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PROMOTING READING SKILLS IN THE NIGERIA CERTIFICATE IN EDUCATION (NCE) PROGRAMME

BY

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Abstract

The Nigerian Certificate in Education Programme seems relevantly ambitious. It is aimed at producing teachers who could handle learners in the Primary and Junior Secondary Schools meaningfully. However, this aim would only be attainable if the teachers in training are able to read effectively enough to cope with the books of different sizes and prints which the various disciplines prescribe. Most learners at the tertiary level in Nigeria are not able to read well. They suffer psychological, linguistic, physiological and instruction-based problems. The general studies English (GSE) at the NCE level could have served as a powerful means of remediating such problems, but its reading components do not seem to be robust enough. How NCE students could be helped to become functional readers and strong academic achievers constitutes the thrust of this paper.

Introduction

The NCE programme is meant to "groom teachers for Nigerian Primary and Secondary Schools and their equivalents elsewhere" (NCCE, 1990, p.10). Government pump funds into the various Colleges of Education in order that this objective may be attained. But the efficacy of the NCE Programme would seem to depend on the effectiveness of literacy skills that NCE students have acquired throughout the programme. One of such literacy skills is the art of reading which has been defined as intellectual milestone (Unoh, 1983). It involves moving the eyes through the written symbols with the aim of processing the symbols for information and rational application in problem-solving. This means that reading is never done carelessly. It is a skill of skills which requires mental, linguistic and socio-cultural alertness on the part of the reader (Olajide, 1997; Lawal, 2003).

The uses of reading are many. It is a tool for intellectual development. The advanced learner applies it in every academic task, irrespective of his specialization. He draws on reading skills in order to obtain the experiences he would use in accomplishing assignment, term paper, research report, or examination. James (1985) observed that reading ability determines how the candidate tackles an examination question. As such, the NCE student should read extensively and intensively in order to excel. Reading increases nationalism and nationalist instinct. It has therapeutic value, too.

Regrettably, however, research evidences abound that students in Nigerian tertiary institutions are inefficient readers (Abe, 1991; Lawal, 1991; Olajide, 1991; Obah, 1985; Unoh and Banjo, 1976; Unoh, 1983; Zinga, 1983). This affect their performances adversely, calling for urgent attention.

Factors that Impede Effective Reading at NCE Level

More than ten years of teaching reading and other English courses at the College of Education, Ilorin, revealed that majority of NCE students remain inefficient readers because of psychological, linguistic physiological and instructional factors.

Psychological Factors

Most of the learners do not possess the right experiential background. They have not been exposed to effective reading comprehension. The components of English there seem to emphasize the development of the lower order skills of literal interpretation, reorganization and inference, whereas NCE learners now need the skills of inference, judgement, and creativity.

NCE students' psychological problems compound because most of them hardly read recreationally. They concentrate on basal materials which Spiegel (1981) believes cannot alone make dynamic reader-learners. This looks like a continuation of the Secondary School or Teacher Grade II situation in which students are restricted to the basal texts mostly imposed by Governments. Obanya (1985) and Unoh (1985), therefore, seem right to have alleged that NCE students usually carry over poor reading habits from the pre-tertiary level.

This may explain the general apathy towards reading which Adewumi (1988) and Zinga (1983) found among a group of advanced students. Such students, especially those who do not belong in the humanities, do not see the need for them to be compelled to take the "Use of English" course. They do complain about reading comprehension questions posed to them during examinations, and often fail that part of the examinations. Even though most of the students would not want to read beyond their disciplines, they do not perform so well in the disciplines.

Then, the students show other reading problems, like vocalization, sub-vocalization, finger-pointing, regression, limited eye-span, and inability to concentrate on the target material. Grellete (1988) and Nuttal (1988) are agreed that these problems lead to poor comprehension and low scholastic achievement.

Vocalization obtains when the reader openly pronounces the words being confronted, while sub-vocalization involves pronouncing the words with the mind. By finger-pointing, the reader points an object at the target words. Regression compels him to read, and re-read a structure, preferably shorter than the sentence. There are also those who cannot take sufficient numbers of words for mental processing at single fixations. And where they take appreciable number of words, they lack the concentration needed to reflect on the message contained.

