

*Review*

# Helpful hints for the successful teaching of reading comprehension in the ESL English language classroom

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The performance of ESL students in English language public examinations may not be unconnected with lack of proper comprehension of what is read. More specifically, performance in the comprehension section in public examinations such as the School Certificate/Senior School Certificate Examinations in Nigeria is appalling. Students' performance in the West Africa Examination Council's conducted examinations confirms this fact and also points to the reality that the stereotyped method of teaching the language is no longer effective. The method is not only drab, but has also failed to produce the expected result. In this paper, efforts have been made to look at the possibility of methods that have not been fully explored up till now. There are suggestions of gradual stages in the teaching of reading comprehension, right from the Junior School to Senior School in a six-year post-primary education system. The paper also considers the place of motivation in an ESL comprehension lesson and the teaching of different types of question that are often tested in the West Africa Examination Council's conducted Senior School Certificate public Examinations. The different methods of teaching new words have equally been suggested. Finally, a suggestion is made on how the time allotted to the English Language on the school time-table can be effectively utilized for optimal value. It is concluded that if Nigeria and other countries that use English as a second language is not to be left behind in the technological revolution currently going on in the world, the teaching and learning of the language should be given more serious consideration, not only because it has become the second language of many developing countries, but because it is a tool in the successful acquisition of knowledge.

**Key words:** ESL classroom, reading, comprehension.

## INTRODUCTION

As a derivative of the word "comprehend", "comprehension" means the ability to understand fully. Superfluous as this definition may appear, it is necessary to remove the seeming obscurity and technicality that comprehension tests have been subjected to. Comprehension in this paper, as indicated in its title is reading comprehension.

The objective of any comprehension test is to test students' understanding of a given text and it should be noted that the degree of understanding varies, according to individuals, for many reasons. Interest is one of the factors that affect understanding. Comprehension is achieved if the reader is interested. The degree of

interest determines the rate of comprehension. A total loss of interest will almost lead to a total lack of comprehension, no matter the simplicity of the language. The teacher can create this interest through motivation such as getting challenged in some way and having a purpose in their reading. Some of the passages in the English Language Paper on comprehension examinations are quite interesting, but many students do not realize this because of anxiety.

Background experience is an issue in comprehension. A familiar text, by way of having read it or a similar one before, that it is within the reader's experience or within his environment will be more easily comprehensible than

one that has neither been seen nor read before, and which is outside the reader's environment or irrelevant to the reader's field of specialization. Where background experience is lacking, interest can make a text easy to understand. Following linguistic cues, present in a passage, can also be of assistance in comprehending a seemingly difficult text. Apart from restricted or lack of background knowledge, limited vocabulary can also lower comprehension (Ife, 1975).

The rate of reading, which can either be slow or fast, will depend on the purpose of reading. The rate at which a pleasure seeking reader will read a text will differ from that of a person searching for a piece of information or another sitting for examination will read the same or similar material. A student sitting for examination, for example, needs to be fast but careful since very little time is allowed for any particular question. Some people are of the opinion that slow reading leads to better understanding. This may not be necessarily so, and it has not been found to be so. In fact, slow reading may hinder accurate understanding as distractions may set in and thoughts may become disjointed. This, however, does not admit the fact that the faster reader comprehends better. Cautious reading should be encouraged and excessive slow reading, especially if associated with certain bad habits, should be discouraged. Smith (1970) opines that "the rate of reading should never be so high as to interfere with the degree of understanding desired by the reader".

Noise, in its various forms: physical, psychological and syntactic, also affects reading comprehension. Physical noise refers to various distractions in the reading environment; psychological noise pertains to distractions arising from the reader's state of mind, which may include stress, worries and anxieties, while syntactic noise is the inhibitions caused to comprehension by errors of language use, such as wrong use of words, punctuation, errors of grammar etc.

