



Research Paper

Towards Functional Reading and Comprehension: Notes on Practical Strategies

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ABSTRACT:-*The classroom is a complex environment because it is a contact between two distinct participants. The teacher and his/her student(s) belong to different generations and, or world views. The mixture of variant backgrounds, beliefs, emotions, tastes and purposes among other things makes the classroom even more cumbersome. However, adequate planning and technical know-how in terms of teaching methods/strategies, on the part of a teacher or a lecturer does the magic of turning learning to a productive experience. A good teacher is known not by the degree of his vocabulary; “the –sms” and “the –tys” but by the quality of his/her products, who turn out to positively impact on their immediate and remote environments through functional knowledge they have acquired via qualitative teaching. This paper gives an insight to how reading and comprehension, an aspect of language learning can be made more productive in a simplified form without eroding the technical ingredients. It is indeed, a demonstration of the writer’s accumulated experiences on the subject-matter, over the years.*

Keywords:- Classroom, participants, comprehension, meaning, vocabulary.

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading, the third language skill, is decoding; that is, ability to interpret the written, typed or printed symbols in an attempt to unmask the writer’s ideas and, or stream/line of thought. Ogundokun (1997: 3) [1] comments thus: “Simply put, reading is decoding. That is, the interpretation of the written and/or printed symbols into their equivalent original speech forms in tune with the context of the words that constitutes the body of the message given in the printed/written symbols.” Comprehension means understanding. The fundamental aim of any form of communication understands and reading is an aspect of communication. To make reading and comprehension a productive exercise, learners at various levels are expected to be informed about the nature of meaning and its types. Apart from the general agreement between linguists and philosophers, which sees meaning as the nucleus of semantics, there still exist points of departure among many experts on the actual components and, or conception of meaning. The naturalists, headed by Plato see meaning as fundamentally the entity; that is, what a word represents or symbolizes. In other words, sound and meaning have an intrinsic link. However, there is a problem with this concept of the meaning of a word because there are words in human/natural languages without material/physical representations. Typical examples are the abstract nouns.

Another school of thought called the conventionalists hold the view that words and their assigned meaning are not directly connected. Aristotle and his followers believe that any form of relationship giving to a word and its meaning is merely the invention of the user of such a word or any language for that matter.

The third major view on the nature of meaning is known as the *contextualists* and J. Firth is the exponent of this line of thinking. Those in this school of thought want words to be interpreted based on the context of its usage.

The interplay of all these views on the meaning of a given word must be brought to focus in the interpretation of a text to make reading and comprehension successful. Besides the nature of meaning, we have thematic, conceptual and associative types of meaning. When meaning is obtained from the arrangement of elements of communication which underscores the message presented in an expression, it is described as thematic meaning.

The overt, dictionary use of a word, which does not deviate from logical, cognitive or denotative meaning of a word is the conceptual meaning. This usage of a word does not have anything to do with the environment where a word is used or emotional imports, which are capable of affecting the speech act. Conceptual meaning has a universal acceptance since there is an established “shared” conception of every word of a given human language.

The associative meaning is a free open-ended use of a word. In this case, meaning of a word is non-static. It can even be said to be covert as it is affected by variant determinants such as the context, the time, the backgrounds, emotion and extra linguistic and cultural components of the communication of both the speaker and the hearer. It is difficult to express associative meaning based on contrastive semantic attributes. Associative meaning accommodates individualized intentions and interpretations since it is believed that style is unique and personal. Many words, linguistic units, structural arrangements can be used to invite certain emotional appeals or reactions in the hearer(s). Also, a particular attitude or behavior (body language) given to a communication act can be the best element of meaning in associative meaning. Barnwell (1980) and Leech (1981) (Ogbulogo, 2005: 16-33) [2] identifies; connotative, *collocative*, affective, reflective and stylistic/social meanings as five sub-classes of associative meaning.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is premised on the usage theory of meaning propounded by Wittgenstein in 1953 and later developed in the works of J. Firth and M. A. K. Halliday. The use theory, also known as operational or contextual theory holds that the meaning or interpretation of a word, a sentence, an expression or any utterance is guided and determined by the context of its usage. In other words, the effect generated by a linguistic entity within a specific context expresses its absolute meaning. This position is informed by the fact that if meaning were treated as mere entities, the meaning of many words could be misplaced, thrown away or lost entirely in the process of matching them with what they represent.

