

Applying Theory of Variation in Teaching Reading Skills: A Case Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Katsina State

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Abstract

This study examines the application of variation theory in relation to students' reading problems with emphasis given to their inability to make the proper exploitation of reading skills as a result of poor teaching methodology being used by teachers in our ESL setting. Part of the objectives of this study is to identify the factors responsible for this, familiarizing teachers with up to date and productive methods of teaching reading that will assist learners' maximum participation and reaffirming the importance of exposing learners to texts of different complexity belonging to different genres. The data for the study were collected through administering a reading test. In the course of analysis, a comparative approach was applied as the answers obtained in the pre-test session are subjected to comparison with those obtained in the post-test session. The study establishes that reading is a complex activity as such, it requires the application of appropriate teaching methodology which can enable learners to actively apply their learnt reading skills in reading passages belonging to different genres as the variation theory offers them the opportunity of so doing since the more they are exposed to different texts the more they become competent readers.

Keywords: 1. ESL -English as a Second Language

Introduction

Education is central to any form of individual or Societal development. An illiterate society is no doubt a backward society. Onibokun (1966) states that, in terms of functional literacy, less than 60% of the Nigerian adult population can read and write in any language. Obasanjo (2006), declares that over 51% of Nigerian's are yet to become literate. According to him, 7.3 million children of school age are not yet in school. Elley (2001) remarks that generally the literacy levels of those in school are low. This is not surprising considering the uninspiring, non-supportive learning environment surrounding the average Nigerian child before he/she starts formal education. Formal education in Nigeria comprises Primary and Junior Secondary Education, which makes up the Basic Education every Nigerian child is entitled to, Senior Secondary Education, and Tertiary Education. Reading is one of the four basic skills namely, speaking, writing, speaking and listening, which a learner should acquire in English language right from primary through secondary to tertiary level. Reading is an active process that further involves the learner in using language. It forms a backbone to understanding language and using it effectively in all contexts. According to Gray (2000) reading is a highly complex activity, including various importance aspects, such as recognizing symbols quickly and accurately comprehending clearly and with discrimination the meaning implied by the author. Reading is regarded as the proof of intellectual development because the acquisition of the reading skill is actually the first step towards literacy. The process involves reacting to and using ideas secured through reading in harmony with the reading purposes and integrating them to definite thoughts and action pattern (Hams 2000). This paper uses theory of variation to explore problems of teaching reading skills and suggests some solutions in some selected secondary schools in Katsina State.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Variation

Marton and Booth's Theory of Variation (1997) is drawn from the phenomenographical research tradition. It argues that there is no single way to understand, experience or think about a particular phenomenon; indeed, there is considerable variation in people's discernment. In learning, individual students make sense of new concepts in different ways, according to their existing understanding and frameworks of knowledge. This requires teachers to engage closely with their

students to grasp the variations in understandings and knowledge so that they can take account of this diversity in structuring the learning activities in a lesson (Marton & Tsui, 2004).

According to the Theory of Variation, students' attention should be directed towards an 'object of learning'. The object of learning could be drawn from the subject syllabus or from a teacher's assessment of students' needs. Once the object of learning has been chosen, the teacher then considers its critical features—the characteristics that distinguish it from other objects of learning. At this stage, consultation with students is valuable for two reasons. First, as noted above, individuals might perceive what the critical features are in a variety of ways, and the teacher needs to incorporate the variety in the lesson planning. Second, teachers, as subject experts, might not view an object of learning in the same way as novice learners, and they need to attune the learning experiences to the needs of the latter. Once the critical features and the students' perceptions of them have been identified, the teacher can design learning activities that bring these features to the fore.

