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Reading Habits of Undergraduates and their Academic Performances: Issues and Perspectives

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Abstract

Reading is an indispensable tool of learning. Every course of study is accomplished partly through reading. Lecturers in the University usually have high expectations of a students' ability to cope with the demands of reading. However, reading as a practice and an art has tended to diminish. The general expectations of these students' reading ability have not been met. Students have a key role to play for them to succeed academically. Required information, skill and more information can be acquired through reading. This study examined the reading habits of undergraduates and their academic performance. A total number of two hundred (200) undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka and Anambra State University were randomly selected from four faculties as research subjects. The subjects were

exposed to a reading test, while some students were interviewed so as to elicit useful information on their reading habits and how it affects their performance. Result revealed poor reading habit and negative attitude towards reading which resulted in their abysmal performance as evident in the reading test conducted. This study shows also that many students read only to pass their examination and not for pleasure and acquiring knowledge. This was arrived at through reading test, structured interview and questionnaire administered to the selected undergraduate students. Issues and perspectives towards the pedagogy of reading and how students can defeat this apathy and improve their reading skills and efficiency is the crux of this study. Based on the findings, few recommendations for improved reading among our undergraduates were made.

Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that reading is important. Academic success at the tertiary level is likely a multidimensional phenomenon that includes languages proficiency, learning, study strategies and certain personal characteristics. The study of this very important language skill: reading, for some time now met many obstacles. In the university, students are expected to read many books so as to succeed academically. In order to get their degree, all students must read and pass their courses. Success in the University demands knowledge of facts and grasp of idea, much of it through the written word knowledge we know is power and we acquire knowledge through reading.

Reading as a habitual activity is normally confined to a relatively small section of the students' and continued serious reading is limited to an even smaller segment within this group of readers. The habit of reading does not appear to be a prominent feature in the lives of most students'. In the University, the world had assumed that students knew "how to read". Formal reading ceased for most students in the elementary and secondary schools.

Students come from all sorts of background: the very wealthy, the poor, tall and short, handsome beautiful and ugly, fast and slow learners. They come from all parts of the country. Some come from good secondary schools, some from woefully inadequate ones. Some come to the University because everyone they know does and to make good contacts. There is this other group that have come to bid their time, but out of laziness. Many come simply to learn to make a living, to have fun is still another motive and finally, to obtain education (knowledge). There are students who actually

come because they want to learn, because they are curious about many things. There are these students who will tell you; “There are thousands of books I want to read”. They are aware of their own lack of information and they want to do something about it. Often, these are the brighter students. Some are the unfortunate ones who possess the best of motives and an instinctive strong drive in the direction of learning, but who unfortunately lack the requisite imagination and skill to go about it. All scholarly and scientific studies of reading habits show that any reader, no matter how fast or slow he reads, or how much or little he gets from his reading, can improve both his rate and comprehension by conscious practice of the sorts of techniques.

Definition of reading/reading comprehension

There have been several contributions in the attempt to define reading. Many people have often, taken too simple the term “reading”. For some, reading means not more than running one’s eyes across a printed or written page recognizing and possibly comprehending the work. For others, reading is concerned with the recognition of the printed symbols that represent speech and to respond emotionally or otherwise to their sounds and meaning. But, at this level, we must establish the fact that reading is more involving; much more than the recognition of words.

In the views of Okwilagwe (1998) it should be more of reasoning, involving the meaningful interpretation of words, phrases and sentences, requiring all types of thinking such as critical, analytical, creative, imaginative, evaluative, judgemental and problem-solving. It is evident from the above that the reading process involves one’s acquisition of intended meanings of the writer as well as one’s contributions in the form of interpretations, evaluations and reflections about these meanings. It therefore means that anyone who is reading should be thinking, predicting, questioning, evaluating, defining and redefining what is being read. Strange et al in Nduka (2003), agreeing with the above says that reading is more than seeing words clearly, more than recognizing the meaning of isolated words. Reading requires you to think, feel and image. This definition recognizes the physical and mental activities that go on during the reading process but unlike the linguists, he de-emphasizes the physical aspect.

