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## **WORD TREATMENT CULTURE AND STUDY SKILLS AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL LEAVERS IN NIGERIA: STUDY TECHNOLOGY AS CURRICULUM SUPPLEMENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Knowledge of words has long been established as one of the most important factors in reading comprehension. However, there has not been an overarching position on how effectively unfamiliar words should be treated in the course of reading. A study of the Nigeria Primary School English language curriculum established that while provisions are made to teach new words and also to use context clues to deduce meanings of misunderstood words in texts, no provision is made to train students on the necessity of identifying and consciously clearing misunderstood words to aid comprehension as espoused in Study Technology. Using the Quasi-Experimental design on 45 Primary School Leavers currently in JSS1 of Solid Foundation Academy, Pankshin, Plateau State, Nigeria, the study investigated the centrality of word consciousness and direct word treatment procedure as enunciated in Study Technology to a meaningful and useful text comprehension. Results indicated that only (11.1%) of the sample were aware of the necessity of using the dictionary to clear their misunderstood word to facilitate proper comprehension of reading texts. Also, there is an improvement and certain level of relationship between pre- and post-word knowledge and comprehension among the school leavers with mean scores of 1.07 and 6.27 for Pre and Post word knowledge and comprehension levels respectively; and a level of relationship of 0.137. Further, results revealed a decrease in the percentage of zero and literal understanding with an increase in full understanding after the application of word treatment technology at post-word treatment. It was concluded that there is a significant difference between the pre and post word treatment of specific word knowledge and comprehension with mean difference of 5.20 out of 10. Trainings in the treatment of Misunderstood Word as a barrier to proper understanding of texts as contained in Study Technology was recommended for inclusion in the Upper Primary School curriculum.

**KEYWORDS:** Word Treatment, Study Skills, Misunderstood Word, Study Technology, Curriculum.

### **Background to the Study**

Reading is an existential skill. It is an indispensable life skill that is neither level nor status

discriminatory. It is a vital component of both life and academic successes. A good study ability and practice provide a 'know-edge' for its possessor over and above their less privileged counterparts. It is the key to all effective academic life. This underscores the reason why ability to read is at the heart of primary education in Nigeria. One of the cardinal objectives of primary school education in Nigeria is the inculcation of permanent literacy skills in primary school graduates (NERDC, 2014).

Reading is comprehension. Any text that is to be read is constructed in words and the understanding of the units of the words in the constituent of each sentence making up the text is germane to making meaning out of any written text for whatever strategic reasons the reading exercise is being undertaken, more so if the reading is for study purpose. Words and the meaning constructed out of their combination convey understanding and serve to achieve the purpose for which the text is intended. This is what is known as comprehension. Inability to come to terms with the meaning of a word or a shift in the assignment of the right meaning as intended in the context blocks understanding in reading and serves as a barrier to productive study.

Knowledge of words meaning has long been established as one of the most important factors in reading comprehension. Studies have overtime established significant correlation between sound vocabulary knowledge and effective reading comprehension (See Graves & Watts-Jaffe, 2002, Marzano, 2005, Biemiller & Boote, 2006, Manzo & Manzo, 2008, Ashlie, 2015). If readers do not know the meanings of most words in a passage, they will be unable to understand the passage. Second language learners, like the status of English learners in Nigeria, are at a gross disadvantage because of their limited vocabulary knowledge as they try to make sense out of a reading text. It has been observed that there is now increasing evidence that comprehension is particularly dependent on vocabulary knowledge at relatively deep levels (Quellete, 2006, Tannebaum, Torgesen, & Wagner, 2006 in Jane, Kate & Carsten, 2019, see also Cobb, 2007). This underscores the reason why adequate word treatment in the course of reading has become a *sine-qua- non* to effective reading performance. Any reading programme that advocates heavily a "gamble" on words meaning in the course of reading is then to be considered catastrophic.

Jane, Kate & Carsten (2019) identified two different approaches to teaching vocabulary, which are: simply helping children learn the meaning of specific words; and helping children become better at figuring out meanings of new words through the course of reading. It is our submission here that the latter may amount to waiting a little too long till the reader becomes enmeshed in a morass in comprehension that wriggling out becomes an uphill task, it can be a pretty frustrating study experience.

