IMPROVING STUDENTS' ORAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH THROUGH THE SILENT READING METHOD

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Abstract

The work aimed at finding out the influence silent reading method has on senior secondary two students' oral competence in English as a second language. Special emphasis is laid on the concept of reading, problems associated with the teaching of reading in a second language situation and the type of reading that brings about better understanding to the reader as well as the importance of reading in academic achievement. The teachers' level of preparedness towards teaching the silent method to help improve the students ' oral competence in English was also highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is considered the most problematic among the four basic language skills. For that reason, many students within the school system find it difficult to grasp reading skills. Many writers have pointed out that there are children at risk of not getting the meaning of print and unless we come to their rescue, the age of 'darkness' might reoccur. The ignorance of what reading entails has led to widespread failure in reading among students. It has become an indisputable fact that how well a student achieves in his school depends to a large extent, on how much he can read and give meaningful interpretation to what has been read, notwithstanding the method employed in the reading exercise. Reading can be described as an act of making meaning from print. According to Nwoke and Nwogu (2002), it is the ability to follow printed or written sequence rapidly for comprehension, usually silently, while

the eye scans whole groups of, words or sentences at a time.

This definition of reading stated above is the one which a considerable portion of the secondary school programme is concerned with. Through this, the student learns to read by direct association between printed words and their meanings. Therefore, reading involves the development of complex skills. It is a mechanical process involving print recognition but for a reader to show understanding of what he has read, he must bring his background knowledge to bear on the printed material.

The theory which explains the nature of learning to read, which is the traditional theory or 'bottom-up' process focuses on the printed form of text. Secondly, the cognitive view or 'top-down' process also focuses on the role of background knowledge in addition to what appears on the printed material. Cognitive based views of reading comprehension emphasize the interactive nature of reading and the constructive nature of comprehension. Dole (1991) stated that besides knowledge brought to bear on the reading process, a set of flexible, adaptable strategies are used to make sense of a text and to monitor ongoing understanding.

The concept of reading

Reading has been defined in different ways by many different authors. According to Oyetunde and Muodumogu (1999), reading is a process of obtaining information from print; this process is so complex that it involves the interaction between the reader and the author. Any form of reading that does not translate into comprehension is just mere 'barking at print' and a useless venture. Reading is a meaning searching activity, therefore, the reader is not just passive in the process but actively involved in constructing information while making use of textual cues in line with the information stored in his/her head. It is important to note that reading is not pronunciation and neither does it consist of the ability to recite the letters of the alphabet. In this case, the reader is not passive but active in constructing information making use of context cues in conjunction with the information stored in his head. Reading is not a meaningless activity. It is not moving of the head from one side to the other, etc. Having seen what reading is, and what reading is not, there is the need to go the extra mile to discuss the types of reading we have.

Types of reading

Reading can either be extensive or intensive, depending on the purpose for the reading exercise. Nwoke and Nwogu (2002) assert that extensive reading involves reading for pleasure and knowledge, reading widely and reading with speed. Students do not need all the information in the reading material as the purpose of this type of reading is to cover as many reading materials as possible, within the shortest possible time. Extensive reading develops skills for faster forms of reading. On the other hand, intensive reading includes content study reading and linguistic study reading. These forms of reading emphasize those skills which will enable the readers understand aspects of language such as syntactical and lexical arrangements and other devices which they will need to decode logical arguments, read for surface meaning, implied meaning, mood and attitudes of the author, as well as the general arrangement of written materials.

Reading silently improves students understanding because it helps them concentrate on what they are reading rather than the pronunciation of individual words. When one reads silently, he can form mental pictures of the topic being discussed. When students are encouraged to read silently, one is helping them to develop the strategies they need for reading fast and with better comprehension. This is called reading efficiently, and it helps students to read any text with minimum attention to meaning. Silent reading also helps develop the skills of reading for a purpose as the focus is on understanding the content without the additional burden of having to pay attention to pronunciation. This also helps students absorb ideas into their subconscious and then use them in their daily lives. It also helps them to improve their vocabularies, better their writing skills and spelling ability and brings about greater knowledge of literature. Better still, it helps them to understand the way and meaning of figures of speech used in texts. The writer serves as a model to them too.

Effects of silent reading method on the speaking skills of students

The ability to read and comprehend what is read is a great asset in our modern society. We do not have to look far to recognize the critical role reading plays in many aspects of an individual's life. Reading is an active process reflecting the interaction between the writer and the reader which can be done silently. Many researches have been carried out to ascertain what method can best be used to teach reading comprehension effectively to enhance speaking skills. Sustained silent reading is a form of school based recreational reading, or free voluntary reading where students read silently at a designated period of time every day in school. Krashen (1989) found out that in respect to reading comprehension, sustained silent reading can lead to a successful reading habit. A reading habit can be imbibed when teachers expose their students to sustained silent reading method in the classroom. Other researches have also shown that a single sustained silent reading session was enough to positively change attitudes about reading.