Physiological factors

Bad eyes, aching teeth, damaged brain and major wounds are among the physiological factors affecting reading comprehension. They divert the readers attention and make reading a sterile activity. They also impede the memory in relation to the retention and recall of target facts.

Instructional factors

Also, there are problems associated with the mode of instruction. The frequency, manner, and quality of teaching could determine the performance of NCE students in their chosen fields as well as the "Use of English", tagged "GSE 101" to "GSE 104" in the NCE curriculum (NCCE, 1990). Students in all disciplines are compelled to take these courses in their first two years. The curriculum seems to have been out to tackle reading inefficiency observed by Unoh (1983) among "ostensibly well-educated or highly literate persons in society" (p.22). Yet, the curriculum appears inadequate.

(a) The circuitous and seemingly disjointed nature of GSE English. The following are the aspects of reading contained in the courses.

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|-----------------|------|--|
| GSE 101: | i. | Skimming and Scanning for main ideas; |
| | ii | Extensive reading; |
| GSE 102: | iii | Reading faults; |
| | iv | Reading rates and Speeds; |
| | v | Reading for specific purposes; |
| | | for examinations, pleasure and oral testing. |
| GSE 103: | vi | Extensive reading; |
| | vii | Reading for inference; |
| | viii | Reading for vocabulary development; |
| GSE 104: | ix | Reading interpretation; |
| | x | Critical analysis and appreciation. |

Thus, the GSE reading curriculum seems to have some intricacies which the teacher should note. It appears circuitous. For example, items ii and iv involve the same concepts that would have to be taught spirally for adequate success. Again, item viii – vocabulary development – treated as a separate component of the reading curriculum, is actually a continuous process relevant to every aspect of reading.

Similarly, "intensive reading" required by advance learners is not given as much prominence as "extensive reading", even though one may be tempted to assume that skimming and scanning for main ideas – i – amount to extensive and intensive types of reading respectively. All these have implications for student performance in the NCE programme generally.

- (b) Inadequate library facilities. Most Colleges of Education may not have reading clinics where reading disabilities among learners could be diagnosed and remediated. It must be pointed out here that the general language laboratory may not be able to support an aggressive reading remediation programme such as required by advance learners. Perhaps the library should serve as a viable alternative to the reading clinic in a College of Education. The use of the library would complement the reading skills that are not accorded prominence in the NCE programme. For example, ENG 012 is a reading course designed for the preliminary students and does not entail library skills. Even, ENG 128, titled "Reading comprehension and summary" does not bring in the library skills.

Whereas the library like the internet, is the intellectual store of any great institution, most Colleges of Education may not be able to boast of well-equipped libraries. Learners need to be trained to gather,

store, and retrieve information. They should be able to organize their study and read self-selected materials by which they would become more functional learners.

- (c) Class size is another problem facing reading-related courses in the NCE programme. Because such courses are compulsory for students and there are not sufficient classrooms in many of the colleges, so many students are squeezed into a classroom. This would not allow for effective training in reading. Detractions, like noises, squabbles, and sensational dresses do feature in large classes.
- (d) Reading materials and their textures may also prevent NCE students from acquiring appropriate reading skills. Many teachers do recommend basal materials which may not be adequate for NCE students in terms of the texts' cultural and linguistic contents. Also, the texts may not be readily available on the market. This is owed either to carefree attitude or lack of awareness on the part of such teachers.
- (e) As found by Olajide (1999), the evaluation practices by many teachers of GSE English are far from being adequate. Examination questions hardly tap appropriate reading skills in the Colleges. Thus, there is a mismatch between expectations and outcomes regarding the GSE English curriculum.

Government-related factors

Only a few of the Colleges of Education in Nigeria are owned privately. Others belong either to the States or Federal Government. It seems not all, especially State Government owned, Colleges enjoy adequate funding. Hence, such Colleges lack instructional facilities, particularly the libraries and reading clinics.

Although the various Governments once launched literacy campaign programmes, the corner stone of which should have been possession of reading skills by a larger percentage of the citizenry, the programmes are no longer pursued with vigour. Trained reading workers are hardly allowed a say in the programmes. If the programmes are properly executed, they could have wash-back effects on the reading behaviour of advance learners, promoting their academic performance across disciplines.