It is a sad reality that actual comprehension in the course of reading in school today is not of much

importance to students. What students have reduced study to in school is ability to store up data in their memory and be able to recall such data when circumstances of tests or examination demand without much involvement with the data or ability to think with them such as to apply same in real life situation. After all, the school system in most cases reward such brain tripping exercises with a pass and flamboyant certificates. Thus, many of the students who have their study experiences conducted in this manner end up becoming at best ‘bright non-apppliers’, that are only good on paper as their reading absolved comprehension. This inability to read to learn has its root in Primary education’s failure to lay effective foundation for productive reading engagement.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Overtime, students have been programmed to go pass a misunderstood word in the course of reading and thus coming to the end of a reading passage and cannot make sense at all out of the passage. Applied Scholastics International (2003: p.4) submits that:

*It is catastrophic to go on past misunderstood word as one will not understand what he is studying. A student must discipline himself not to go past misunderstood words. He should learn to recognize from his reaction to what he is reading, especially the mental blankness which usually ensues right after one, that he has gone by a misunderstood word. He should look them up and get them fully defined before going on with his reading. Students must be persuaded to do this. It is a self-discipline that has to be learned.*

Unfortunately, our reading curriculum has not understood this truth in its purity – the centrality of word treatment (Word Clearing) to reading comprehension!

Further to the above is the erroneous impression most people go around with thinking that a misunderstood word is just something they obviously don’t know – a “not-understood” (APS, 2003b). APS (2003b) identified ten different ways a word could be misunderstood with grievous implications for comprehension in reading. The school reading curriculum must of necessity teach these nuances of the complexity of words for readers to make headway in reading. A word as simple as ‘run’ may have well above fifty definitions in some dictionaries. Each of these definitions introduces a shift in construction of meaning in the context of a reading passage. An assignment of any substitute to the intended definition within a reading text will block comprehension of the text material. A drill along this line is instructive as captured in LRH (2009). Let’s take a look at this paragraph and how substituted definition can block reading comprehension:

*The **kite** flew high in the sky. It looked beautiful and graceful as it dipped and soared. It must have been hungry and looking for its dinner.*

Ordinarily, majority of young students will interpret 'kite' in the passage as:

*A light frame usually of wood covered with paper, cloth or plastic; it is tied to a string and flown in the air when the wind is blowing.*

It then becomes inconceivable linking this understanding to "been hungry and looking for its dinner" as contained in the extract. Whereas the intended meaning is the second definition of: 'kite' *as a bird that preys on insects, reptiles, etc.*

It is necessary to reiterate that except the school reading curriculum recognizes the necessity of addressing the centrality of word clearing training as the bedrock of reading, and drill such into learners as early as the upper primary level, nothing substantially meaningful can be achieved in addressing the ever-declining reading skills amongst students, starting from the primary school. The centrality of being conscious of misunderstood words in texts, assigning definitions to all the word, and suitable one at that in the course of reading or studying, is given the due emphasis in Study Technology but not so in the reading provisions in Nigerian Primary School curriculum.

### **Summary of Curriculum Provisions from primary 1 – 6 on Reading Skills Development**

The general expectation of the English studies primary education curriculum in Nigeria is that the learner's reading ability and communication competence will be enhanced (NERDC, 2007). In this section, we bring out the provisions of the Nigeria Primary School curricular that can help the students develop effective reading skills. The provisions are discussed under the following headings: Vocabulary/word treatment skills and comprehension skills such as identifying literal meaning, inference making, and critical or evaluative skills:

#### **Vocabulary/Word treatment skills:**

- ❖ Various sections of the curriculum especially in primary 1-3 dwell on helping pupils to explain meaning of new words in content specific texts correctly.
- ❖ They are to be guided to use new vocabulary and grammatical constructions in own speech.
- ❖ Efforts are to be made to identify and teach new and unfamiliar words (from 100 to 300 words) to the students.
- ❖ Students are expected to find the meaning of words in the dictionary.
- ❖ Students are also expected to be guided to use decoding to identify new words in reading passage. They are to scan for the meaning of the new word.
- ❖ There are provisions for studying word formation processes such as: Forming Nouns from Adjectives, forming Verbs from Adjectives, Nouns from Verbs, and Adverbs from Adjectives etc. These are veritable knowledge of using morphological structures to decode meaning of unfamiliar words.

- ❖ There are provisions for the study of words and opposites, words and their synonyms; and idioms and figurative expressions. These also are cues to unlock meanings of new words.