### **Justification for this paper**

Failure rates in English have continued to be on the increase. It is reported that between 59.9 and 65.9% failed the English language paper between 1995 and 2000 in the West Africa Examinations Council's (WAEC) conducted public examinations. Apart from the WAEC report, newspaper reports each time the National Examination Bodies release results show abysmal performance in the English Language, a language that has not only become part of our linguistic family, but also a tool for teaching and learning at various levels of our educational system. Kekemeke (2011), NECO Information Officer, Ibadan, in a newspaper article says:

The National Examinations Council's (NECO) results released in 2009, recorded a 10.53%

performance of five credit passes, including English Language and Mathematics by the 1,184,907 candidates that sat for the examination. Maintaining the same trend, the 2010 NECO results showed that out of the 1,113,117 candidates that sat for the examination, 79% failed to obtain credit passes in English Language and Mathematics.

Adegbija's (2004) report of two consultants from the British Overseas Department of Administration on visiting five universities in Nigeria on the problems of teaching the English Language in Nigeria shows that the poor standard of English is negatively impacting on the general standard of education, with the indirect negative impact on other areas of the Nigerian life because English has direct bearing on other disciplines. Reading and lack of comprehension of what is read is one of the factors leading to poor performance in English at the lower levels of Nigeria's educational system with its spiral effect at the tertiary level. English as a second language, for most people in the world, should be properly learnt so that people can fit well in the global community (Muriungi et al., 2011). Appropriate teaching of reading comprehension is capable of enhancing improved reading, thus improving the English language teaching/learning process and acquisition of knowledge. This is necessary as Burton and Humphries (1992) have noted that "as a popular activity...reading has probably, and understandably, declined during the past fifty years". That observation, made in 1992 remains valid today as it is reported that people no longer read. It is becoming a global problem as a result of the visual culture which has taken over. Ekwuazi (2010) says "if you want anybody to read anything put it in film, put it on television. This is all over the world; people are losing that ability to sit down and read.

### **OLD TEACHING METHODS, DWINDLING RESULTS**

Ewuzie (2009) has noted and condemned the obsolete methods of teaching still maintaining a firm grip on Nigeria's tertiary institutions but not only at that level, but even at the lower levels, producing certificate carriers with little or no industry experience. These old teaching methods still hold sway in our schools, even when it is obvious that we are not getting the expected results. It is unfortunate that teachers still take so many things for granted and base their teaching methods on assumptions. This is particularly so in the upper classes of secondary schools, especially if students had had different teachers at different levels. Many second language English teachers do not seem to realize that "the teaching-learning situation underwent a paradigm shift after communicative language teaching (CLT) came into existence in the late 1970s" (Joy, 2011). Further,

Sarigoz (2008) says “the recent educational theories about intelligence profiles of learners necessitate a new change of focus”. It is obvious that reliance on old teaching methodologies can no longer avail.

Reading is another major problem of reading comprehension. Inability to read intelligibly is a noticeable problem, and it is very disheartening that many students in the upper classes of secondary school can hardly read comprehensibly. Reading, in most cases, is haphazardly done, and this greatly impairs understanding. Good reading techniques ought to be part of the English Language comprehension syllabus, because appropriate reading, naturally, precedes understanding, and until this is ensured, no progress can be made in the English language comprehension lesson in the ESL classroom. As a panacea, in this paper, some practical steps have been put forward as means of remedying the present parlous state of performance in English, for which comprehension is a contributory factor. These suggestions span a period of six years, covering the three years of junior secondary and the last three years of senior secondary, in Nigeria’s two-tier post-primary and pre-tertiary education system.

### **Conducting an effective comprehension lesson in the ESL classroom**

Over three decade’s observation of comprehension being the worst handled of all the aspects of language still seems to be true, as performance in comprehension still remains poor in WAEC year 2007. What the teacher seems to do is treat the reading passage in the prescribed textbook without, in most cases, any previous knowledge of what comprehension entails. Many teachers are even less concerned about the reading ability of students. At the upper classes of the ESL classroom, the emphasis on language teaching seems to be on lexis and structure and largely, composition. It is assumed the students *can* read and understand. In fact many teachers spend 2/3 of the time in the last two years on composition and lexis and structure.