Societal factors

The Nigerian public is never a reading public (Aliyu, 1991). Eventhough there are recreational volumes, like novels, short stories, magazines, and newspapers, the speeches and write-ups by most Nigerians do not suggest that they are avid readers. This possibly explains why most students in the Colleges of Education and other tertiary institutions do not have the right experiential background to make them read to learn effectively. Spiegel (1981) advocated the development of recreational reading programmes because it has psychological and educational value:

The development of a love of reading is too important to be left to chance. A recreational reading programme should be a conscious, planned part of every classroom programme... recreational reading helps the development of several crucial aspects of reading. It promotes positive attitudes towards

reading, expands experiential background, enhances automaticity and fluency, provides opportunity for practice in the use of context clues, and expands meaning vocabularies (p.4).

Promoting Reading Skills among NCE Students

Having adduced reasons for the poor reading skills and subsequent unattractive academic performances among the students, measures should be suggested to improve the skills.

Abe (1985) recommends four apt steps to make reading effective in the teacher training colleges:

- (i) Reading should be given a separate status in the teacher training curriculum while it should be taught as a part of every subject in school;
- (ii) The teacher training college should regard reading as a specialist area which is also related to the content areas of the curriculum; this would improve students' overall performance;
- (iii) Reading methodology programme should be separate because reading is an essential part of the total school work, not necessarily English Language alone;
- (iv) Reading Clinics should be developed in schools to diagnose and help learners who are deficient in reading (p.23).

The practical side of reading should groom the NCE learners for the task of obtaining information from the ever-increasing volumes that they confront. Hence, practical reading sessions should be organized for NCE students.

Besides, the teachers of reading at this level should select materials that appeal to the learners both culturally and linguistically. If a target text lacks cultural relevance, learners would not find reading it convenient (Obah, 1985). Similarly, the more complex the linguistic structure of the text, the more greatly it repels the learner readers (Nuttal, 1988).

The materials implemented for all NCE reading courses should reflect the various disciplines of the learners. Research into the reading performance of advance learners (Olajide, 1991) confirmed that learners perform better on texts that are related to their disciplines; they find it easier to transfer learning experiences, thereby increasing their fluency.

Also, while evaluating, teachers should pose questions that test the learners across the five reading skills, particularly the higher order ones by which the learners are able to solve problems and create things. It should be noted that the abilities to make valid inferences, pass sound judgements, and create educative ideas and things are hallmarks of advance education.

On the part of the learners, they could read extensively and reflectively. They should realize that they require adequate reading skills to learn any subject. They must read recreationally, so that they could gather relevant background experiences.

College authorities should continue to equip their libraries. The librarians might be given opportunities for further training, by which they would be able to meet the reading challenges to be posed by the learners and their teachers. Because it is the life-wire of any serious institution of higher learning, the library could be encouraged to improve its services by organizing seminars, workshops, symposia and orientation programmes which would

promote reading awareness among learners. NCE students need to be able to use the library meaningfully. Thus, the teachers of reading, in collaboration with the College Librarians, should inculcate library skills in the students.

Governments and general lovers of literacy should embark on schemes that would promote reading not only in Nigerian Colleges of Education, but also other institutions of formal learning. They could make more grants available to the institutions for the procurement of relevant reading materials and conduct of useful research into reading. They could also institute prizes for outstanding performance in, and publications on, reading comprehension among the learners and teachers. Governments might encourage the colleges to open reading clinics. Such clinics could be equipped by seeking material and expertise aids from the International Reading Association (IRA) based in Delaware, USA, through its Nigerian affiliate, the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN).

Conclusion

The reading-learning situation in Nigerian Colleges of Education is not impressive. Whereas reading is a vital intellectual tool which value runs across disciplines, it does not receive adequate attention in the curriculum. Reading has skills, the highest being those of judgement and creativity which enable the learner to register his personality. NCE learners should be equipped with these skills. Effective reading skills move the society forward generally. Although there are many problems militating against reading effectiveness among the learners, the teachers, college administrations, library staff, governments, general lovers of education, and the learners themselves should endeavour to promote reading activities. Reading is supposed to have contagious effects in NCE programme, positively influencing student performance in all disciplines.

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