similarly, Akande (1993), Lawal (1993), Shih (1992), Richardson et al. (1991) focused on teachers' practices in comprehension lessons instruction from varying angles and with divergent results. These scholars revealed the important role of the teacher in comprehension lesson instruction and revealed that a teacher's weak knowledge base about teaching comprehension would make such a teacher ineffective.

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

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)

Teachers in the Nigerian educational system use one of three major instructional modes which we have identified as teaching, testing or questioning, and teaching/testing to facilitate their classroom practices. Each of these instructional modes determines the extent to which students will develop life-long comprehension skills. Differences arise between teaching, testing, and

teaching/testing comprehension. When teachers read a passage or ask students to read a passage and attempt the questions that follow, they have not taught but tested. When teachers take learners through modeling and call into play the learners' knowledge, such the teachers are engaged in teaching and when the students are evaluated, the complementary teaching and testing paradigms reveal the appropriate mode of teaching. The situation in reading comprehension lessons is that teachers move freely from, testing to teaching, and teaching to testing. It does become imperative to investigate what teachers actually do in reading comprehension lessons.

Purpose

As a result of the mass failure in English language by secondary school students in Nigeria due to ineffective teaching of reading comprehension skills, this study investigated how far teachers' practice in reading comprehension lessons are responsible for students' failure. This study examined the instructional practices adopted by teachers in comprehension lessons based on the parameters of teachers' age, educational qualification, experience, and gender. The current study, in its concern at helping teachers to teach comprehension skills successfully, sought to identify the patterns of teachers' practices in comprehension lessons in secondary schools in Ibadan city, Oyo State, Nigeria. Ibadan is the third largest city in West Africa, and it is the political and business epic center of southwest Nigeria excluding Lagos.

A descriptive survey research design was used. The eight-week study sought to answer these four questions:

1. What practices do English teachers engage in during comprehension lessons?

2. What is the pattern of English comprehension teachers' practices based on their age?
3. What is the pattern of English comprehension teachers' practices based on their experience?
4. What is the pattern of English comprehension teachers' practices based on their qualifications?

Data were analyzed using frequency count and percentage distribution.

Procedure

Forty-five teachers of English as a second language (ESL) were selected from eighteen secondary schools located in six local government areas that make up the Ibadan metropolis. The teachers were selected because they were qualified to teach senior secondary students in the selected schools. In Nigeria's school system, teachers are often designated to teach the senior students based on some parameters like years of experience and qualification. Three teachers were picked from each of nine schools; while the others were picked from the remaining schools in varying numbers from each school.

Participant observation technique was used. As the teachers taught comprehension lessons, the researchers recorded and took photographs as well as wrote their observations in their notebooks. The teachers were asked some questions after the lessons.

Instruments

Teachers' Comprehension Teaching Observational Schedules (TCTOS), an instrument adapted from Grasha-Reichmann's Learning Style (1996), was used to gather information. The instrument met face and content validity and had a reliability co-efficient of 0.72.

Results

Of the 45 teachers who were part of the study, the data revealed that only 5 teachers (11.1%) engaged in teaching; 25 teachers (55.6%, the largest group) engaged in testing; and 15 teachers (33.3%) engaged in the combination of teaching and testing.

All five teachers taught comprehension were between the ages of 41-50 years and in that group, three have been teaching between 11-15 years and the other two have between 21-25 years of teaching experience. Among this group, two of them have B.A. degrees and three have B.Ed. degrees.

The demographics of the group of 25 teachers who engage in testing were more varied as could be expected given the size. Three of the teachers were 20-30 years of age; nine teachers were between 31-40 years old; 10 teachers were between 41-50 years old, and 3 were older than 50. The numbers remain the same when examining the years of teaching experience: three have been teaching for 1-5 years; nine have been teaching 6-10 years; 10 have been teaching 11-15 years; and three have been teaching 21-25 years. Their teaching qualifications are as follows: six have a B.A., 13 have a B.Ed., and 6 have B.Ed./M.Ed. degrees.

The last group was the 15 teachers who engaged in the combination of teaching and testing. Seven of them were between the ages of 31-40, and the other eight were between 41-50 years old. Seven had been teaching between 6-10 years; six had taught between 11-15 years, and two had been teaching between 16-20 years. The teaching qualifications in this group were that two of the teachers had a B.A.; 11 had a B.A/M.A, and three had B.Ed/M.Ed degrees.

What is apparent in the foregoing results is that irrespective of qualification or years of experience, most teachers of reading comprehension in the study area tested students instead of teaching them comprehension skills. It is therefore not surprising that most of the students lack the strategies that will help them to read effectively and acquire information to pass their exam in the subject.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made.

It was observed that the majority of the teachers do not teach but test students during comprehension lessons; therefore, it is recommended that teachers should be given on-the-job training to update them on contemporary strategies of teaching comprehension skills.

A need to review teachers' education curriculum of tertiary institutions in Nigeria is evident. These institutions must teach and model the appropriate strategies of teaching comprehension skills in school.

It was observed during the study that some teachers seemingly engage students in testing because of the unavailability of recommended texts by students. Government and parents must ensure that such texts are available for each student and in the library. The situation where teachers' copies of selected texts were also not available in schools must be urgently

addressed. Teachers cannot make omelettes without the students having eggs.

Government and school officials should continue to monitor schools to ensure that teachers fully use appropriate strategies teaching reading comprehension skills.

Conclusion

This study has established that English language teachers adopt three different strategies namely, teaching, testing, and teaching/testing in their effort at promoting the acquisition of comprehension skills by students, and this has been ineffective according to the students' test results. From observation, the majority of teachers engage the strategy of testing students instead of teaching the students the comprehension skills first before they are asked to apply the skills in answering selected questions on passages read. This poses a major problem to students' ability to comprehend language and non-language texts. This results in their failure in examinations.

Appropriate recommendations that would improve teachers' classroom practices in comprehension lessons have been made. Government and other stakeholders will need to take appropriate steps to address the present problem in the teaching of comprehension skills at the secondary school level in Ibadan in particular and Nigeria in general.

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