Most English lessons in the ESL classroom are conducted under a very dull and drab atmosphere. The teacher has to make the class interesting, if he has to sustain the students’ interest in comprehension lesson. It is most inappropriate for the teacher to just come in to the classroom and repeat the usual routine of “*good morning/afternoon students; bring out your text and where are we?*” This does not, in any way, arouse students’ interest. Interest is one of the factors that contribute to easy comprehension. Lack of it will lead to lack of understanding.

One of the things the teacher should do is to start the class in a lively mood, then give an introduction to the passage. It should not be the kind of introduction that reveals the content of the passage the class wants to

read. In some cases the teacher can make materials outside the usual textbook in use available. For example, where the science class is separated from the arts and social sciences or commercial class, in the upper senior school, materials should be made available outside the usual textbook and relevant to their field to fight the usual drudgery found in English lessons in science classes. This will arouse students’ interest in English and in comprehension in particular. Such materials should also be used in other non-science classes as a break from the usual and to serve as variety.

Before starting a comprehension class, especially in the junior classes, the teacher can take the students out on sightseeing to an area close by and relevant to the topic or materials the teacher wants to administer. Such an area could be the library, laboratory, the geographical garden etc. An ingenious teacher can adopt different ways, as may occur to him/her, to arouse the students’ interest. The teacher should be observant enough to notice when the students are losing interest and do everything to get them back on course. The teacher should strive to always sustain interest.

### **Reading the given passage**

The major problem of reading comprehension is reading itself, without which literacy cannot take place. It should be noted that literacy, which comprehension enhances by testing is ability to read and write reasonably for effective communication to take place. Literacy is a tool that aids acquisition of knowledge as well as skills required for all-round development in contemporary societies as a way of improving efficiency and productivity (Aruna, 2006). Effective comprehension must, therefore, start with purposeful reading. Proper and purposeful reading is essential in any comprehension lesson, if it is to be effective. The teacher can adopt any of the various methods currently in use in schools (Table 1). These include:

1. Asking students to read independently, telling them to note the important points in the passage;
2. Asking specific candidates, not necessary the good ones, to read and
3. The teacher can read to the class to serve as a model.

Since, usually, more than one reading is required; all the above approaches can be adopted at any particular comprehension lesson. Thereafter, the teacher can go ahead and ask questions on the passage read. The questions need not be restricted to those provided in the textbook in use as is the usual practice in many comprehension lessons. Further illuminating questions should be added as may be required.

The junior class examination is, in most cases, more of the multiple-choice types; teachers, in their teaching, are

**Table 1.** Suggested stages in the teaching of comprehension.

<b>Junior school</b>	<b>Term</b>	<b>Schedule</b>
Junior class I	I	With ages ranging between 10 and 12 and depending on background, reading techniques should be taught with emphasis on pronunciation and eye movement. Pointing to words should be discouraged right from the outset.
	II	Teaching reading skills should be intensified and the teacher should strive to perfect reading skills and pronunciation. Mispronunciation (phonological noise) is a major stumbling block to reading and understanding. Vocalization/sub-vocalization should be discouraged.
	III	Reading and understanding very simple and short passages should be introduced. Speed-reading should also start but not emphasized.
Junior class II	I	Speed-reading with drills should continue, with fairly long but still simple passages. The passages should also be interesting, some of which should be relevant to students' background experiences. In this regard, the teacher may have to go outside the school recommended text and resort, at times, to authentic text (Joy, 2011).
	II	Short interesting stories should continue to be testing materials. At this level, students should be timed. At this stage all bad reading habits: pointing to words, vocalization/sub-vocalization and regression should be disappearing.
	III	Timed reading should continue. This is to discourage excessive slow reading. Eye movement should be watched and controlled. The teacher should confirm progress by calling the students one after the other to read.
Junior class III	I	Real reading and understanding should start. Hitherto, techniques have been emphasized. Students should be made to recall what they have read without much reference to their book after reading. While doing this, rote learning should be discouraged.
	II	Students should now be encouraged to read for specific information whose answers can be found, directly, in the passage, while also introducing them to implied meaning.
	III	As the last term to the Junior class examination, students should be taught to read to extract not only direct facts in the text, but to also fish out implied facts.
<b>Senior School</b>	<b>Term</b>	<b>Schedule</b>
Senior class 1	I and II	Fairly long texts should be introduced and students should be made to read and reproduce the content of texts read, using their own words. This is necessary as the Senior School examination is not the multiple-choice type only.
	III	Texts given should now vary from one discipline to the other because, by now, students must be preparing to choose a line of study or profession to pursue. The variation in the choice of texts exposes students to different fields of human endeavor so that no text will be found to be too strange later.
	I	The different types of comprehension question usually tested should be introduced. These are: Literal, Interpretative and Inferential/Deductive. Students should be made to know their difference. Prose passages should be given to test students understanding of these question types.
Senior class II	II	Another type of question usually asked in comprehension test should be introduced. This is vocabulary question. The teacher should teach the students the difference between lexical and contextual meanings and the need not to super impose one over the other.