The long term effects of sustained silent reading (SSR) include better vocabulary, better writing skills, better spelling and greater knowledge acquisition. Researchers have shown that students who were taught reading comprehension via the silent method tend to develop positive attitude towards reading than students who do not participate in the SSR programme.

THE SUSTAINED SILENT READING (SSR)

The concept sustained silent reading (S SR) according to Krashen (2007), is a form of school-based recreational reading or free voluntary reading where students read silently in a designated time period every day in school. The sustained silent reading (SSR) method in the true sense of it is supposed to allow students select their own books and require neither testing for comprehension nor book reports. Those schools that cared to implement the sustained silent reading, did so under a variety of names, such as: Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) or Free Uninterrupted Reading (FUR).

The importance of the sustained silent reading method as seen by advocates such as Stephen Krashen, has been shown to lead to gains in several literacy domains. The method is enough to change the attitude of students towards reading. When the skill is properly acquired, it has long-term effects on the learner.

HOW SUSTAINED SILENT READING CAN DEVELOP ORAL COMPETENCE

Sustained silent reading (SSR) can be employed to develop oral competence of the learner through extensive reading which can maximize their language naturally with rapid development of words knowledge to secure the learners continuous vocabulary growth. Because accuracy is a fundamental component of fluency, teachers who work with beginning readers must focus significant amounts of instructional time on basic word recognition and word analysis skills. To do this effectively, sustained silent reading can be developed by encouraging students to read for about 15-45minutes daily.

Key elements of successful SSR method

Silent reading method can be successful when the teacher is a role model, as such, what the teacher does during and after the reading time is crucial. Teachers have the opportunity to demonstrate their interest in and enjoyment of reading by providing role models of silent reading. They should comment upon and talk about books they read; by doing so, students will be eager to do same thus improving their speaking skills. According to Aranha (1985), if we want our students to grow to appreciate literature, another step is to allow them to exert ownership and choose the literature they will read, that is allowing students to select their own learning materials. Because of the high level of success achieved in using the SSR, one is tempted to say that the sustained silent reading method is a better option even for teaching speaking skills in schools.

A research carried out by Aranha (1985) in some schools in Asia and Africa showed that there was high gain in reading attitudes in the sustained silent reading

altitudes in the SSR group and a loss in the attitude scores in the control group. Also, girls of the experimental sustained silent reading group showed significant improvement in achievement scores compared with girls in the control groups.

Problems of teaching reading

Reading generally has often been neglected in the language programme in both primary and secondary schools. When you analyze it critically you will find out that no reading ever takes place in most of our classrooms as the teaching of reading at these levels is often done haphazardly and unsystematically. What teachers do in the name of teaching reading is to convert the literature class into a reading lesson, especially in situations where the same teacher teaches both language and literature. In some schools, however, a lesson is devoted to reading comprehension every week. Nwoke and Nwogu (2002 : 101) stated that: Often times, teachers merely ask students to read a given passage while they listen and correct their pronunciation mistakes. Reading is, thus, reduced to teaching of pronunciation. At other times, teachers see the reading lesson simply as a period to explain new or unfamiliar words to students.

In such a situation, reading is reduced to vocabulary development. Some teachers merely explain a passage read to their students and ask them to read and answer questions based on what they have read. Such teachers too, regard reading as just comprehension. These inconsistencies in methodology might partly be due to poor or complete lack of proper training for most language teachers. For a long time, the assumption has been that any teacher who speaks well can -teach English language. However, teaching reading is known to be one of the specialized areas, therefore, it requires careful and systematic instruction to develop. Maturation, motivation and meaning are essential ingredients in reading; as such, the student has to reach or attain a certain level of intellectual development before he can read well. In addition, reading instruction should proceed through carefully planned

programmes, which will take into consideration, the intellectual maturation of the learners.

Some problems of teaching reading according to Oyetunde and Muodumogu (1999: 17) are highlighted thus: Reading is not being taught in any meaningful sense in many Nigerian classrooms; beginning reading instructional activities tend to be an exercise in reciting passages from books with little or no comprehension. Other features of beginning reading instruction that may be observed in the classrooms include memorizing and reciting the letters of the alphabet, letter naming and blending to pronounce words and others. The inability to perform well in reading activities has made most learners reluctant readers because of lack of sufficient exposure to printed materials. Most second language readers are not given enough exposure to written words in meaningful contexts.

Conclusion

Reading is one of the four basic language skills that most learners fail to develop a positive attitude towards. The fact remains that no single method of teaching reading is better than others, but researches were carried out on the viability of silent reading method and the results have shown that silent reading is a better method for teaching reading, speaking and writing skills than other methods. The consequences of lack of developing a worthwhile reading skill have made many students find reading a difficult or frustrating experience and the very few that manage to learn to read, find it a wearisome task. But the truth remains that, how well a student achieves in school depends to a large extent on how much he can read and give meaningful interpretation to what he has read. It is equally true that a student needs to do as much if not more reading in other school subjects as he needs to do in English and Literature. In view of the importance of reading to the academic achievement of students in school subjects, effort should therefore be intensified to improve the teaching of reading in schools.

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