Bond and Tinker in Nduka (2003) were of the same opinion when they maintained that reading involves the recognition of printed or written symbols which serve as stimulus for the recall of meaning built up through

the readers past experience. De Harren in Nduka (2003) added an aspect vital to the definition of reading. This aspect is the reader's participation in arriving at the meaning. He said;

Reading involves a process of deriving meanings in print itself; printed symbols merely represent the sounds of language. To derive meaning from print, readers must translate the written symbols into the sound symbols of language and utilize his or her knowledge of language to reconstruct the writer's message (6).

De-Harren in the above definition rightly emphasized the importance of language in reading. The author and the reader have to share the same language code if meaningful reading and comprehension should take place.

In giving some clarification on what reading implies, Unoh (1990) said:

For the beginner, reading is concerned, for the most part, with learning to recognize the printed symbols, which represent speech, and to respond emotionally or otherwise to the sound and meaning of words. For the experienced reader (Let us say in schools and colleges) reading becomes less a problem of reasoning, involving meaningful interpretation of verbal symbols such as words, phrases and sentences, and requiring all types of thinking, evaluation guiding, imagining and problem solving (1).

The above definition makes a distinction between learning to "read" and "reading". This probably, has been the area of difference between the two views of the definition of reading. A child in the first year of primary school is battling with the problem of recognizing the different letters of the alphabets and attaching sound to them. He is not concerned with meaning as there is no meaning in letters itself. Reading at the college and University level should be seen as a cognitive or learning activity (processing, interpreting, comprehending and synthesizing of information).

Comprehension on the other hand, is the ability to understand something. It involves the understanding of the thought beneath the printed word. It is in addition, the ability to grasp the author's thought, structure, not in isolated fragments but as an organized whole. When one really comprehends according to Leedy as cited by Unoh (1990), one is able to relate main ideas to details and to see the principal thought as a matrix in which all subsidiary

ideas are contained. One is able to outline the thought and demonstrate the relationship of one part to all the other parts.

Eyisi (2005) recognized three abilities involved in reading comprehension as recognition, retention and recall. We should read a thing once to find out what it contains. A second time to understand it, and a third time to imprint it on our memory and the fourth time, we should report it silently to test ourselves whether we have finally mastered it.

The comprehension of any written work can be successful only if effective reading is accomplished. To read effectively and comprehend the passage, the reader must process the author's words: he must distill and extract from the printed words, the thoughts which are expressed therein. In other words, the only obvious thing which the reader is looking for as he reads is the thought that lies beneath the printed words before his eyes. As soon as one is able to find the thought and is able to reconstruct the message, one is said to have comprehended the passage. Effective comprehension results in effective retention and recall of the information.

Meaning and nature of achievement

According to American Heritage dictionary (2000), achievement is basically an act of accomplishing or finishing something. Something accomplished successfully is especially by means of exertion, skill, practice or perseverance. The definition of under-achievement is fundamentally, the opposite of achievement. In other words, when one does not measure up to one's level of aptitude or when performance is below the expected level, it could be referred to as under achievement.

Emenyonu (2000) agreeing with the above statement opined that inefficiency in reading continues to be an endemic educational problem often resulting in mass examination failures and incessant outcries against the fallen standard of education in general and of English language in particular. The above observation by Emenyonu shows that poor reading results in poor performance by students.

Research method

This study was carried out in Nnamdi Azikjiwe University Awka and Anambra State University. The population of the study comprises the year two students of both schools. The year one students of these schools would have been preferably used but since they are new to academic life in the university, they need to adopt the skills necessary for effective reading, first.

On the whole, a total of two hundred (200) i.e one hundred (100) students from each school were randomly selected from four faculties of the universities. English Department, Industrial Chemistry, Banking and finance, political science and Geology were chosen to represent other departments in the four faculties selected. Twenty-five (25) respondents were randomly selected in each of these departments. The researcher also used stratified random sampling to elicit information on the reading habit of undergraduates. Responses from the interview and simple observation were the primary source of data collection.

Questions were designed to elicit vital information on the students reading frequency, perception of reading, attitude to reading, reading interest/preferences, factors affecting reading/difficulties encountered while reading, source of reading materials and their personal evaluation of their reading habit. A reading test was as well conducted and marked and the respondents were evaluated. The essence of the reading test was to test their comprehension rate, speed of reading attitude to reading and reading difficulties. As the respondents busy with the reading test, the researcher observed then the recorded the observation made.

