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Activities and Tasks for Effective Teaching of Reading Comprehension in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Reading is one of the four language basic skills that integrates the learning and teaching of other language skills. Through reading, one gets to understand his/her environment as well as that of others far and near. It gives knowledge, pleasure and heals like medicine. Reading voluntarily has however been relegated to the background as students no longer read for pleasure unless under examination situations or when reading becomes mandatory. They rather prefer to read text messages or from social media where in some cases, the language used is substandard. This paper highlights the teaching of reading that would enkindle the love of reading and the motivation to read in students. The paper does this by identifying the role of reading in learning, reading strategies and giving tasks that the teacher would use to teach reading both communicatively so as knitting together all the language skills and forms to ensure effective and student-centred reading. Some of the reading strategies highlighted in the paper include previewing, predicting, skimming, scanning, guessing meaning from context and paraphrasing. The paper also highlighted some reading tasks/activities classified under pre-reading, grammar, cohesion and logical relations, whole text organization, functions and moves, among others. It is expected that this paper would facilitate appropriate teaching of reading as well as encourage students to read and view reading an interesting and rewarding exercise.

Keywords: Reading, comprehension, whole text organization, outlining, summarizing, functions and moves

Introduction

The decline in the reading culture of most Nigerians both old and young is a matter that should attract the concern of language teachers and researchers. Then were the days when people read materials such as newspapers, magazines, drama texts, novels etc. for knowledge and pleasure. Reading culture is yet to be our culture as many literate Nigerians shave not formed the habit of wide informative reading. Many read only when they are forced to read. They read for examination or academic purposes only. The kind of reading now prevalent by our youth is that mediated by technologies such as mobile phones, computers and the internet which in some cases contain substandard expressions of English language. The lukewarm attitude to reading may not be unconnected with the societal norm of emphasis on economic engagements and the desire to emphasize only what

benefits one can achieve and see instantly. Reading gives knowledge of the surrounding so that one knows about the happenings, events, situations and developments in or out of his/her environment.

Aliyu (2006) defines reading as a way of building up from what has been put down in the written form. The written symbols are used to form words and sentences, which are in turn expected to represent certain information or intention. Reading is thus a form of communication during which the contents, challenges and claims made by a writer are gone over by the reader who tries to capture the substance of the written material.

Reading is a multi-faceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation. Ogungbe (2014) defines it as a psycholinguistic problem-solving exercise which actively involves the reader in the process of decoding and assigning meaning. Its success therefore, depends on the use of appropriate strategies. Leipzig (2001) observes that reading is making meaning from print that requires the reader to:

1. Identify the words in print (word recognition)
2. Construct an understanding from them (comprehension)
3. Coordinate the identified words and make meaning so that reading becomes automatic and accurate (fluency).

The reading process requires continuous practice, development, and retirement. Blau (2016) opines that repeated readings is a way to help students recognize high-frequency words more easily, thereby strengthening their ease of reading. Having students practice reading by re-reading short passages aloud is one of the best ways to promote reading fluency. N'Namdi (2005) states that reading is an essential part of language instruction at every level because it supports learning in multiple ways, as in:

- Reading to learn the language: Reading material is language input. By giving students a variety of materials to read, instructors provide multiple opportunities for students to absorb vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and discourse structure as they occur in authentic contexts. Students thus gain a more complete picture of the ways in which the elements of the language work together to convey meaning.

- Reading for content information: Students' purpose for reading in their native language is often to obtain information about a subject they are studying, and this purpose can be useful in the language learning classroom as well. Reading for content information in the language classroom gives students both authentic reading material and an authentic purpose for reading.

- Reading for cultural knowledge and awareness: Reading everyday materials that are designed for native speakers can give students insight into the lifestyles and worldviews of the people whose language they are studying. When students have access to newspapers, magazines, and Web sites, they are exposed to culture in all its variety, and monolithic cultural stereotypes begin to break down.