One powerful pedagogical tool is the use of comparison, as juxtaposition can highlight similarities and, crucially, differences. Thus, variation occurs in another form in the process: not only do people demonstrate variation in their perception of a phenomenon, they can learn by discerning variation across different objects of learning (Bowden & Marton, 1998). Teachers can manipulate the use of comparison in order to guide the students to focus on particular features of the object of learning, thereby structuring and directing the students' discernment. The quality of the manipulation determines the effectiveness of student learning (Marton & Morris, 2002; Marton & Runesson, 2003). Marton and Runesson (2003) list four forms that the manipulation might take, **contrast**, **separation**, **generalization** and **fusion**. If the object of learning is, for example, the format of newspaper reports, the concept could be introduced by contrasting this format with a similar but different format, such as a police report; the contrast serves to highlight the features of the newspaper report format. Through this **contrast**, the particular characteristics of this format can be **separated** from those of other report formats. **Generalization** might comprise showing the students different kinds of reports and asking them to distinguish the common features (e.g., the use of narrative and description of events) from other variable-features (degree of formality, degree of depersonalization, and so on). **Fusion** consists of integrating more than one of the first three forms.

Contrast

Contrast is to discern whether something satisfies a certain condition or not, that is whether something —is| or —isn't|. contrast seeks to distinguish different and unlike things.

Separation

Separation is the awareness of critical features and/or dimensions of variation. A dimension of variation is an emerging feature of a phenomenon which can take on different —values| while some aspects of the phenomenon are varying. Separation is an awareness of part whole relationship awakened by a systematic refined contrast obtained by purposely varying or not varying certain aspects aiming to differentiate the invariant parts from a whole.

Generalization

Generalization is a variation interaction that is inductive in nature. When the same invariant pattern appears in different situations under contrast and separation, this pattern may be de-contextualized. Generalization is a purposeful contrast to explore whether an observed pattern can occur while certain aspects vary.

Fusion

Fusion integrates critical features or dimensions of variation into a whole simultaneous covariation. By fusing the separated-out critical features or dimensions, of variation together, a whole concept may appear.

Analysis of Data

Predictably, the data generated is of diverse kinds and this is observable in the difference of quality between the data obtained during the pretest activity and those obtained in the post test activity. Student genre awareness, as it is demanded by the Variation Theory, is our major concern here. The six question used for the two different session are structured in such a way to assess student ability in general knowledge. In the pretest session, as it is retrieved by the researcher, the student, being not conversant with the Theory of Variation, ended up providing us with answers that have nothing to do with genre knowledge. However, a different kind of response

was generated in the past text activity involving same participants who took part in the earlier session. This could be seen as follows:

Pre-test: In text A there are words like food, eating, ancestors, vegetable, cancer, hypertension and atmosphere and in text B we have school, teacher socio-economic group, etc. posttest: A is argumentative and text B is expository.

Respondents B

Pre- test: yes, in text A the vocabulary is mainly about food and in text B it is about school and learning.

Post text: Yes, text A is argumentative in nature and text B is expository

Respondents C

Pre-test: There is a difference between the two. Text A is shorter compared to text B

Post-test: Of course, there is a difference. Text A is argumentative in nature and text B is exposition. Reading test is the instrument used for data collection in this study. Two texts of different complexity which belong to two different theoretical patterns were used in both pre-test and posttest session. The scope from those two sessions were the instrument utilized in the course of analysis. The outcome of the analysis is based on the students' achievement in the two sessions. The Data analysis has to do with dissecting and arranging the quantitative information gathered through research which is based on descriptive statistics. The data were analyzed in a comparative way. The whole analysis process is based on Morton and Tsui's (2004) four patterns of variation: generalization, contrast, fusion and separation. Sixty students from the two different schools make the total population of the research. This is for convenience and for the realization of authentic results particularly that the research is based on reading and answering questions that follow.

Summary of the Findings

The study focuses on using the Variation Theory as a framework to enhance teaching reading in some selected secondary schools they are Government Girls' Technical College, Charanchi and Government Science Secondary School, Batagarawa in Katsina State. Also, the study seeks to explore problems of teaching reading in some selected secondary schools in Katsina State, and suggest some solutions. The findings of the two rounds of study show that how teachers organize

their teaching is paramount. To it sum up, to create a broader space of learning for students is a goal that many teachers want to achieve. In order to improve students learning, the quality of teaching is often a decisive factor. However, learning study provides a platform for teachers to work together on lesson planning and classroom teaching. As Lo and Marton (2004) describe

"Through cycles of the research lesson, teachers engage with planning the research lesson, gathering evidence and using this to feedback into their own teaching to improve student learning outcomes "(P149).