Data was analyzed using frequency table and simple percentage formula.

Presentation and discussion of results

The tables show the analysis of the data collected.

The findings revealed that majority of the students read only to pass examination and quiz and not for pleasure. The usual reasons of lack of time and access to reading materials accounted for their little reading. This agrees with the studies of Osman (1977) on the reading problems of students and found out that students read only to pass examination and do not read for pleasure. These students forgot that examination oriented reading promotes rote learning and results in poor performance. It was equally observed that students have replaced reading for watching movies, playing computer games, watching and spending more than enough time on the internet (Face book).

The findings also revealed that negative attitude and poor reading habits hinder comprehension and results in abysmal performance of the respondents which could have improved with better attitude and good reading habits. Most students do not have good reading habit: They read slowly/laboriously and inefficiently. They struggle painfully and come away from reading task

with only a vague/garbled notion of what they have read without comprehending. This agrees with what Emenyonu (2000) found out that inefficiency in reading continues to be an endemic educational problem often resulting in mass examination failures. In table 5, 85% of the respondents believed that reading plays an important role in academic success while 68% showed that reading a book/novel is too tedious. Consuming and only 20% were motivated to read because they enjoyed reading. Table 7 shows that performance of the respondents on the reading test. This shows that negative attitude and inefficiency in reading continues to affect students' performance. Negative attitude to reading may be prompted by laziness, carefree attitude, lack of motivation quick loss of concentration, inadequate educational background, inability to interpret words and meanings of passages, lack of reading materials and the negative attitude lecturers towards reading. These negative attitudes should be discouraged for effective reading to take place.

Again, the findings showed that most of the students did not comprehend effectively what they to the fact that they have read. This situation is traceable are not familiar with appropriate skills that facilitate comprehension. This led to their poor performance in the reading test as shown in table 7. This agrees with the findings of Unoh (1990) and Onukaogu (1989) on the studies of reading problems of students. According to them, comprehension determines academic achievement. Tertiary level students requires efficient reading (comprehension) skills if they are to succeed with the volume of reading required of them whether they are in humanities, science or technology. If reading is approached from this functional and pragmatic perspective, tertiary level of students will achieve greater academic success and thus make more meaningful contribution to development of Nigeria.

The short and easy-readable comprehension passage given to the students to read tested their reading habit, attitude to reading, speed of reading, reading defects and factors affecting reading (comprehension). The time the test was conducted varied (morning and afternoon) so as to find out if weather and the physical environment affects reading (comprehension). The result revealed that the effect of the physical environment and weather affected their reading and performance adversely. For the students that were tested in afternoon, the environment was noisy and full of distractions so they performed poorly. This is to say that reading is most effective when carried out in a quiet, peaceful and comfortable environment with little or no distraction. Noisy

surroundings high or low temperature, stimulating or distracting surroundings interferes with maximum comprehension.

Again, the test revealed that generally, some students showed negative attitude to reading. Some asked funny question like “how much will I be paid for reading the passage”, “I don’t have the time now”, “Reading is boring”. While some reluctantly collected the passage, others refused to read out rightly.

Table 7 also showed that the department of English performed better than any department due to the fact that they have been taught comprehension strategies and skills, and they are adopting it gradually and again, for the reason that their test was conducted in the morning when the weather was clement and the environment, quiet and peaceful. Scientific studies of reading habits showed that any reader, no matter how fast or slow he reads, or how much little he gets from his reading, can improve both his rate and comprehension by conscious practice and exposure to all sorts of reading techniques.

Table 1 and 2 revealed that 62% of the students read at anytime they feel like, and may not necessarily have a reading timetable 60.6% spend 3-5 hours on the internet (face book) chatting with friends instead of reading. Some other students engage themselves on frivolous activities like attending parties and other social activities in and around the school community instead of reading.

