

TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION IN LARGE MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS AT THE BASIC EDUCATION LEVEL IN NIGERIA: THE PRESENT SCENARIO

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Abstract

This paper highlights some of the problems teachers face in teaching reading comprehension in large multilingual classrooms at the basic education level in Nigeria. The paper proposes some strategies that can be used for affective teaching of reading comprehension in large multilingual classrooms. The implication for teachers and the curriculum were highlighted. The paper concludes by suggesting that communicative activities such as role plays question and answer sessions, problem-solving tasks etc. should be incorporated into teachers' lesson plans and teaching. The curriculum for colleges of Education and other teacher training institutions need to be reviewed to provide teachers with the opportunities to competently teach through the medium of at least two languages.

Introduction

Nigeria is a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual country. Because of its geographical uniqueness, it has been a place for multi-faceted research studies for the scholars from all around the world. In Nigeria there are over 395 identified languages. Most of these languages do not have orthographies from the pedagogical perspective, it has been very challenging for both teachers and learners in Nigerian primary school system. In the same background, there have been very few discussions on how to settle or address the multilingual classroom challenges in primary schools in Nigeria. (Olaofe, 1990, 2007, Babalola, 2010).

Furthermore, researchers (Enemanjo, 1990, Bamgbose, 1976, Badejo, 1989, Pressley, 2002 and Robinson, 2006) have revealed that many teachers teaching in large multilingual classrooms have little or no formal professional development in handling such students. Many of such teachers are not

adequately prepared to work with a linguistically diverse student population.

Teaching reading comprehension in a multilingual classroom presents challenges beyond those faced in the monolingual classroom. The difficulties inherent in reading in an ESL class namely, encoding, decoding, speaking and listening in the target language are multiplied when the learners in those classes are neither native speakers nor from the same linguistic background. Problems ranging from inability to comprehend a reading tasks to vocabulary limitations to perhaps most troublesome, pronunciation issues complicate the process of reading in a second language. (Grabe, 1991, Barnett 1989, Durkin, 1993, Oyetunde, 2009, and Yusuf, 2010).

From a classroom management standpoint, however, a bigger challenge is when such obstacles turn from frustration and students from differing linguistic background begin to tune each other out, or worse, exhibit irritation. Fortunately, when handled well, a

multilingual classroom is a great place for students to try out their real-world conversation skills. If they can make themselves understood not only to ESL teachers and to others linguistically like themselves, but also to the world at large, then they are on their way to becoming proficient readers. The present study has attempted to assess how reading comprehension is taught in large multilingual classes. The study has also highlighted the problems and challenges faced by teachers in teaching reading in such classes.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to:

1. Assess how reading comprehension is taught in large multilingual classes at the Basic Education level.
2. Identify the problems and challenges faced by teachers in

Table 1: Teachers' qualification

Academic qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Degree B.Ed, B.A, B.Sc	4	20
NCE	14	70
Others (Diploma, ND/ACE)	2	10
Total	20	100

Table 1 revealed that 4 out of the 20 teachers interviewed had university

teaching reading comprehension in large multilingual classrooms.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers teach reading comprehension in large multilingual classes at the Basic Education level?
2. What are the problems and challenges faced by teachers in teaching reading comprehension in large multilingual classrooms?

Methodology

Five Junior Secondary Schools were visited and twenty teachers were observed (i.e 4 teachers in each of the 5 schools) in order to see how reading comprehension lessons were conducted in multilingual settings. Each of the 20 classes visited had 70 students and above on roll.

Analysis/Discussion of Findings

degree while 14 had NCE and 2 had ND certificate.

Table 2: Schools and classes observed with their population

S/No	School	Class	No of students
1	Government Secondary school Sabo Tasha	JS 1A	72
		JS 1B	86
		JS 1C	70
		JS 1D	78
2	Government Secondary school Kakuri	JS 2A	74

		JS 2B	75
		JS 2C	89
		JS 2D	72
3	Government Secondary school Kurmin Mashi	JS 3A	74
		JS 3B	73
		JS 3C	81
		JS 3D	85
4	Government Secondary school Kawo	JS 2A	82
		JS 2B	74
		JS 2C	71
		JS 2D	78
5	Government Secondary school Doka	JS 1A	84
		JS 1B	73
		JS 1C	87
		JS 1D	82

Table 2 revealed that each of the classes observed had students' population of 70 and above. The lowest population was 70 while the highest was 89.