### **Comprehension Skills: Literal, Inferential and Evaluative**

- ⇒ The current curriculum for primary education in Nigeria contains provisions to help students develop literal, inferential and evaluative reading comprehension abilities. This is to be achieved at different periods by given the pupils passages to read and answer questions that are designed to measure these levels of abilities.
- ⇒ Students are consciously requested to be drilled to “answer questions on what is not said but suggested in the passage”. (Primary 4 Curriculum; pg 3: Inferential).
- ⇒ They are also required to “point out the moral lessons in the passage” (Evaluative).
- ⇒ Pupils are required by provision to be guided to recognize topic sentences, write down main points and supporting details in the passage (Literal).
- ⇒ Pupils are expected to, by provision, read and determine writer’s attitude and feeling from the passage (Evaluative).
- ⇒ The curriculum contains provisions to drill students on skimming for main points and scanning for specific information.
- ⇒ At the peak, the curriculum in primary 6 contains extensive reading in a library situation where students are to read through books on their own with the teacher just giving assistance and answering questions.

### **Observations on the Current Primary School Curricular in relation to Reading to Learn**

The objective of the primary school curricular in Nigeria is geared to achieve the goal of primary education as contained in national policy on education which is to inculcate in the school leaver permanent literacy ability, which include reading. At the peak, the provisions aims at producing independent readers who are capable of engaging in extensive reading, extracting and processing information from textual materials.

While much efforts have been made to cover vital areas in reading demands to achieve the above aim, enough recognition has not been given to inculcating ability in the pupils to develop word consciousness in their reading endeavours and the need for regular word treatment techniques to aid comprehension on a continuous basis. The curriculum attention for now is mainly on teachers helping to develop the vocabulary of pupils by direct teaching of “new” and “difficult” words. However, inability to appreciate shades of meaning embodied in words which, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, can effectively lead one to misinterpret whole trains of thought is apparent in the curriculum. Words that block comprehension in reading must not be “new” or “difficult” words as envisioned by the curriculum planners (L. Ron Hubbard Series, 1996). Teachers cannot “protect”

students from words by teaching every difficult term they will encounter in their reading, but do need to help students understand words that clarify text (Judy, Raymond and Charlene, 2012). This is vividly captured in the body of knowledge on handling misunderstood word in reading.

The misunderstood word (word that is not understood or wrongly understood) is “the root problem behind all inabilities in reading to learn – how we comprehend word, how we translate words into ideas and how even a single misunderstood word may derail an entire ideological flow” (L. Ron Hubbard Series, 1996: p.45). What has not been studied previously, and which is a gap in the current primary school curriculum, is that the flow of ideas in any reading text can be blocked by a word(s) in such a way as to suppress further understanding or comprehension from that point on. Not only was this understanding not reached in its purity, but also there has not been an attempt to systematically guide students on how to remedy the problem when they occur, which will always be, in their reading endeavours.

‘Word Clearing’ as this exercise is called in Study Technology (a body of knowledge developed by L. Ron Hubbard) is a systematic way of locating and resolving the misunderstood word in reading. The clearing of misunderstood word is central to comprehension. Efforts need to be made to include in the reading curriculum at the primary level, which by extension continues into adulthood, exercises that develop the abilities to consciously identify reactions to misunderstood word in reading, locating such word(s) that block comprehension, and understand how to systematically resolve such misunderstanding and restoring comprehension on a continuous basis.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study is set in this understanding that current school curricular as designed have failed to address pragmatically the bane of proper comprehension in any meaningful reading task which is the problem of how to handle the misunderstood word. It, therefore, aims to establish the centrality of direct word treatment procedure as enunciated in Study Technology to a meaningful and useful reading comprehension activity.

### **Specific Objective**

In specific terms, this study intends to first reiterate a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, and thus providing the basis for the inclusion of appropriate word clearing procedure in reading comprehension and study skills development in upper primary school curriculum.



### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of consciousness of primary school leavers to locating and handling words that serve as barriers to comprehension in study?
2. What is the level and relationship between pre and post- specific word knowledge and comprehension of the students' study texts?
3. What is the range of ability of students along zero understanding; literal understanding; and full understanding of study text at pre and post-word treatment states?

### **Hypothesis**

**Ho:** There is no significant difference between the pre and post-word treatment of specific word knowledge and comprehension among primary school leavers in the study

## **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

### **Reading Skills**

Reading is defined as the capacity to receive knowledge from a text and process it with background knowledge and assumptions to achieve a definite purpose (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). Efeyinwa and Agbauche (2016) outlined four stages of reading skills as follows: the sensory, perceptive/cognitive, language/communicative, and memory processes. Other aspects of students reading skills include: predicting, visualization, making connections (i.e. bringing background knowledge to bear), summarizing, questioning, and inferring. For the convenience of this survey, we have decided to address reading problems in primary school in the area of Reading to Learn which includes skills necessary for a lifelong reading and study endeavours, and relevant skills enumerated above are then reviewed as appropriate.

