

Impact of Aliteracy on Learning English as A Second Language in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of aliteracy on learning English as a second language in Nigeria. Genuine concern expressed by stakeholders on the poor performance exhibited by Nigerian secondary school students in English language has led to a number of inquiries for solutions to the problem. Many studies have attributed poor language performance to a number of factors but nobody has connected the apathetic stance of students towards reading to poor language performance. Their appalling performance manifests in the plethora of spelling and grammatical errors that riddle essay assignments. Writing is a productive language skill by which a student demonstrates his ability to produce grammatically correct and connected texts. This study searches for the link between students' lack of interest in reading and their writing competence. Aliteracy is the state of being able to read but being uninterested in doing so. The data for the study were generated from students' written essay and questionnaire. An analysis of the students' reading habits juxtaposed with their continuous writing showed that students who were avid readers performed better than those who did not like to read. This result shows that the decline in the level and quality of language written by senior secondary school students in Nigeria can be attributed to poor reading culture.

Key words: Aliteracy, Learner, English, Second Language, Reading, Writing

INTRODUCTION

Aliteracy is the state of being able to read but being uninterested in doing so. The apathy towards reading exhibited by students in Nigeria today has become worrisome. At the secondary school level, learners are expected to exhibit a high motivation towards reading that will culminate in outstanding performance at the critical senior school certificate examination. But the reverse appears to be the case. Harris and Hodges define aliteracy as 'lack of the reading habit in capable readers,' (6) They observe that because aliterates are capable readers, aliteracy, including not reading textbooks, is a choice that is being made since the skills to accomplish the task are present, but the choice is to not apply them' (6). Scott, on the other hand, sees aliteracy as 'the lack of reading and writing habits especially in capable readers who choose not to read and write' (22). This scenario plays out among the majority of young learners in Nigerian secondary schools today. No wonder Joseph Brodsky, a motivational speaker points out that 'there are worse crimes than burning books and one of them is not reading them.'

In times past, a healthy competition existed among young people regarding the number of novels read within a specified period of time, particularly during the holidays. There were conscious efforts made by peers to out read one another. There was exchange of novels, and discussions were held regarding the content of novels read. Today, students

no longer talk about the number of novels read or the stock of their libraries, because they no longer read novels nor keep collection of books. Their attention has shifted to what movies they have watched and the number of films in their mobile phones. The linguistic contents of most of these films are nothing to write home about. They are riddled with ungrammatical and unacceptable expressions, which corrupt the little English learnt by students. The film industry has practically destroyed the reading culture of young people. The situation where a student can sit down for five hours at a stretch watching home videos but is unable to sit down for two hours to read a book tells a lot about the shift in emphasis.

Decrying the poor reading culture of Nigerians Omojuwa (1977), opines that "the average Nigerian adult reads only newspapers and magazines to get information on current affairs and professional matters while the students only read for examination purposes". He maintains that "this approach to reading which cuts across educational levels and social strata is faulty."

The acquisition of the reading skill is fundamental to the acquisition of knowledge and also to high levels of performance in all areas. Mallam (1986), cited in Osakwe (2002) observed that part of the causes of students' failure in 'word problems' in mathematics in the past was a reading failure.

Furthermore, the link between the reading skill and proficiency in writing has also been enunciated by experts. Kennedy et al have observed that:

The experience of carefully reading an excellent writer, noticing not only what the writer has to say but also the quality of its saying, rubs off (if you are patient and perceptive) on your own writing. Deepen your mastery of one and you deepen your mastery of the other. (20)

Kennedy et al pointed out that a strong connection exists between avid reading and writing proficiency. Similarly, Saul Bello's statement that 'a writer is a reader moved to emulate' (10), lends credence to the views expressed by Kennedy et al cited above. This establishes the fact that students can be better writers by reading and emulating the good writing of others. Effective reading invariably would entail effective writing.

Many language experts have expressed concern over the poor performance of students in English language in Nigeria, particularly in the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination. Amechi Akwanya observes that 'the low performance of Nigerian students in English has been worsening since the mid - 1970s' (2). Many have attributed the poor performance to a number of factors, such as the large class syndrome with the attendant dearth of written exercises, lack of suitable teaching materials, lack of commitment among teachers, and the proliferation of technological communication media. But few have linked poor performance to learners' apathy towards reading. This is what this research sets out to do.