A functional way of arriving at meaning of a linguistic unit and its analysis is to touch light its lexical relations as well as its sense relations, which normally exist in the area of similarity, disparity and/or closeness in terms of sound. Many words, groups/units of words with or without verbs cannot be explained correctly into meaning components by mere relying on their referential or denotation properties. Ogbulogo (2005: 33) observes thus: “Since word meaning cannot be completely analyzed using their reference or their components, there is the need to refer to the relationships between words.” For a better scholarly reading and comprehension, learners must be made to appreciate what synonym, antonym, hyponymy, homonymy, *polysemy*, homophony and homograph are.

III. DISCUSSION

As reading is the ability to decode written symbols (letters of the alphabet), which became words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs and texts, comprehension means the capacity to internalize and digest a writer’s views or ideas on a given subject-matter. Carrying out these two essential academic tasks depends largely on a number of factors. In this paper, we shall discuss types of reading, bad reading habits, influence of grammar, topic and illustrative sentences, the contribution of simple literary appreciation, types of reader and question types with regard to reading and comprehension.

Types of reading

First, there are different types of reading. Intensive reading, which is also called academic reading, is reading for a specific purpose; such as a test, an examination, an interview, a demonstration, a conference, a debate or a quiz competition among other academic exercises. This kind of reading requires a high level of concentration to pave the way for better understanding. Another type of reading is the extensive reading. It is recreational in nature because it is strongly for the purpose of entertainment or to have general knowledge about something. The reading of newspapers, magazines, short stories and fictions, which are not prescribed for any test or examination, which one is taking part in, comes under this reading categorization. It is good for entertaining and nurturing human minds.

Bad reading habits

There are certain factors and/or mannerisms, which may affect the effectiveness of reading and comprehension exercise. If a reader is not schooled on these seemingly enemies of progress, he/she may fall a prey. Poor vocabulary is one of the challenges facing young and average readers. A reader who is not exposed to various registers that represent different callings, vocations or human endeavors will find most texts difficult to decode and digest. Halliday (Beuagrande, 1992: 7-25) [3] says register is “a tendency to select combinations of meanings with certain frequencies...” It is observing the activities of a given human language in different contexts based on the different situations where it is operational, which eventually influence its usage or

adoption. A good reader has to be at home with a writer's choice of words, technically called diction. Vocalization, which may mean the movement of lips and, or neck during a reading exercise, is a bad manner of reading. The movement of neck; left and right when reading can make a reader get tired easily and once tiredness sets in, his/her brain will not coordinate properly and chances of understanding what is read will reduce.

Again, scholarly reading and understanding requires undivided attention. A reader must be in a good frame of mind and make his/her attention focused on a given reading material. Bad frame of mind and lack of concentration will lead to regression; that is, the process of going back to what has earlier been read. Apart from the fact that forgetfulness when reading will cause a reader some precious time, it will also hinder him/her from entering the writer's ideas. Psycholinguists see regression as a major enemy of productive reading and comprehension.

Tracing/fingering words and mono-syllabic reading, a very poor reading speed should be avoided. Physical or environmental disturbances especially heavy noise from people and moving vehicles also have negative effects on reading and comprehension.

Grammatical Properties

Effective reading cum comprehension equally demands that learners must be informed about the essentials of grammar. Ogundokun (2013: 13-17) [4] remarks: "Grammar is the foundation of every good communication." There is the need for readers to demonstrate their competency in the areas of identification and usage of phrases and clauses, sentence patterns, types as well as their functions; direct and indirect/reported speeches; active and passive voices because all of these play significant role in the conceptual and contextual interpretation of a given text/passage. "In order to communicate new knowledge in any field of human experience, including areas of science and technology, we need the language structures, which can express new conceptual categories" (Oyewo, 2005: 260-276) [5].