In the analysis of table 6 which sought to know factors affecting reading and the general observation made during the reading test, the following findings were made:

1. Some students were observed reading slowly. This hindered their comprehension and performance. For a comprehension passage, rate of 200 words per minute may be fast and appropriate. Speed was determined by this formula.

$$\begin{aligned} & \frac{\text{Number of words in the passage (467) x 60}}{\text{Time Spent (In seconds)}} \\ = & \frac{467 \times 60}{60 \times 15\text{min}} = 31.13 \text{ words per minute} \end{aligned}$$

The students were observed reading at 31.13 words per minute which is slow. Studies show that remarkable increase in rate of reading without loss of

concentration, if appropriate help and guide is given. Factors that contributed to slow reading include: struggling with the meaning of the difficult words, lack of constant reading practice, loss of concentration, reading word for word instead of reading in phrases and laying emphasis on word recognition rather than on comprehension of ideas and thoughts. Majority were observed showing much interest in answering the questions only instead of reading and comprehending first. This caused them to regress a lot.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken to examine the reading habits of undergraduates versus their academic performance in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka and Anambra State University. It specifically looked into the students' reading behaviour, purpose, factors affecting reading, reading habits/styles, attitudes to reading and how it affects their performance. The findings revealed five categories of readers; the non-readers who believe that reading is a boring activity and time consuming, the marginal readers who do not have much interest in reading. They would rather do other activities than reading. These marginal readers read only when it is really necessary especially to pass examination/quiz. The avid readers who actually love reading and specifically to acquire new knowledge and skills and those who possess the best of motives towards reading but lack the requisite imagination and skill to go about it. Students need to improve their reading habits. It will be beneficial to have a record of their reading habits in order to make predictions about their academic success in their programme.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Since this study has exposed poor reading habits among the undergraduates, students should be motivated and encouraged to read by making enough reading materials available to them. Award should be given to best students in reading comprehension. This can motivate students to adopt positive attitude to reading.
2. Reading programme, well designed to suit and take care of the students' need areas should be included in their use of English lectures so that these students will adopt comprehension skills/techniques for them to read effectively.

3. Lecturers should pay special attention in developing positive reading attitude in students by emphasizing comprehension skills and strategies so as to enhance effective reading.
4. Students should improve/develop good attitude reading and equally adopt good comprehension/reading strategies; this makes them an effective reader.
5. A good reader must indulge in a lot of extra-curricular reading, to increase his vocabulary so, students should read for pleasure and acquiring knowledge and not reading only to pass their exams/quiz.

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Table 1 shows Time which Respondents Normally Reads

Time	Number	Percentage
Midnight	52	26
Anytime	124	62
After Dinner	24	12
Total	200	100

Table 2 shows Respondents Frequency of Reading and the Reading Materials

Hours per week	Reading Material	Percentage
Less than 1 hour	Newspaper/magazines/journals novels	15.4
1 – 2 hours	Course texts (for exam/quiz)	34
3 – 5 hours	Internet (face book)	50.6

Table 3 shows source of Reading Materials

Source	Number	Percentage
Bookshops	20	10
Library	50	25
Internet	120	60
Friends	10	5

Table 4 shows purpose of reading

Purpose	Number	Percentage
Pleasure	30	15
General information	50	25
Study/Exams	120	60

Table 5 show Attitude to Reading

Statement	Agree	Disagree
I read because it can improve my proficiency and achievement.	85	15
I read in order to pass my examination	97	3
I read to enhance my knowledge and skill	52	48
Reading a book/novel is too time consuming form	74	26
Reading is important but am too busy	68	32
I read when I do not have any other thing doing	80	20
I read for general information	45	55
I read for pleasure	20	80

Table 6 shows some Factors that affect Reading

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Methodology affects the students' reading habit and performance	160	40
Pointing, vocalizing, sub-vocalizing, too many eye regression, failure to read in phases affect reading.	150	50
Lack of constant reading brings about breakdown in reading.	96	94
Undue attention and difficult individual words affect reading.	146	54
Physiological malfunctioning in the form of fatigue, illness, sensory defect, emotional disturbance affect the rate of comprehension	120	60
physical environment in which reading is carried out affects reading and comprehension.	133	67

Table 7 shows the performance of the Respondents on the Reading Test

Department	Faculty	71-100%	55-69%	40-54%	30-40%	0-29%
English	Arts/Social Science	4	7	8	2	-
Industrial Chemistry	Natural Sciences	-	4	7	10	4
Banking & Finance	Management Sciences	-	2	10	7	6
Geology	Environmental	-	3	12	5	5