Table 1. Contd.

	III	Students should be introduced to the importance of, and identification of topic sentences in paragraphs. The role of topic sentences and the use of signal words as strategies for understanding fully should be emphasized.
Senior class III	I	The teacher should teach students how to ascribe title to an untitled passage. Other question forms not yet introduced should be introduced now. Such question types include structural items like clause and phrase types and functions, identification of and grammatical functions of parts of speech, etc. Questions involving identification of figurative expressions should also be given attention.
	II and III	The last two terms should be used as revision perfecting those things already learnt the previous years.

therefore advised to lay emphasis on proper and thorough reading to avoid picking seemingly correct answers.

As students resume and move on to the senior school, they must have acquired enough knowledge in the art of reading, at least, to get specific information and implied meaning. Having achieved these objectives, the teaching of comprehension can then go on along the following lines.

### Understanding question types

Many are not aware that not all comprehension questions can be answered by relying solely on a given text. Questions set on any given text vary from literal or direct, interpretative and inferential or deductive. Literal/direct question is a type of question that is neither figurative nor metaphorical. The answer to this type of question is usually not farfetched in the given passage. This question type does not demand much thinking, as the answer is often very obvious in the passage. Interpretative question is the type of question that demands some thinking on the part of the student as answer to an interpretative question is not always as obvious as that of literal type of question because the question can be either projective or retrospective. Inferential/deductive question, like interpretative, asks questions whose answers need not come directly from the passage. Extra-textual or background experience is needed to answer this type of question.

It is the teacher's responsibility to bring the different types of question to the awareness of the students. The students' recognition of these question types will help them answer questions correctly and in good time. For example, the teacher can ask students to get a passage on which they should draw these different types of question. The class can then treat individual attempts and correct errors. These attempts will get the students accustomed to the question types. With this knowledge,

students will know when to look for answers in a given passage and when to be introspective in giving answers to questions. When this has been done, the teacher should go ahead to test students knowledge by asking them to identify specific question types and not necessarily the answers to the questions. When they have finally grasped the question types they can start attempting answers to them.

### Vocabulary tasks in the comprehension class

The WAEC 2007 Chief Examiners' Report gave giving unimaginable meanings to words in the passages as one of the candidates' weaknesses, and went further to say:

A candidate cannot understand the content of a passage unless he understands the meanings of the words used. It is no wonder, therefore, that many of the candidates failed to answer correctly the simple content questions on the comprehension passages: they did not understand the passages (p. 8)

The vocabulary task is always a direct one, requiring students to find another word or phrase to replace a given one *as used* in the passage, but it is unfortunate that every year, the reports of the Chief Examiners indicate candidates' poor response. It is also important that teachers highlight, in the vocabulary task, the difference between lexical and contextual meanings, emphasizing the fact not to superimpose previous knowledge of a lexical item over and above what it may mean or imply in a given context. Bright and McGregor (1979) have advised that "the whole business of inference of meaning from context needs to be explained to pupils and they need to be convinced through examples that it is possible and useful".