Reading according to Mikulecky (2008) is a conscious and unconscious thinking process. The reader applies many strategies to reconstruct the meaning that the

environment of the learners. This view is emphasized in the *National Policy on Education* (NPE, 2004) which says:
'Most of our textbooks at present are unsuitable, inadequate or expensive, new curricular call for appropriate textbooks and reference books'.
Therefore, it is better for teachers to be aware that they are not to be enslaved to particular textbooks or a set of materials but must understand and use the freedom that they have to adapt and to supplement the materials to conform to the needs and interests of the learners. Ohia and Adeosun (2002) posit that "even the good textbooks on modern English methodology do not contain sample lessons to illustrate in concrete form, the modern views or techniques in language teaching and that a single course book cannot meet the needs of learners from varied language backgrounds. Since no single course book can equally satisfy the needs of a class of learner, there is the need for, "multi-way and multi-media exchanges [verbal and non-verbal] between teacher and learners as well as among learners in the conduct of classroom lessons". Also, lessons and learning even outside the classroom must be activity–based. Moreover, some teachers find it difficult to deal with reading texts found in their course books and mostly go with the rest of the exercise accompanying the texts. The many rich language teaching and learning activities suggested in this paper can be embedded in teaching reading activity in order to facilitate effective reading. These activities not only embrace four language skills but make the teaching of reading more lively and enriching for both the teacher and the learners.

Activities /Tasks for Effective Reading

Teaching reading is not the mere conventional method of teacher reads while students listen or students read one after the other and then answer questions that follow the passage. In teaching, different activities based on the passage can be carried out with or without the recommended course book to make reading activity more fun and more meaningful to students. These activities and tasks are embedded in pre-reading, reading and after reading sessions.

The following Pre-Reading activities suggested by Mikulecky (2008) are interesting and students' centred activities based on three reading sessions. He observes that if they are used by the teacher during pre-reading stage they may serve as preparation for reading proper in several ways:

- Assess students' background knowledge of the topic and linguistic content of the text.
- Give students the background knowledge necessary for comprehension of the text, or activate the existing knowledge that the students possess.
- Clarify any cultural information which may be necessary to comprehend the passage.
- Make students aware of the type of text they will be reading and the purpose(s) of reading.
- Provide opportunities for group or collaborative work and for class discussion activities. All these can be achieved through the following:
- Using the title, subtitles, and divisions within the text to predict content and organization or sequence of information,

- Looking at pictures, maps, diagrams, or graphs and their captions,
- Talking about the author's background, writing style, and usual topics,
- Skimming to find the theme or main idea and eliciting related prior knowledge,
- Scanning for numbers or specific words, phrases and ideas,
- Reviewing vocabulary or grammatical structures,
- Reading over the comprehension questions to focus attention on finding that information while reading,
- Constructing semantic webs (a graphic arrangement of concepts or words showing how they are related with the topic to be read),
- Doing guided practice with guessing meaning from context or checking comprehension while reading,
- Predicting which may also involve reading the source of the article such as giving the name of the text to be read or provide factors to reflect the topic of the text.

Students may make 2-3 predictions as they brainstorm on what the text is all about and may be asked on why they make the prediction. The prediction may involve pre-reading through the use of questions to activate prior knowledge and set goals for reading. The role of the teacher at this stage is to activate students' appropriate background knowledge to enable them think about what is known about the topic, set goals for what is to be learned, make initial predictions about the meaning of the text by examining the vocabulary, sentence structure, sub-sections, sequence of information and graphic aids (Mikulecky, 2008). N'Namdi (2005) and Blau (2016) in their studies state that pre-reading activities are most important at lower levels of language proficiency and at earlier stages of reading instruction. Pre-reading activities make reading more approachable by eliciting students' existing knowledge in discussions, reviewing new vocabularies, through skimming to get the main idea or scanning for specific information, before they begin intensive reading.

Actual Reading and after Reading Activities
The actual reading process is characterized by detailed reading to enable the students understand and get information from the reading text. During and after these periods, many activities/ tasks that have to do with language development and familiarization with language forms are taken into consideration. Such activities include:

Grammar and Vocabulary Activities
Vocabulary activities address words needed by the students to process the reading text. One of the activities involves picking few words from the passage being read and writing them on the board and after reading the passage encouraging students to brainstorm on them to get their meanings; putting them in sentences and writing a brief story using each of the words. This familiarizes the students with the vocabulary used in the text. They can share the stories and discuss briefly any of the words whose meaning they do not understand.
Other activities under grammar and vocabulary activities include:

a. Students need to understand the words in the text and predict meanings from affixes, suffixes, compound words/ long phrases in the reading material.

b. They can also look for words nearest in meaning (synonyms) e.g., power, energy, same/equivalent.

c. Or look for words opposite or nearly opposite in meaning (light/dark),

d. Words that go together (collocations) e.g., (make-up/take-off).

e. Compound words such as mother-in-law, accountant-general.