Topic and Illustrative Sentences

In addition to all that we have said towards qualitative reading and perhaps understanding, readers should be able to differentiate topic sentences from illustrative sentences. That sentence, which sums up the central idea of a paragraph, is known as a topic sentence. A topic sentence contains a writer's main idea in a given paragraph. In other words, it summarizes a writer's major idea and every paragraph has at least a topic sentence. It has no fixed place in a paragraph. Transitional conjunctions - first, firstly, secondly, again, also, besides, apart from that, moreover, more so, furthermore, similarly, not only that but also, by and large, notwithstanding, meanwhile, conversely, on the contrary, in short, in a nut-shell, in sum, summarily, finally, last but not the last, lastly, in conclusion, etc - can guide readers to fish out topic sentences in a given text.

Sentences, which provide examples, instances, illustrations and additional information to drive home the ideas contained in the topic sentences, are called illustrative or developmental sentences. Linguistic items like for example, for instance, as in, example given (e.g.) and such as, are popular markers showing illustrative sentences. While topic sentences serve as the skeleton, the illustrative sentences provide the flesh, which covers the carcass and makes it presentable. Hence, the two can be distinguished but they complement each other in the construction of a good text.

The ability to differentiate topic sentences from developmental sentences will help good readers to produce an excellent summary of a given text since all that we need in summarizing a text is a writer's salient points, which are contained in the topic sentences.

Exposure to simple literary appreciation

A sizeable knowledge of literary evaluation is an asset to a reader in a functional reading and understanding process. Figures of speech provide language structure with good hints on several mental phenomena. Langacker (193: 1-38) [6] notes: "The relationship between language and mental phenomena, one of the fundamental percept of cognitive linguistics is the idea of close interrelation. The cognitive abilities and experientially derived cognitive models have proved to be direct and pervasive inquisitive manifestations, which conversely furnishes the language structure with important clues on some basic mental phenomena."

Learners, who are familiar with common literary devices especially figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, personification, irony, oxymoron, metonym, pun and alliteration are likely to perform better than those readers, who are not predisposed to such connotative use of words because items like that have associative meaning, which are not connected to the primary combination of words that may form certain given sentences. Similarly, readers who can identify a writer's mood, tone, atmosphere and narrative technique/perspective stand the chance of understanding a text better.

Types of reader

As we have types of reading, which we have discussed, we again, have types of reader. There is an active reader, who can read about 60 to 80 words within sixty seconds. This type of reader is also called a fast reader. On the contrary, a reader who cannot read a given printed, typed or written material of about 60 to 80 words in a minute is described as a slow or passive reader. However, being a fast or a slow reader does not determine the level of reading effectiveness and performance in reading and comprehension exercise. Things need to be worked out. For instance, a fast reader is expected to read a given text at least twice to establish a good understanding of a particular material. A fast reader is hyperactive and may not pay special attention to certain vital details in the first reading. For an impressive performance, in reading and comprehension exercise, a fast reader is encouraged to follow the following steps:

- I.** SQ, survey of the questions on a given text.
- II.** S, skimming a given text.
- III.** CR, critical reading of a given text (scanning).
- IV.** SRM, selection of relevant materials as answers.

A slow reader is advised to survey the questions on a given passage before he/she begins to read a given text at all. This will shape his/her mind on the specific information to look out for in a text. A slow reader can only read a given passage/text once because of time factor, in a test or an examination situation. But, interestingly, it is observed that a slow reader does not read and place all information in a passage on an equal rate. He/she (a slow reader) takes time to internalize and distinguish different information. For a better performance, a slow reader should adopt these reading strategies:

- I.** SQ, survey of questions on the given passage.
- II.** SR, serious reading of a given passage.
- III.** SRM, selection of relevant materials as answers.