One method the teacher could adopt in the vocabulary task in the comprehension lesson is to first identify the

words he wants to reach in a passage, ask students to give their meanings and then select the correct option(s). He should then go on to identify the word class and then ask the students to use the words in sentences of their own. Where a word is capable belonging to more than one word class without its form changing, students should be asked to use the word in sentences in the different word classes. This will not only make students retain the word for a relatively long period, it will also make them know the different situations or environments in which the same word can function. The examples below show how the words highlighted can mean different things in different linguistic environments:

- 1a. You will give account of this event.
- 1b. They will account for their actions.
- 2a. The water is too hot to drink.
- 2b. I water the plant every day.

We have considered the form and not the phonological realizations, especially with variations in accents. Students, in comprehension class, tend to consider only the form, unmindful of the difference in accent and pronunciation, which might lead to differences in meaning.

### **The use of word puzzles in increasing students' vocabulary bank**

Students can be encouraged to get involved in vocabulary building activities, such as playing scrabble, at their leisure. Where this is not practicable, the teacher can adopt the use of word puzzles in building students' vocabulary. This is also a way of motivating learners as they use an aid different from the usual classroom text. The teacher can prepare the puzzle before coming to class. In the alternative, he can reproduce from the numerous word puzzles in newspapers or elsewhere.

The above method which could be adopted up to the senior secondary one will help stimulate students' interest in comprehension and in learning, generally as it is capable of allaying learners' fear.

In this paper, only two methods by which students can be motivated have been discussed. An ingenious teacher should be able to think of other uncommon methods, such as very brief visit to nearby places relevant to a comprehension passage to be treated. Such places could be the library, the laboratory, the school farm or any other place very close to the classroom. This could take between ten to fifteen minutes. It should not be viewed as time wasting as the whole forty five minutes or so could be spent without achieving anything if the students are not involved while thirty minutes could be more beneficial if the students are properly involved. The teacher is therefore a major factor in students' motivation towards successful learning in the ESL English classroom.

### **The teacher's role in making students actively involved in the comprehension class**

Because teachers are poorly remunerated and motivated, their students share in their frustration and so, many teachers do not seem to believe that students can be motivated in a comprehension lesson. In very many cases, it is the usual reading and answering session without any form of motivation.

There are ways the teacher can encourage students and stimulate learning. One of the ways is to get them involved in the activity or activities either going on in the class or in the passage. This method was used, a long time ago by Agwu (1975), a school teacher at the Federal Government Girls' College, Benin City with amazing results. According to her, she got the students actively involved by asking them to produce the pictograph of the activity in a comprehension passage she wanted to treat. Agwu whetted the students' appetite for the story and the pupils got the pictures ready the next day and were all very anxious for the story. And of course, she confessed that they all thoroughly enjoyed the story to the extent that the students said they wanted to act the story. Acting may be another way of enlisting the students' interest in learning.

### **Innovation in the use of the school time-table**

One method adopted, by this author, which proved quite useful in the few years spent teaching the upper classes, in secondary school was the split of English language teaching among different teachers. One handled composition (Essay and Letter Writing). Another was in charge of comprehension and summary, while another was in charge of structure. Where this method is not possible for lack of manpower, the single teacher, as it is the case in most cases, should properly distribute the periods so that no section is completely ignored.

Since the allotted time on the time table is not likely to be sufficient, the teachers should do some preparation beforehand. The preparation could also include students' active involvement in certain activities that, at times, could be practical. Whatever the case, the teacher should vary the approach to the reading passage and allow variety in classroom teaching.

### **CONCLUSION**

With the abysmal performance in the English language paper as evident in failure rates constantly between 59.9 and 65.9% (Osisanwo, 2006), and considering the fact that the subject is not only a necessity for academic advancement, but also a tool in the teaching/ learning process in many developing nations, one of which is Nigeria, there is a serious need to see what we can do, as teachers of the subject, to redress the downward

trend. As Adegbija (2004) has noted, there is need to be more serious with our approach to the teaching and learning process of English if the technological revolution on-going in the world is not to elude us. Although English teachers remain poorly remunerated and frustrated, there should still be concerted efforts from all stake holders in the education as well as development sectors to ensure this language, which has come to be our second and official language is not left to continue to decay as has already been noted.

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