### **Reading to Learn**

The essence of reading is to extract information from text for specific reasons. Reading to learn entails "reading to understand a topic, or reading to learn some new or some further information with perhaps a specific application in mind" (Maclellan, 1997: p.277). After the elementary reading skills of Learning to Read, a proficient reader continues to read for specific purposes of academics and other existential needs. At this stage, some much more advanced skills of reading that bother on understanding and application come to play.

Reading is an active process of meaning construction which the reader brings his or own contribution, his extant knowledge to the reading task. Maclellan (1997) summarized the requirements of Reading to Learn in terms of conceptual knowledge and strategic knowledge. Conceptual knowledge has to do with content knowledge, how language is used in texts. It entails being able to read and understand all of the words in a text and deriving the overall meaning by filtering the content knowledge with extant

knowledge. Strategic knowledge follows after having come to terms with the conceptual knowledge of knowing what the text 'says'. Strategic knowledge demand of reading requires a reader to process all the information derivable in the content of the text using specific reading strategies to achieve a purpose or goal.

As stated earlier, some of the required strategies or skills that characterize a competent reader at the level of Reading to Learn include: predicting, visualizing, making connections, summarizing, questioning and inferring. However, fundamentally either at the level of conceptual knowledge or strategic knowledge in reading, the centrality of words and their definitions cannot be over-emphasized. This fundamental centrality of giving proper definitions to words, and all the words in a text, to aid understanding has been ignored or somewhat abused to the detriment of producing effective readers from our school systems. Inability of the school system to include, as a curriculum provision, training in the proper handling of words in reading vis-à-vis the possible ways a word could be misunderstood different from a purely "not-understood" word is right at the heart of non-comprehension in reading.

Currently, there are direct vocabulary instructions going on in schools. The questions that are paramount remain, which words should be taught and which ones should be ignored and at what level? Much more germane is the question of how much words could be taught to the extent that a student will no longer have problems with comprehending text information emanating from the effect of a misunderstood word. Most of the times, educators have provided for them already predetermined words for vocabulary exercises in the curriculum and in reality, to every word taught, there are yet hundred untouched. In essence, the goal of vocabulary instruction should be developing word consciousness and how to handle them in context than attempting to teach all words. Individuals who are word conscious are aware and interested in word and word meanings (Graves & Watts-Taffee, 2002), and notice when new words are used in context (Manzo & Manzo, 2008). Study Technology offers pragmatic ways of developing in a reader word consciousness in texts; not only when it involves new words, but also in cases of familiar words that throw curves at readers.

Study Technology as a body of knowledge places emphasis on student self-identification of misunderstood words in reading; clearing words explicitly in the context of personally made up sentences, and locating exact and precise word meanings in the dictionary entries made for such word. While theories like Bloom's Taxonomy (see Oakhill, J., Cain, K., & Elbro, C, 2014); Direct Instruction (see Carnine, D. W., 2004) somewhat like Study Technology recognize the centrality of treatment of words in reading comprehension; some other theories differ substantially by emphasizing contextual learning rather than isolated vocabulary knowledge (see Graves, M.F. & Skater, W. H.. 2016).



## **METHODOLOGY**

The population of this study consisted of fresh primary school leavers who had just enrolled into the Junior Secondary School programme in Pankshin Local Government of Nigeria. The study sample consisted of 45 intact group students of JSS1 in Solid Foundation Secondary School, Pankshin, Plateau State, Nigeria.

The research design were the Quasi-experimental design and the Descriptive Survey. The Quasi-experimental consisted of pre and post specific word treatment reading comprehension exercise. Samples were made to undertake a comprehension test without any specific word treatment at the pre-treatment stage and same sample were made to repeat the test at post-treatment stage where two specific words were pre-treated. Pre-treatment and post-treatment results were compared to measure how significant the difference was between the two. The Descriptive Survey design was used to describe the samples level of awareness of the process of handling specific words that block comprehension of a reading text.

The instruments for data collection were the Misunderstood Word Awareness and Remediation Procedure Questionnaire (MWARPQ) and Misunderstood Word Barrier Reading Comprehension Tests (MWBRCCT). The Questionnaire items were derived from Applied Scholastics' Study Technology Manuals. The study used percentages, mean scores and T. Test for data analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Research Question 1: What is the level of consciousness of primary school leavers in locating and handling words that serve as barriers to comprehension in study?**

Results from the Misunderstood Word Awareness and Remediation Procedure Questionnaire (MWARPQ) revealed that students witness some of the misunderstood word barrier reactions in the course of their reading at the following range:

Getting worried and upset in reading (84.4%); Daydreaming (80.0%); Unable to apply what is read (66.6%); Doing the wrong things different from what is contained in the text (66.6%); Getting disinterested in reading (62.6%); Going blank (57.7%); Inability to remember what was read (55.5%); Staying too long on a reading text (55.5%); Getting tired of a reading text (53.3%); and Doodling in the course of reading (44.4%).