Therefore, the problem of this research is to ascertain whether aliteracy has any impact on learning English as a second language in Nigeria. Specifically, the objective is to find out whether aliteracy impacts on the writing competence of the learner of English as a second language in Nigeria. The study was guided by the following research questions:

To what extent are students able to develop relevant ideas on an essay?

Are they able to organize their ideas in paragraphs?

Do they mobilize appropriate vocabulary to express their ideas?

What is their level of mechanical accuracy?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

So much has been said and written on aliteracy, reading, and learning English as a second language in Nigeria. This paper has reviewed some literature in the above order.

Aliteracy

In a study entitled 'Social Media: A Cure or a Cause of Aliteracy in Undergraduates of Federal University of Technology Owerri,' Chukwu Scholastica and Emerole Nancy examined social media to see whether they are a cure to or a cause of aliteracy in undergraduates of Federal University of Technology Owerri. Their findings indicate that social media causes aliteracy as students do not have enough time to read while they made use of social media sites. However, those of them that read, concentrated on books in their area of specialization which has not increased their desire to read and write. They recommend formation of reading clubs in

the university. But one wonders how a reading club, which is done normally in primary and secondary schools can be in a university setting where there are mature students. If they had recommended the formation of students' literary and intellectual club, that would have been more appropriate in a university.

Furthermore, R.A. Joyce in a 1991 study on 'Aliteracy among community college Students' cited in Godwin (1996), developed a more complex definition of aliteracy which incorporated six components: reading attitude, reading behavior, types of texts read, range of reasons for reading, intensity of motivations for reading, and reading ability. From her findings, it is affirmed that males tend to read newspapers and magazines, while women are book readers. Godwin Latty's research was undertaken to better understand the reading behaviours of college students, and, more specifically, it questioned why aliteracy occurred among college students.

In yet another work entitled 'The Rising Population of Aliterates in Nigerian Schools: Role of School Library' Ilogho Julie examined the factors militating against the reading habits of students and the role of school library in promoting reading in secondary schools. She enlisted the following as factors that encourage aliteracy: out- door activities such as sports, school clubs such as music/band, school choir etc.; technology available in homes; and the school instructional system. She recommends involving students in reading promotional activities and conscious input of school librarians.

Reading

Reading has been emphasized upon because of its importance in the daily life of the student. Students are encouraged to read wide and extensively and not just for the purpose of passing their examinations. Guthrie and Seifert define reading as 'the receiving end of communication, which confers a host of possible benefits to the actor' (30). Similarly, Akwanya observes that 'far from a passive absorbing of information, reading signifies the expansion, the challenging, and in short, the awakening and engaging of the mind' (31). And for Emmitt and Pollock, 'the ultimate goal of reading, is to be able to understand written material, to evaluate it and to use it for academic purposes and daily living.' (20)

However, Onukogu has posited that the major factor that hinders the attainment of effective and efficient reading skills by the Nigerian school child is that the child is never really taught how to read. This, he attributes to the fact that the generality of school and college teachers do not know how to teach reading skills. He quips:

Reading as a discipline is not given the prominence it deserves in the curricula of our colleges of Education, Institutes of Education, and Departments that offer language courses in our universities. Where reading is taught at all, it is taught tangentially as a language skill. There is no tertiary institution in Nigeria that offers a Diploma or degree in Reading... Competence in Reading cannot automatically confer one with the ability to teach Reading. (24-5)

Hence, Onukaogu proposes a teacher-centered strategy designed to empower a teacher on how best to effectively

teach reading. He calls this the 4P's – Planning, Preparation, Presentation, and Practice. He attributes the learners' lack of reading competence to teachers' incompetence.

Why English

English is a second language in Nigeria, as well as the medium of instruction in education. Nevertheless, the status of English in Nigeria today transcends its local official and second language utilitarian role. English is Nigeria's means of gaining access to the world of scholarship. Technology has turned the world into a global village and English language is the access code. Proficiency in English is a sine qua non for becoming relevant in the present dispensation. No wonder it has become a status symbol for literate and semi-literate Nigerians. Mazrui (1975) rightly predicted then that "by the year 2000, there will probably be more black people in the world who speak English as their native tongue than there will be English people". This has come to pass, though, without recourse to the quality of language produced.