Research Question 1: How do teachers teach reading comprehension in large multilingual classes?

Table 3: How teachers teach reading comprehension in large multilingual classes

Teaching reading comprehension in large classes	Frequency	Percentage
Teacher reads the passage aloud and allows students to read on their own.	10	50%
Silent reading of the passage by students	6	30%
Teacher discusses meaning of difficult words before reading the passage with the students	4	20%
Total	20	100

Table 3 shows how teachers teach reading comprehension lessons in large multilingual classes. 50% of the teachers interviewed and observed merely read passages aloud to students and they answer the questions that follow, 30% allow students to read silently and answer the questions and 20% discuss difficult words before reading the passage aloud and silently.

None of the classes observed organised any group work. There were also no much interaction through conversations.

The lessons were a bit boring as students were passive and not active. Students sitting at the back were completely lost as some of them could not even read.

To answer research question one, most teachers teach reading comprehension in large multilingual classes by reading passages aloud and also allowing students to read on their own silently.

Research Question 2: What are the problems and challenges faced by teachers in teaching reading

comprehension in large multilingual classrooms?

Problems/challenges of teaching reading comprehension in large multilingual classrooms

1. Grouping learners

Teachers in the schools observed find it difficult grouping learners according to their reading ability. They consider the whole class as one large group of about 70-90 students. Most students (more than half of the class) in the school visited were very passive and paid little attention to the teaching task. Occasionally when teacher A in school A asked students questions, only one or two students were seen raising up their hands to provide answers to the questions posed. The 20 teachers observed did not make any attempt to encourage students to participate actively in class. Students ought to be encouraged not to passively receive reading instruction but should at every stage be active participants in the activities designed to achieve the reading tasks through participation in well directed and meaningful activities.

All the 20 teachers observed in their various classrooms did not group learners according to their reading abilities. In fact there were no group work activities at all. Students were seated in their regular sitting positions throughout the duration of the lesson. My interaction with the teachers revealed that teachers find it difficult to group learners. Some of the teachers confessed that if they have to do any grouping of students, it would merely be done randomly and not based on reading ability since the teachers themselves are not adequately informed on the criteria

to be used in grouping students according to their reading abilities.

2. Language problem

Teachers in the schools visited were not competent to effectively teach reading in English Language. 70% i.e seven out of the ten teachers studied indicated that they could teach reading more effectively in Nigerian languages than they could teach in English language. This type of situation compounds students' problem of acquiring reading skills in English as a second language. There is need to train specialist teachers in reading in order to cope effectively with the classroom challenges.

3. Poor reading standard

The findings of this study revealed that students did not begin to read fluently until they reached secondary school. This probably accounts for the reason why most students finished Senior Secondary class three with a mean reading level of Junior Secondary class one. 50% of the students sampled were unable to read Junior Secondary one text when assessed. The word recognition test administered to students revealed that students were only able to read an average of eleven out of fifty words. One wonders whether the children found it difficult to understand, whether they had particular problems or whether their teachers lacked the proper approach and techniques for teaching reading. There is need to probably overhaul the teacher training curricula and re-assess the professional needs of teachers of language arts with particular focus on reading.

4. Lack of qualified reading teachers

Most secondary school teachers have little or no guidance in the teaching of reading comprehension in large multilingual classes. This study has revealed that 80% i.e sixteen out of the twenty teachers observed lacked knowledge of different aspect of developmental reading instruction. Infact most of them, 70% i.e fourteen (14) of them were NCE teachers who specialized in other teaching subjects like social studies, CRK/IRK, mathematics, Only six (6) out of twenty (20) read English. This clearly shows that there is the problem of inadequate teachers of reading in schools. Teachers should be better trained in awareness of fruitful techniques for effective reading instruction in large multilingual classes. Students in a bilingual/multilingual learning situation have peculiar difficulties in reading comprehension. Such children acquire and speak their mother tongue but they are forced to read in the second language. This kind of situation does not encourage early acquisition of reading skills.