Similarly, no single teaching method or strategy is able to cope with all objects of learning (Lo, Pong and Ko, 2005). Thus, the effectiveness of teaching and learning should be built upon the successive reflections of teachers and students. It is also hoped that teachers may reach consensus on how to make student learning possible by working in effective collaboration.

Problems of Teaching and Learning Reading Skills in Secondary Schools

This study shows that many faceted problems exist with students reading skills. The main problem is mispronouncing word, insufficient vocabulary, omitting, and substitution. New words in every sentence prove a main hurdle for student to understand texts, many students depend on dictionary meaning more than contextual meaning of words. As a result, they fail to understand the meaning words assume in the context of a text. Moreover, most of the students are unable to understand and analyze long sentences in a text. They also have problems with understanding syntax and surveying text organization.

The Approaches Currently Used by Teachers/Solutions.

Teachers activities in the classroom are disappointing as teachers do not follow the prescribed student oriented techniques. Instead, they use traditional teacher-oriented methods. Some teachers are just coopted as teachers but their discipline is not English. This makes it impossible to achieve better results. Teachers are arbiters, and the students are passive learners in the classrooms. The finding imply that pedagogical approaches to teaching in Katsina need reassessment. Since this area of teaching English is very essential to the stability of this country because English Language is the language of instruction in the country and English language is official language in the country.

Since English Language is indispensable therefore, its necessary changes are required to ensure students engagement in reading activities. Instead of teachers explaining texts,

1. Students should be made, to read and find out the meaning of the textson their own.
2. Teachers need to only guide them in order to understand the meaning a text implies.
3. It must be kept in mind that reading skills will develop only if the students are made to read as much as possible. Teachers should not lecture.
4. They should guide, monitor, help and provide feedback. Their responsibility should be engaging students in reading.
5. They should not be arbitersor controllers of the class. They should be rather part of it.

Conclusion

The application of the Theory of Variation in our reading classes is useful. This is particularly with respect to intermediate students like the Senior Secondary school students who are about to move to the higher level of education. Actually, this category of learners deserves to be made to believe that, in addition to its being the only way towards aspiring to genuine scholarship, itis through reading that their genre awareness could be broaden; an essential means of making them versatile and efficient in the area as well. Since the more learners are exposed to texts of different kinds the more likely it is for them to write their own essays. Satisfactorily, as reading reinforces writing the way writing promotes reading.

Recommendations

1. Teachers should engage students in reading activities. They should help them with hints and clues, and train them on the cognitive and metacognitivestrategies of reading.
2. Teachers need not to lecture, and explain everything to the students. They should make students read and find out for themselves the different layers of meaning in texts.
3. Teachers should monitor students' activities, assist them and provide guidance and feedback. They should engage themselves in what Nuttal (1996: 32-33) describes as responsibilities of the teachers:
 - a Helping students to enjoy and value reading, including making sure that there is an attractive extensive reading program;

- b Finding out what the student can and cannot do, and working out a program to develop the skills they lack;
- c Choosing suitable texts to work on; d Preparing the students to undertake the tasks;
- e Making sure that everyone promoting productivity and to their full potential by encouraging students. Promoting text-focused discussion and providing 'scaffolding' to enable them to interpret the text themselves, rather than having to rely on the teacher;
- f Teacher should monitor progress to make sure that everyone in the class improves steadily according to their own capabilities.

In view of the above, therefore, learners need to be engaged in the reading process. They should read individually, work in pairs or groups to find out meaning of words, sentences and texts. In other words they should be engaged in 'word attack', 'sentence attack and text attack' activities. Students should be active organizers, not passive recipients. Moreover, a large number of teachers are not trained, therefore arrangements should be made to train teachers in the new approaches to teaching reading and teacher education as well.

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