However, studies have shown that proficiency in English enhances success in other subjects. In a 1989 study, Hughes discovered that in Fatima Primary School Jos, teachers attributed pupils' difficulties in solving simple mathematics problems to the fact that the problems were given in words. This buttresses the point earlier made by Kalejaiye, (1980) that a minimum level of comprehension of English language is needed in order to understand 'word problems' in Mathematics.

A level of English language mastery is highly relevant for over-all intellectual development. The quality and quantity, as well as the degree to which reading is sustained as a life-long engagement, all have to do with the quality of the intellect.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The design for this research is qualitative as it was conducted in natural school settings with the researcher personally conducting the survey. Two instruments were used to collect the data for the research: a questionnaire on reading, and an on - the - spot essay written by the students. The essay was written first, and overleaf the questionnaire for exact identification of respondent. The sample population for this study comprises 100 Senior Secondary 1 students drawn from two public secondary schools; a boys' school, and a girls' school. The choice for both sexes is to enable a comparative analysis of findings. Senior secondary 1 students were chosen because they just crossed over from the junior secondary where they took an external examination. Moreover, they have longer time to spend in school. Catching them young would give the researcher room to follow them up for proper guidance.

The questionnaire, presented as figure one, was designed to elicit the reading behavior and attitude of the students, as well as the role of the school in the provision of reading facilities. Two questions were specifically used to delineate and classify alliterates and non -alliterates. These are questions 5 and 8. Question 5 required the students to list

literature books they had read on their own, while question 8 asked whether they were engaged in reading during the long holiday, and, if not, question 9 demanded to know why they had not read. The essays were graded using the criteria certified for assessing essays in English language. The essay is assessed under content, organization, expression, and mechanical accuracy. The mean scores of alliterates and non-aliterates were analysed as well as the standard deviations in the scores obtained by boys and girls. Comparisons were made between scores obtained which helped the researcher to draw necessary conclusions.

The secondary schools were selected from the university town of Nsukka, in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State.

FINDINGS

HO₁: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students in essay writing between those who read and those who did not.

Data in Table 1 shows that those who read obtained a mean score of 16.3333 and those who did not read obtained a mean score of 13.02.

Data in Table 2 shows that the difference is not significant at $P < 0.05$ $FCI, 96) = 3.299, P < 0.07$. However it tends towards significance. The null hypothesis is not rejected.

HO₂: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of male and female students in essay writing.

Data in Table 1 shows that male students obtained a mean score of 10.64 while the female students obtained a mean score of 16.04. The difference is significant at $P < 0.05$ as shown in Table 2; $FCI, 96) = 21.751, P < 0.000$, in favour of female students. The null hypothesis is rejected.

HO₃: There is no significant interaction effect of status and gender on students' mean achievement in essay writing.

Data in Table 1 shows that female students obtained higher mean scores than male students in the group that read (Male = 10.82, Female = 18.50) and in the group that did not read (male = 10.55, female 14.31). The interaction effect of status and gender is not significant as at $P < 0.05$, as indicated in Table 2, $FCI, 96) = 2.547, PL.114$.

Table 1. Between subject factors (Mean and SD scores of male and female students in the two groups)

Read	Gender	Value label	Std. deviation	N
Read	Male	10.8182	4.23835	11
	Female	18.5000	5.99691	28
	Total	16.3333	6.5227	39
Non Reading	Male	10.5476	4.75370	21
	Female	14.3125	5.77316	40
	Total	13.0164	5.69647	61
Total	Male	10.6406	4.51563	32
	Female	16.0368	6.18093	68
	Total	14.3100	6.21613	100

Table 2. Analysis of variance of scores by status and gender

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta squared
Corrected model	922.958a	3	307.653	10.176	0.000	0.241
Intercept	14732.245	1	14732.245	487.279	0.000	0.835
STATUS	99.749	1	99.749	3.299	0.072	0.033
GENDER	657.626	1	657.626	21.751	0.000	0.185
STATUS*GENDER	77.004	1	77.004	2.547	0.114	0.026
Error	2902.432	96	30.234			
Total	24303.000	100				
Corrected Total	3825.390	99				

The null hypothesis is not rejected, indicating that female students performed better than male students irrespective of whether they read or not.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Three null hypotheses were formulated and tested in this study. The interpretation and discussion of the results are presented in relation to the hypothesis.