5. Home background

One of the major problems associated with reading inefficiency is home background. Nigerian parents could be divided into two groups; the literate and the illiterate with the later constituting the largest number. This researcher's interaction with some of the students revealed that most students from educated backgrounds have access to reading facilities such as readers, novels, newspapers, magazines and other electronic gadgets such as television, cable satellite, internet, radio etc. In addition to these facilities, the parents

encourage their children by praising their efforts in the reading task. Consequently, children from this background in most cases perform better in reading comprehension in the school though there are exceptions to this rule. On the other hand, students from illiterate home background have little or no access to reading facilities because their parents do not have the means or knowledge of how to help their children.

Strategies for teaching reading comprehension in large multilingual classes

The following are some strategies for increasing cross-cultural student-to-student engagement and understanding in teaching reading comprehension in multilingual classrooms.

Incorporate many reading activities

- Teachers should incorporate as many communicative reading activities as they can into their lessons plans-role plays, Q & A sessions. Information gap exercise, realistic problem-solving tasks etc and group students from distinct linguistic backgrounds together.

Keep the Students on Their Toes

- After a student answers a reading comprehension question, tells a story, or makes a sentence, throw a mini listening pop quiz. Choose a student from a different linguistic background to see if he understood the original student's comments. Ask him to rephrase, repeat or summarise what he heard. This is a good double check on both speaker and listener.
- Play linguistic Hot Potato in the classroom: If a student asks you a question, divert the question back out

to the class to see if another student can provide an answer or explain it to the others. In this way, students will not tune out while the others are talking and they have yet another chance to interact with each other.

Let the Students do the Work

- At the beginning or end of class or after reading comprehension exercise, have students ask each other questions about the material covered. That will get them used to listening to each other's accents, not just to yours. Plus it provides an often needed review of the frequent problem of question formation in English.
- Try not to echo your students or summarise their comment. If you "help out" students with pronunciation difficulties in this way, the others will feel free to ignore them and wait for you to repeat it more clearly.

Work on Every student's Difficulties

- If teachers are doing pronunciation exercise or discussing a false cognate for one linguistic group, follow it up with one for another group. This will help teach the students to be patient with each other's linguistic limitations, as they learn that while the problems may not be the same for each group, each group has its own problems.

Use multilingual conversational exercise

- Emphasize that communication effectively means not only speaking so that a teacher can understand, but speaking so that everyone can understand. Students who speak the

same language often understand each other not because they speak correctly, but because they make the same mistakes. If you can do so tactfully, you can use a multilingual conversational exercise to point out the difference between what a student thinks he is saying and what his classmates actually hear.

- As students tend to forget, communication also means accurate listening, not just to the video or to native speakers, but to each other as well. For those students who think it is pointless or even detrimental to listen to other non-native speakers, remind them that in today's global society, the chances are that they will find themselves conversing, doing business, or otherwise interacting in English with other non-native speakers.

Use creative activities where students have to speak

- One of the best aspects of multilingual classrooms is that the widely varying cultural, linguistic and personal backgrounds of the students provide constant source of interesting conversational material. Use this to your advantage by creating activities where students have to speak and actively listen to each other describe how things work in their culture or country.

Recommendations

1. Teachers teaching reading comprehension in large multilingual classrooms should create forms or language awareness appropriate to their situation. Doing an informal survey of the languages learners (especially in the lower classes)

