

## What methodologies do Universal Basic Education teachers use in teaching reading in Benue State, Nigeria?

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### Abstract

*Today, students completing basic education in Nigeria are unable to read and use reading as a tool for learning. This problem is attributed to inadequate methodologies arising from poor teacher preparation. The problem also seems to be related to teachers' faulty understanding of reading and how to teach it. Using a sample of 163 teachers, this study investigated the development of reading, the reading methodologies, teaching and assessment strategies used and the criteria used for recommending reading materials. A survey questionnaire was used to gather data, which were then analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequency, percentage and rank order. The findings show that teachers' instructional strategies are counter to the recommendations for a balanced reading programme. They neither explicitly develop learners' skills nor use research-proven best practices in the teaching and assessment of reading. They do not choose materials using learner-based criteria. It is recommended that teacher education be repositioned to empower teachers with strategies of teaching reading.*

**Keywords:** reading, learning, inadequate methodologies, strategies of teaching reading, learner-based criteria.

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## **Introduction**

The goal of any education system is to develop permanent literacy, numeracy and critical thinking skills in the learners. This is because reading is critical for growth and development. The ability to read effectively is used as a yardstick for the assessment of the level of human development in any country. Effective reading also measures an individual's performance, competence and astuteness in discharging professional and leadership duties. This implies that young people should be helped to acquire literacy skills that will enable them to progress in studies and, later, in the world of work.

Based on the above premises, any school system that is unable to make those who pass through it functionally literate is a source of concern to the citizenry (Oyetunde and Muodumogu, 1999). The concern expressed in educational circles and in research reports in Nigeria is the inability of the basic education programme to inculcate functional literacy in the learners. The consensus is that an alarmingly high percentage of learners in public schools in Nigeria are unable to read, and those who do read are unable to use reading as a tool for learning, and therefore cannot be said to be strategic in their reading (Muodumogu, 2007, Umolu, 1997; Oyetunde and Umolu, 1991). Oyetunde and Umolu summarize the situation thus;

...primary education, as it is offered in the government schools is failing in its task of equipping children with the needed literacy skills. The vast majority of children who finish from government primary schools are neither literate in English nor in any Nigerian language [...]. Primary education as it now functions, is a disservice to the average Nigerian primary school child, because it gives the false impression that he has been educated, whereas, his education does not make him functionally literate (p.232).

This kind of reading, which results in poor comprehension and underachievement in academics, has been attributed to poor instructional methodologies arising from poor understanding of the nature of reading and the inadequate preparation of teachers in Nigeria (Muodumogu, 2010; Oyetunde and Muodumogu, 1999). It appears as though teacher training programmes do not appreciate the difference between teaching English and teaching reading. As a result, public primary schools in Nigeria do not have reading on their instructional menu. This implies that reading is haphazardly taught, if it is taught at all. It is generally

assumed that reading is “caught” and not taught, and that children learn to read in the course of schooling. Again, teacher education programmes do not emphasize reading. Muodumogu (2010) found that the teacher education programme at the National Certificate in Education (NCE) level, which trains teachers for teaching basic education, does not adequately prepare teachers to teach reading. This is because the reading courses in the curriculum provide language teachers with basic skills in reading, while teachers in the content areas are not taught reading at all. No effort is made to give pre-service teachers direct instruction on teaching reading skills and the methods and strategies of developing them. This negates the submission of Kerlin (1975:13) that the “most important elements in the success of a reading programme is what the teacher brings to it – that is what makes the difference”.

The teacher of reading ought to be academically and professionally competent enough to adopt a balanced approach to the teaching of reading, one that emphasizes the use of differentiated instruction or eclectic methods, depending on the literacy needs of the learners (Farris, Fuhler and Walther, 2004). Allington (2003, cited in Farris et.al, 2004) informs us that teacher trainers should make each comprehension strategy visible to trainees through instructional practices such as modelling, thinking aloud, literature circles and direct and explicit teaching of reading skills, which constitute methodologies that are rich in high quality teacher-to-student and student-to-student talk about texts. Duke and Pearson (2002) further inform us that the overall goal of reading instruction is to teach learners to engage in productive reading behaviours by helping them to acquire the strategies and processes used by good readers. This gives the learners the time and opportunity to read, write and discuss texts. According to Duke and Pearson, good readers:

- Have clear goals in mind when reading,
- Constantly evaluate whether the text, and the learners’ reading of it, is meeting their goals,
- Frequently make prediction about what is to come,
- Construct, revise, and question the meanings they make as they read,
- Determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts,
- Draw from, compare and integrate prior knowledge with materials,
- Monitor their understanding of the text and make adjustments in their reading as necessary.