f. Explain the meaning of words or match words from the passage.

g. Students may be asked to identify parts of speech of words such as noun, verb, adjective, pronoun and their functions in phrases or sentences in the material they have read.

h. They may complete or conclude sets of words by taking a clue from the key word provided as in the diagrams below:

Diagram 1
Essential Need

Food	?		Housing	?	
					Clothing

Diagram 2

Types of Vehicles

Train	?	Car	?		?
				Bus	
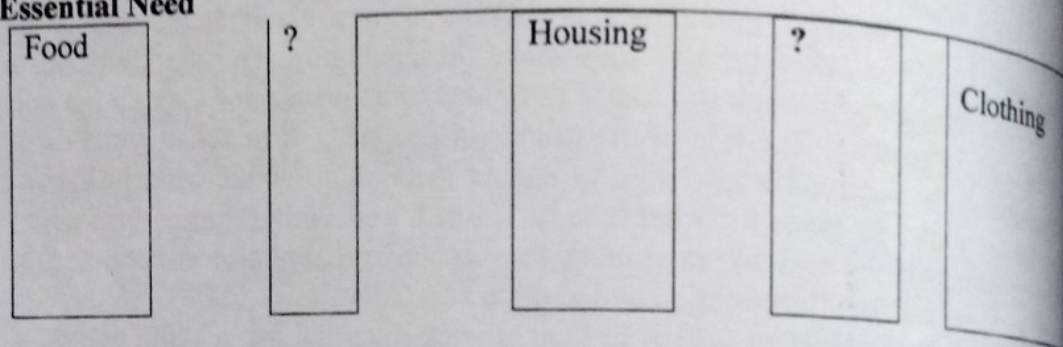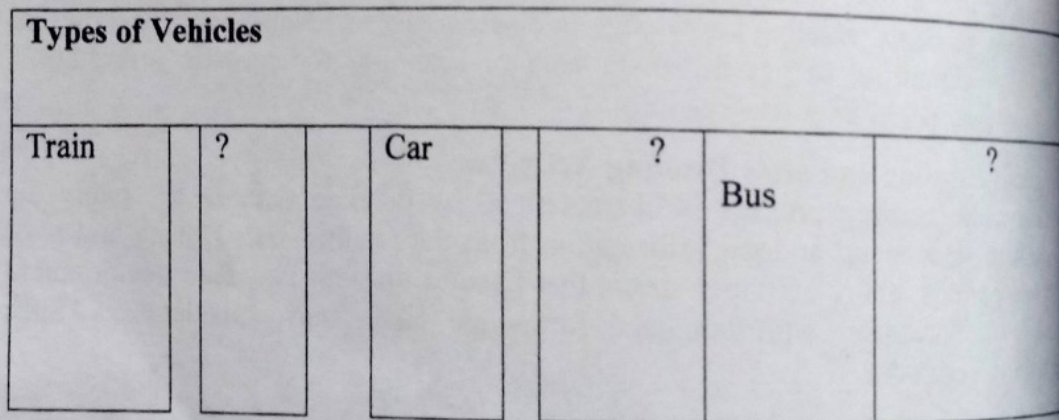
i. The teacher may give an unpunctuated version of the passage they have read and tell the students to punctuate it. The passage given may be section of the material being read or a related material. This exercise helps in developing their knowledge of punctuation marks and their functions.

j. A section of the material being read may be assigned to groups of students to change the verb forms, e.g., from present tense to past tense or present to future. The change of verb forms may vary from group to group. For instance, while group one changes present to past other groups may take other verb forms.

k. Also, the teacher may tell the students to change the modals in the passage to other modals so as train their knowledge of modal auxiliary verbs and tenses. For instance, what happens if 'can' changes to 'could'; 'may' to 'might'; will to would; shall to should.