The data obtained for testing the first hypothesis as shown in Table one revealed that there is no significant difference in essay performance between those who read and those who did not read. However, a further analysis of their scores in essay content, shows that those who read obtained a higher mean score of 4.28 than those who did not read with a mean score of 4.0. Although the difference is not significant. However, in mechanical accuracy, those who read obtained a significantly higher mean score than those who did not read, showing that reading rubs off on their spelling ability, vocabulary acquisition and correct grammar usage. Hence, Brockman, et al writing about helping students to be proficient in writing observed that 'their ability to make connections in their reading-to-writing process is essentially because college students are expected to discern both main and subtle ideas in assigned reading and be able to summarize, analyze, and synthesize what they have read in their writing (2010:45).

Furthermore, the data obtained for testing the second hypothesis shows that male students obtained a mean score of 10.64 and female students obtained a higher mean score of 16.04. The difference is significant at $P < 0.05$ as shown in Table 2. With this result the hypothesis is rejected because girls demonstrated a better performance in essay writing than boys. Citing studies conducted by Diamond and Onwuegbuzie (2001), Ilogho (2011), reported that females had higher scores in both reading attitudes and reading achievements. Similar to this finding, and in an earlier research, Camarata and Woodcock, (2006), observed that girls show an advantage over boys in reading. This advantage invariably translates to better writing achievement as well.

The third null hypothesis was designed to test the interaction effect between status and gender on students mean achievement score in essay writing. From the analysis of data in Table 1, female students obtained higher mean scores than male students in the groups that read (male: -10.82, Female: 18.50) and in the group that did not read; (male: 10.55,

female: 14.31). The interaction effect of status and gender is not significant at $P < 0.05$, as indicated in Table 2; $F(1, 96) = 2.547, P < 0.114$.

The null hypothesis is not rejected, indicating that female students performed better than male students irrespective of whether they read or not.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregone discussions, the following conclusions were drawn from the study, and recommendations made.

One of the conclusions of this study is that aliteracy is one of the causes of poor language output particularly in the continuous writing context. Students' apathetic stance towards reading invariably culminates in poor mastery of the language as manifested in poorly written compositions. Consequently, students who read performed better in essay writing than their counterparts who did not. However, girls performed better than boys in essay writing whether they read or not.

It is pertinent to note that similar threads run through the narrative of alliterates as reasons for not reading viz; watching films, no time to read, and playing. These reasons have led to the following recommendations:

That the home should be the starting point where the reading habit is inculcated into the child. When this is done in early childhood, the habit becomes in-grained in the child, which enhances the child's interest to value reading as a part of living.

The school should encourage reading by providing library facilities in the school as well as creating a library time on the school timetable. Apart from this, the class teacher can inculcate a reading habit in the students by providing a collection of novels for the students in the class. This could be at little or no cost to and the students as each student would be encouraged to donate a novel to the class. When twenty students, each donates a book to the class, including the form teacher, the class would have over twenty books in stock. They are then made to borrow a book a week. By the time each student reads a new title every week, he becomes an avid reader. Through this process, each student would have read a minimum of twelve books in a term; a feat which he would not achieve without this encouragement.

There should be a reading club established in every school that will foster a reading competition among members. Prizes should be awarded as incentives and rewards.

With regards to developing the writing habit in students, students can be encouraged to keep diaries. At the end of each day, a student reflects on events of the day and writes them down in any genre; prose, poetry or drama. This will enhance the acquisition of the writing skill.

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QUESTIONNAIRE

Kindly fill out this questionnaire in sincerity and God will bless you. Amen.

Sex: a. Male b. Female

Class: _____

School: _____

1. Does your school have a library open to students? _____
2. Have you ever entered a library to read? _____
3. Do you enjoy reading?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No.
4. How often do you read?
 - a. once a day
 - b. Once in two days
 - c. Once a week
 - d. never
5. Can you remember how many literature books you have read on your own? List them, if you can. _____

6. What do you normally read?
 - a. Novels
 - b. Newspapers
 - c. Textbooks
 - d. Nothing
7. What is your reason for the answer in question 6?
 - a. Availability
 - b. unavailability
 - c. interest
 - d. Lack of interest
8. Did you read during this long holiday? _____
9. Why did you not read?
 - a. Playing
 - b. watching films
 - c. nothing to read
 - d. no time to read
10. Do you believe that reading will help you do well in life?. _____

Write a composition on how you spent your long vacation