Cowen (2003) opines that for instructional practice to help students to be good readers, it must be research-based, assessment-based, comprehensive, integrated and dynamic enough to empower teachers to respond to the individually assessed literacy needs of learners. Cohen (2008) adds that it should immerse learners in a variety of authentic reading experiences. When these effective reading behaviours are developed in the learners, the learners are positively pre-disposed to reading and therefore perceive reading as a quest and an expectation for understanding (see also Lewin, 2009).

This paper investigates the reading skills that teachers develop, the methodologies they use and the extent to which the teachers' instructional and assessment approaches address the needs of the diverse learners in terms of meeting the goals of a balanced reading programme. The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent do teachers develop reading skills in the learners?
2. What strategies do teachers use in teaching reading skills?
3. What criteria do the teachers use for selecting reading materials?
4. What strategies do teachers use in assessing learners' comprehension?

## **Methods**

One hundred and sixty three upper Basic Education teachers (junior secondary school 1 to 3 classes) were sampled for the study. The teachers were drawn from schools located in three educational zones (A, B and C) in Benue state. Fifty three teachers were sampled from Zone A, while 55 teachers were selected from Zone B and 55 from Zone C through a random sampling method. Researcher-designed and validated Teachers Reading Methodology Assessment Questionnaire (TRMASQ) was used to collect data. The TRMASQ had two sections: Section A was on Bio-data, while Section B sought information on the reading skills teachers develop, strategies employed in developing the skills, what informs teachers' choice of reading materials and teachers' methods of assessing reading comprehension. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequency, percentage and rank order.

## Results

The data collected were analyzed and presented according to the research questions.

**Research Question 1:** To what extent do teachers develop reading skills?

This question sought to find out the extent to which teachers explicitly teach reading. To do this, some reading skills were listed for the respondents to indicate the extent to which they teach them. Their responses are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of the extent to which reading skills are taught**

Table 1 shows the extent to which the respondents develop reading skills

Reading skills	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remarks
Main idea identification	162	2.3889	.68024	low extent
Summarizing	162	2.1728	.84574	“
Using context to decode meaning of words	162	2.2778	.80565	“
Inferring implied meaning	162	2.1111	.81141	“
Making prediction	162	1.9444	.85065	“
Meaning negotiation	162	2.4444	.76410	“
Text structure awareness	162	2.0617	.85386	“
<b>Grand mean</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>2.2002</b>		

in the learners. Since the mean of the distribution is 2.5, any calculated mean that is greater than 2.5 is considered high extent and any mean less than 2.5 is considered low extent. Table 1 therefore shows that none of the 7 identified reading skills was taught to any reasonable extent. This implies that the teachers involved in the study hardly developed reading skills in the learners.

**Research question 2:** What strategies do teachers use in teaching reading Skills?

**Table 2: Strategies/methods used in teaching reading skills**

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage	Remarks
<b>Guided practice (Scaffolding)</b>	18	5.2	poorly utilized
<b>Shared reading</b>	28	17.3	moderately utilized
<b>Think aloud</b>	10	6.1	poorly utilized
<b>Reading aloud by teacher/ Students</b>	67	41.3	utilized
<b>Explicit discussion of Strategy</b>	19	11.7	moderately utilized
<b>Teacher-student modelling of Strategy /demonstration</b>	12	7.4	poorly utilized
<b>Collaborative use of strategy</b>	9	5.5	poorly utilized
<b>Independent practice</b>	9	5.5	poorly utilized
<b>Total</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>100</b>	

**Decision bench mark:** 40 % and above utilized; 10 – 39 moderately utilized; below 10 poorly utilized.

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of the methods/strategies the respondents use in teaching reading skills. Out of the eight strategies listed, only the ‘read aloud’ method was well utilized by the teachers with a frequency of 67 which represents 41.3% of the sample. Shared reading and explicit discussion were utilized by 28 (17.3%) and 19 (11.7%), while guided practice was utilized by 8 (5.2%) and think aloud by 10 (6.1%) of the teachers. Collaborative use of strategy 9 (5.5), independent practice 9 (5.5%) and teacher and student modelling of strategy 12 (7.4) were poorly utilized. Based on the information in Table 3, it appears that teachers do not utilise research-based instructional strategies that expose learners to viable reading experiences that would move them to independence in reading.