Cohesion and Logical Relations

Nordquist (2017) opines that cohesion is the use of repetition, pronouns, transitional expressions, and other devices called cohesive clues to guide readers and show how the parts of a composition relate to one another. In the simplest terms, cohesion is the process of linking and connecting sentences together through a variety of linguistic and semantic ties, which can be broken into three types of semantic relationships: immediate, mediated and remote ties. In each case, cohesion is considered the relationship between two elements in written or oral text where the two elements may be clauses, words, or phrases. Halliday and Hassan (1976) in Nordquist (2017), observe that, there are six main ways that cohesion is created in a text. These are Paragraph reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical chains, cohesive nouns and conjunctions. For instance, students may be told to identify from the text, transition markers such as conjunctive adverbs such as moreover, however, therefore, nevertheless, meanwhile, next etc., and conjunctive adverbs, so, yet, and, for, but, or and nor. This helps to train students in achieving cohesion and unity in oral or written expressions

Logical Relations

Mekulecky (2008) observes that a logical relation is an inter-propositional relation in which a proposition is related to another in reasoning as

i. premise to a conclusion, or

ii. an antecedent to a consequent

a. Students can be trained on logical relations by asking them to show structure of paragraphs and to identify relations such as general–particular, condition-sequence, cause-sequence, instrument-purpose and instrument-achievement relations between them. For instance, they may be asked to identify general and particular relation between some lines or sentences or look at the transition markers in a sentence and identify how they are linked to a previous paragraph.

b. They may also be asked to make sentences that show a general-particular example or fill in the blanks in a given table to indicate the condition-consequence relations discussed in the passage read. Also, in the passage read, the teacher may highlight problem and solution sentences e.g. page 2 line 16, and ask the students to identify other areas in the passage where such relations exist.

c. They may be asked to identify the writer's use of deductive reasoning in the passage, an example of such can be given and the students are asked to give similar examples from the passage. d. Students may be asked to identify words from the text or indicate the meaning of the connectives as shown below:

'This' in paragraph1 line12

'These' in paragraph2 line19

'It' in paragraph3 line3

'Whose' in paragraph 5 line2

'Thus' in Page 1 line16

'However' in Page 2 line8

'Although' in Page 4 line9
'Nevertheless' in page3 line9

Whole text organization: possible tasks in whole text organization include cutting or writing out certain sentences from a paragraph randomly and asking students to re-arrange them in an order which appears to be coherent to them and to justify the order. Secondly, the paragraphs of a passage can be cut out and scrambled and students are told to re-arrange them in the correct sequence. After that, the students can be divided into four groups and each group is asked to pick any of the four envelopes containing the scrambled paragraphs of the passage. These groups later exchange envelops and each group read sits paragraphs. Each group also works together to decide on the most appropriate sequence in which to arrange the paragraphs. After that, questions such as, 'which words or phrases help you to identify the sequence' can be asked. This activity can also be used to train students on cohesion and logical relations. Moreover, the teacher can direct students to write another introductory sentence to each section of the passage they have read.

Functions and moves – In functions and moves activity, the teacher mixes 15 to 20 sentences from the passage and other sentences from outside the passage and ask the students to extract 10 sentences given from the passage. The students may also be asked to identify the functions of some sentences in selected paragraphs or paragraphs from the passage they have read.

Rhetorical functions: Students may be told to determine quantification of position, conclusion, statement of position, particularization of position, defence of position from the passage and write out in boxes the words, phrases or sentences which help them to do so.

Outlining and summarizing are helpful strategies for understanding the content and structure of a reading selection. Mikulecky (2008) opines that outlining reveals the basic structure of the text while summarizing synopsizes a selection's main argument in brief. Outlining may be part of the annotating process, or it may be done separately. The aim of outlining and summarizing is to distinguish between the main ideas and the supporting ideas and examples.

Other activities for teaching reading include, linking, comparing or contrasting what students have read with related ideas outside the passage, responding to comprehension questions accompanying the passage or formulated by the teacher, restructuring the author's message to show students' level of comprehension, or making judgment about the use of facts in relation to what is already known about the topic. Others include, note-taking, dictation, finding an alternative title to a passage and seeking for students' opinion on what they have read from the passage or about the author.

Conclusion

Teaching reading is an activity that converges all the language skills of listening, speaking, writing as well as grammar; it is an all-embracing exercise requiring the expertise of an experienced language teacher. A well planned teaching of reading can be used to teach other language forms thereby solving the problem of

insufficient allocation of English language lessons on secondary schools' timetables, as well as the over reliance on course books by some English as second language teachers. The paper has discussed vital activities and tasks that are necessary in teaching reading comprehension in secondary schools that would help the teacher to cultivate the habit of reading in students. Reading is like a medicine; it heals souls and enlivens minds to make it feel better. The way and manner in which the teacher fashions the teaching of reading will go a long way in determining the type of readers he produces. It is therefore recommended that, the myopic and traditional methods of handling the teaching of reading in secondary schools should be reviewed completely to make it an all-embracing, interesting communicative exercise.

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