- speaking and finding space to play with the different languages could be the first steps in affirming them and thereby, their speakers.
2. Teachers should be encouraged to collect stories and books and other resources in the languages that learners speak and also encourage them to use their home languages in the classroom, especially in the first three (3) years of primary education. Specialist teachers of reading should be trained to cope with the multilingual classroom challenges.
 3. Teachers should be encouraged to regard the mother tongue or home languages as the main vehicle for cognitive and emotional growth especially in lower basic classes 1-3. This should also include promoting literacy practices and doing written assessment in lower basic classes. It is vital that children learn to read and write at the basic education level in their home languages across the curriculum and to have the choice of being assessed in their home language from lower basic classes upwards.
 4. Teachers should acknowledge the different languages and dialects in the class and also work with existing multilingualism in the classroom, i.e drawing on learners' existing languages as learning resources.
 5. There is need for teachers to provide students with a variety of reading exercises/tasks to improve on their reading level. Students should be given regular exercises on word recognition and close passages to build up their reading vocabulary. This will help to improve students' reading standard.
 6. The teacher training curricula needs to be totally overhauled to re-assess the professional needs of teachers of language arts with particular focus on reading.
 7. Teachers in linguistically diverse classrooms should be encouraged to explore the grouping in their learners in linguistically-sensitive ways that encourage co-operation. Furthermore, teachers in such classrooms should rope in parents and other volunteers as teaching assistants wherever possible particularly in order to bridge intractable language related to communication problems. Teachers should be able to manage learning in groups effectively and also be able to creatively use learning resources.
 8. Teacher should recognize the fact that in large multilingual classes, group work is one of the ways of enhancing reading efficiency. Pupils could also be placed strategically according to how well they work together and are able to help each other with reading tasks. Where the need is necessary for example, teachers can sit e.g One student who can read next to another student who can not read at all or learning to read. This way the pupils would be able to help each other.
 9. The home language is an important part of who learners are. Thus, for second language learners in multilingual classroom to be successful in reading comprehension, it is important that learners' home languages be regarded as legitimate languages of interaction and that they be used in a range of reading tasks and in assessment.

10. The issue should not be which language should be used more and which should be used less but how language usage facilitates the learners' reading comprehension in large multilingual classrooms. In addition to encouraging the use of the learner's home language, there is a need to consider multilingual assessment practices, where test items can be given in English and the learners' home language(s) and learners can respond to the questions in a language they prefer. For this to happen, teachers must be adequately trained in the use of two or more languages and school language policies need to be more flexible to give teachers the freedom to assess in multiple languages.
11. Teachers can facilitate students' reading comprehension by encouraging students to relate their pre-existing knowledge to new learning. For English as a second language learners the integration of new learning with prior knowledge involves connecting what students know in their first language to English.
12. The curriculum for Colleges of Education and other teacher training institutions need to be reviewed and developed to include a new set of language requirements for teachers teaching at the basic education level. Teacher education courses in universities and other tertiary institutions will need to be aligned with these. The goal should be to enable all teachers to teach competently through the medium of at least two languages.
13. The promotion of multilingualism in teachers' in-service training is crucial to the enterprise of facilitating multilingual learning. In-service training courses for teachers should offer courses in which the intersection of multilingualism with curriculum is systematically explored.
14. In teacher training institutions language is treated as a subject and so it is separated from the content subjects, that is if it is dealt with at all. The focus is usually on the proficiency of teachers in English rather than on teaching practices appropriate for multilingual classrooms. It is important that learners in large multilingual classrooms pay attention to how the different languages present in their classrooms can be used to support learners' participation in a range of reading tasks. For learners in these classrooms to be successful in any reading programme, it is important that their home languages be used as legitimate language(s) of interaction in a range of reading tasks.
15. English teachers should collaborate and work closely with ESL and bilingual teaching professionals within and outside the community who can offer classroom support, instructional advice and general insights into second language acquisition.
16. Principals, school administrators should support and encourage teachers to attend workshops and professional conferences that regularly offer sessions on bilingual learners, particularly in the area of reading.

17. Colleges and universities providing teacher education should offer teachers adequate preparation in teaching linguistically diverse learners in their future classrooms. Course work should be offered on second language reading.

Conclusion

Teaching reading comprehension in multilingual classroom indeed has its problems and challenges as highlighted in this paper. Nevertheless, inspite of all these challenges, teachers can implement their reading tasks successfully be encouraging students in many communicative activities such as role play, questions and answer sessions, problem solving tasks, such as, relating the reading tasks to the cultural experiences of the students, front loading comprehension via a walk through the text or a preview of the main ideas, and engaging students in pre-reading activities that elicit discussions on the reading tasks. The curriculum for colleges of Education and other teacher training institutions need to be reviewed to provide teachers with the opportunities to competently teach through the medium of at least two languages.

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