**Research question 3:** What criteria do the teachers use to select reading materials? Part of this research was to establish the criteria teachers use in selecting reading materials for students. This is because learner interest and text readability are critical in selecting reading materials if students are to develop into avid and strategic readers. In order to do this, the respondents were asked to state the factors that informed their choice of texts. Their responses are presented in Table 3 below:

**Table 3: Respondents’ reasons for choice of reading materials**

Reasons	Frequency Out of 162	Percentage (%)	Rank order
Interest	27	16.7	3
Availability	36	22.2	2
Readability	9	5.5	4
Recommended by school	90	55.6	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

The data in Table 3 show that out of the 162 teachers involved in this study, 90 (55.6%) reported that they used a text because it was recommended by the school, 36 (22.2%) respondents said they used a text because it was available while 27 (16.7%) and 9 (5.6%) respondents’ preference for texts is determined by learners’ interest and readability respectively. Since the majority of the respondents’ choice of reading materials was influenced by factors other than learners’ interest in the texts and their ability to read the texts, it appears that teachers are not committed to motivating learners to become avid and engaged readers.

**Research question 4:** What strategies do teachers use in assessing reading comprehension?

This question sought to find out the strategies teachers use in assessing learners’ comprehension of texts. This is because effective teaching and learning lead to better comprehension of texts.

**Table 3 – Strategies used in assessing reading**

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage	Rank order
Dramatization	5	3.0	6
Draw pictures	9	5.6	4
Write story based on the text	25	15.4	2
Link text to experiences (application)	11	6.8	3
Read and answer text-based questions	103	63.6	1
Peer assessment	9	5.6	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>162</b>		<b>100</b>

Table 3 reveals that 103 (63.6%) of the respondents assess reading by directing learners to answer text-based questions without reference

to the comprehension skills being developed. This confirms the finding in Table 1 that teachers do not explicitly teach comprehension skills. The table also shows that 25(15.4%) of the respondents preferred to assess reading by asking learners to write stories based on the text; that is, to use text comprehension to create another text, while 11(6.8%) teachers preferred to ask learners to exhibit their comprehension of the text by linking it to their experiences. Further, 9 respondents (5.6%) preferred to ask learners to make graphic representations of the text (draw pictures) and another 5.6% preferred the peer assessment strategy and went beyond the 'read and answer' text-based questions, to occasionally direct students to comment and critique the written submission of other students. Only 5(3%) teachers occasionally asked students to do a drama sketch of narrative texts.

Since the majority of teachers mainly directed students to answer text-based questions orally or in writing without teacher feedback, it appears that their classroom assessment strategies were not tailored towards diagnostic and formative purposes, and were therefore not seen by the teachers as critical components of effective teaching and learning.

## **Discussion**

The study investigated the methodologies teachers in Benue State, Nigeria use in teaching reading. Specifically, the study tried to establish the following: to what extent the teachers teach comprehension skills; what strategies they use in teaching and assessing reading; and what criteria do they use for recommending reading materials to students?

The findings suggest that teachers do not consciously teach learners how to read. This is evident from the fact that the extent to which they teach reading skills is low. This negates an age old truism that reading is an active process, and therefore the teaching of reading should reflect its active nature. Keen and Zimmerman (1997) inform us that students' comprehension and memory can be improved by teaching them comprehension strategies used by good readers.

However, the findings substantiate the claim by Muodumogu (2010) and Oyetunde and Muodumogu (1999), that the uncritical reading behaviour and underachievement among learners are a result of teachers' poor instructional methodologies arising from inadequate training of teachers. The consequence of this is that reading instruction in Benue State schools is done mostly through reading aloud, and is



characterized by model reading by teachers, explanations of difficult words and students reading aloud in turns. For these teachers, the most innovative approach is that teachers stop occasionally to explain aspects of the passage. Such unproductive methods of teaching reading, especially in the second language situation, de-emphasize the concept of reading as an interactive, purposeful and constructive process of meaning making. As Snow (2007) observes, learning to read in a second language is a difficult task, particularly for children who have limited oral skills in the target language because such learners find it difficult to decode meaning effectively as they have not been empowered to self-monitor their comprehension. Snow further observes that such learners need explicit instruction and teacher guidance, or what Vygotsky (1978) refers to as 'more knowledgeable others' (MKO) to scaffold their learning until they become independent readers. Sadler (2011) underscores the need for learners to be taught how to read if they must achieve sophistication in reading. Therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to ensure that students are provided with instruction in the necessary skills in order to comprehend and analyze what has been read and attain independence in reading.

Basic education teachers in Benue State need to be professionally and academically prepared to be able to develop reading skills in the learners. This presupposes that teacher training programmes should underscore the complexity involved in teaching learners to be strategic and creative, as well as the necessary adaptations teachers must make to deal with this complexity (Duffy, 1993). Duffy further informs us that strategic reading requires strategic teaching, which involves putting teachers in positions where their minds are the most valued educational resources.