At the level of critical reading, which is the same as serious reading, a reader should underline the parts of a given text that provide information about the questions he/she has surveyed. It is important to point out that even a slow reader, who is cautious, may perform better than a fast careless reader if the latter does not read a given text at least two times before setting out to answer questions on a given passage.

Question Types in Reading and Comprehension

There are two major question types as regards reading and comprehension. Some questions test the readers' ability on how best they have understood the content of the passage. Questions based on the information given in a text are called general questions. The application of the concept of the "5Ws and the H" (What, Who, Where, When, Why and How?) enhances the chances of readers in attempting questions drawn on the message content of a passage. If a reader can tell what happens in a story, to who (m) it happens, when it happens, where it happens, why it happens and how it happens, it shows that such a reader has mastered the story.

The second type of question is the mechanical question. This type of question probes into a reader's ability to display his/her understanding of a particular author's style of writing. It usually involves identifying grammatical names and functions of certain expressions used in a passage, identifying the figures of speech used in certain expressions and stating their meaning as well as replacing certain words or groups of words with their nearest in meaning; bearing in mind the exact way those items from a given passage are used. All of these require some degree of technicality. For instance, when students/ candidates are asked to replace certain words or phrases with other words or phrases to mean the same as those used in a given passage, they are advised to establish the class of word/part of speech a particular linguistic item or unit belongs to before replacing it with another. The substitute should be a complete corresponding linguistic element. If a given item to be replaced is a noun, another noun or a *nominalized* element that can perform the function of nominal group should be used as an answer by also bearing in mind whether it is a singular or a plural noun. The same process goes for words that are verbs, adverbs and adjectives. It is also wise to give one answer to each item because if one gives two or more answers but per adventure, one of them is wrong, the examiner may decide to mark it wrong. Multiple answers can suggest guessing.

Good reading should be done silently except for speech training, oral reading evaluation, recitation of poems and broadcasting. One who reads aloud has very little to gain. However, for the case of teaching beginners how to read, the reading aloud is inevitable. The teacher or the instructor should take the lead by demonstrating good reading ability so that the learners can imitate the expected good reading habit. Of course, language is an imitated act.

Students should be made to understand that every language is a system of its own. The nature of a language is practically different from another. For instance, in French language, students must be told that consonant, which ends a French word is not often pronounced. E.g. enfant/ãfã/, les/le/, peut/pø/, dans/dã/, but/

bY/, etc. When a word ends in a consonant and it is followed by another word, which begins with a vowel or a voiceless letter h, there is a link between the two words. This is called « *liaison* » in French.

E.g. Les étudiants sont ici.

Mon ami est arrivé par avion.

Nous allons à la bibliothèque.

Les hommes sont partis.

Note: The underlined parts in the above sentences indicate where the said *liaison* exists.

Again, French students need to be informed that certain orthographical signs are guides to pronunciation. The “accent aigu” makes the letter e sounds [e]. Examples are words such as été, étudiant, bébé, épouse, écrire, etc.

The « accent grave » makes the letter e sounds as [ɛ]. E.g. après, frère, mère, père, etc.

The “accent circonflexe”, when it is used on letter e, also makes the “e” sounds as [ɛ̃]. E.g. bête, être, fête, tête, fenêtre, etc.

The « cédille », when placed under letter c, makes it sounds as [s]. E.g. Français / fRãse/, garçon /gaRsõ/, maçon /masõ/, etc.

IV. CONCLUSION

We can conclude that understanding the concept and nature of meaning as well as the various strategies of reading is *sine qua non* to effective scholarly reading and comprehension. Geeraets (1993:259) [7] observes thus: “meanings are things, pre-packed chunks of information that are contained in and carried about by word bags.” But, we should not also forget that meaning is at the same time a process of mental creation too. Language is a means of communication and a carrier of culture (Ngugi, 1981: 291) [8]. At all times therefore, every reader must read between the lines. The contribution to the global body of knowledge of this paper is that it has given a new insight to the teaching and learning of Reading and Comprehension, the third skill of language in and outside the classroom.s

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