While the students affirmed reacting to the barrier posed by reading pass misunderstood word(s) in the course of reading as reported above sometimes, only (11.1%) of the sample were aware of the necessity of using the dictionary to clear their misunderstood word to facilitate proper comprehension of reading texts as expounded in Study Technology. Some of the responses of the students to what

they do when they come across words they do not understand in the course of reading or when they just cannot comprehend their reading include:

1. I keep on reading.
2. I will come across the word again and understand later,
3. I will jump the word and keep reading.
4. I will find someone to explain to me.
5. I get tired of reading and stop reading.
6. I read and read again from the beginning.
7. I will pray and ask God for help.
- 8 I will start crying.
9. I will sleep.

**Research question 2: What is the level and relationship between pre and post- specific word knowledge and comprehension of the students' study text?**

**Table: Mean and Relationship between Pre- and Post-word Knowledge and Comprehension**

|                                       | N  | Mean | Std. Dev | Correlation |
|---------------------------------------|----|------|----------|-------------|
| Pre-Word Knowledge and Comprehension  | 45 | 1.07 | 1.009    | 0.136       |
| Post-Word Knowledge and Comprehension | 45 | 6.27 | 3.945    |             |

The table presents the level and the relationship between pre and post-word treatment of specific vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of primary school leavers. The result showed a pre and post word knowledge and comprehension levels of 1.07 and 6.27 respectively with 0.136 level of relationship. This indicated that, there is an improvement and certain level of relationship between pre and post-word knowledge and comprehension among the school leavers

**Research question 3: What is the range of ability of students along zero understanding; literal understanding; and full understanding of study text at pre and post-word treatment states?**

**Table: Result of the range of ability of the students between Pre and Post word treatment states**

| Students' ability     | Pre-word treatment | Post-word treatment |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Zero Understanding    | 42.3%              | 22.2%               |
| Literal Understanding | 57.7%              | 22.2%               |
| Full Understanding    | 0%                 | 55.5%               |

The table presents the students range of ability at pre-word and post-word treatment based on Zero, Literal and Full Understanding. The result revealed that at pre-word treatment those with Zero Understanding were 42.3%, those with Literal Understanding were 57.7% and those with full understanding were 0%. However, at Post-word treatment, those with zero understanding were 22.2%, literal 22.2% and full understanding 55.5%. The result revealed a decrease in the percentage of zero and literal understanding with an increase in those with full understanding after the application of word treatment technology at post-word treatment.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

**Ho: There is no significant difference between the pre and post-word treatment of specific word knowledge and comprehension among primary school leavers in the study**

**Table: t-test Result on the significant difference between pre and post-word Treatment of Vocabulary Knowledge and Comprehension**

|                                       | N  | Mean | Std. Dev | Mean diff | T     | Df | Sig (p-value) |
|---------------------------------------|----|------|----------|-----------|-------|----|---------------|
| Pre-Word Knowledge and Comprehension  | 45 | 1.07 | 1.009    | 5.20      | 8.801 | 44 | 0.00          |
| Post-Word Knowledge and Comprehension | 45 | 6.27 | 3.945    |           |       |    |               |

The table presents the significant difference in the pre and post word treatment of specific vocabulary and comprehension among primary school leavers. The hypothesis was rejected since the p-value of 0.00 was less than the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, it was concluded that there is a significant difference between the pre and post-word treatment of specific vocabulary knowledge and comprehension with mean difference of 5.20 out of 10.

## **CONCLUSION**

Good reading comprehension has for long been established to depend on knowledge of the meaning

of the words in the text (see Carrol, 1993, Thorndike, 1973). However, the general belief is that, it is not necessary to know all the words in a text or to stop to look up all unknown words because, to some extent, the meanings of unknown words can be worked out from the context (Cunningham, 2005). Herein lies the booby trap that many readers fall into – relying on and mainly the context to unlock the meaning of words. Most often than not, this practice has made many to stop reading some texts completely or making wrong or inaccurate interpretation of the texts

### **RECOMMENDATION.**

Having established that inability to handle words that block comprehension in the course of reading is at the heart of student's reading challenges, trainings in the treatment of Misunderstood Word as a barrier to proper understanding of texts as contained in Study Technology should be included in the Upper Primary School curriculum.

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