This study also shows that teachers do not use worthwhile instructional strategies in the teaching of reading. Table 2 shows that the respondents are not familiar with proven best practices in reading instruction. A total of 67 (41.3%) respondents teach reading using the loud reading method only and neglect other effective instructional strategies (see Table 2). A negligible percentage of the respondents use other strategies. The spin-off of this is that students are made passive learners who are unable to monitor their comprehension and to apply fix-up strategies when comprehension fails. In support of this assertion, Pearson and Gallagher (1983) in Pressley (2002) assert that students' reading can be improved when teachers adopt effective instructional strategies in teaching comprehension. In their view, teachers should use

each strategy with a wide variety of texts and students should practice with a variety of texts. The teacher should encourage a self-regulated use of such strategies by gradually releasing control of the strategies to students. Only 5.2% of respondents in our study used guided practice, while 5.5% used collaborative strategy and 6.1% used think aloud strategies. Duke and Pearson (2002:207) summarize this by saying that “balanced comprehension instruction should include discussions of text processing at a number of levels, from clarifying basic materials stated in the text to drawing interpretation of text material to relating the text to other experiences, and the reading goals”. The reading comprehension instruction model proposed by Duke and Pearson (2002), among others, emphasizes explicit discussion of each strategy, and when and how it should be used.

The findings in Table 2 also are also counter to Pressley’s (2002) submission that the meaning of a text is socially constructed when readers of the text talk about it. Therefore, one mechanism for increasing active reading in children is to engage them in conversations about the text they are reading. Yet teachers under investigation minimally used discussion (11.7%)

This study also reveals that teachers do not consider learners’ interests and readability levels in choosing reading materials. Most of the respondents used recommended texts regardless of whether these texts satisfied the learners’ needs or not. This promotes the reluctant reading syndrome in the learners because research indicates that when learners have a variety of books that are not only interesting to them but are also of the appropriate reading levels, such learners are motivated to read. Muodumogu (2007) found that students read voraciously, purposefully and strategically if provided with adequate time and access to personally engaging and interesting materials that meet their reading needs.

Fink (2006) did a study on successful men and women who had struggled with severe reading problems as children, and yet succeeded in professions that demand extensive reading. Not only did the participants become avid readers later in life, but they also became highly skilled readers who understand complex and sophisticated texts and read for personal and professional purposes. Fink attributes this transformation to interest-driven and interest-based models of reading. Each participant in the study “had a burning desire to know more about a favourite topic. Spurred by their passion and curiosity, they read voraciously...” (p.8).

They “engaged in intense and repeated reading about a single, favourite topic, which enhanced their depth of background knowledge and simultaneously enabled them to gain reading practice” (p.9). Worthy and Mckols (1990) reiterate that the interestingness of materials may be the biggest factor in learners’ motivation to read.

Another finding of this study is that teachers’ assessment practices do not drive instruction. For instance, the majority of the teachers’ (103, or 63.6%) mode of assessment is to direct learners to read and answer text-based comprehension questions, many of which are lower order questions. Asking only lower order questions results in underdeveloped reasoning skills. Therefore, teachers’ assessment practices seem not to measure complex skills of reading comprehension, and are therefore unable to diagnose learners’ reading problems.

Teachers’ assessment of reading should move from asking lower order questions and assigning scores, to measuring comprehension and monitoring the strategies of learners. El-Dinary (2002:210) suggests that teachers of reading should take up the challenge of developing, “practical assessment that is compatible with the goals of transactional strategies of instruction, tapping thinking processes rather than just factual products of comprehension”. Assessment strategies which have these characteristics drive instruction because they make learners’ strengths and weaknesses visible to the teacher.

In this study, teachers failed to teach or show students skills and strategies needed to read and comprehend both factual and informational texts. They also lacked knowledge of assessment strategies that measure those skills.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The biggest challenge facing the basic education programme in Nigeria is how to make learners functionally literate. To overcome this challenge, teachers’ instructional practices must address reading skills and the strategies that enhance achievement in comprehension and how to develop the said skills in the learners using proven methods and strategies. The findings of this study, however, indicate that teachers do not teach learners comprehension skills, nor do they adopt research-based reading instructional and assessment strategies. If the teacher training programme in Nigeria is repositioned to prepare teachers to face the complexities of teaching reading, then they would be academically and professionally competent to guide learners to overcome their reading

problems.

Based on the findings of this study, we make the following recommendations:

The teacher education programme for basic education teachers should be strengthened to make teachers from all disciplines into conscientious, diligent and highly professional instructors of reading. If students are taught to become independent and creative readers at the basic education level, they would be able to read effectively at higher levels. Workshops on best assessment and instructional practices should be organized for teachers in order for them to learn to best assist students enhance their comprehension of texts. Such workshops would also enable teachers to understand the concept of instruction - driven assessments that would uncover learners' strengths, and weaknesses and guide teachers to design instruction that would address their learning needs.

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