



The Relationship between Reading and Second Language Learning

Joana Chinedu IKpenwa

Department of Languages, School of General Studies, Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Anambra state, Nigeria

Corresponding Author's email: ugomikky824me@gmail.com

Abstract

Language is an essential component of communication skills which allows people to interact successfully in their environment. Reading as one of the four language skills facilitates the comprehension of various texts as well as their context and inference. Reading ability is critical for improving one's general literacy. That is to say that reading improves one's vocabulary, speech, analysis and communication. On the other hand, second language is the language a child learns after he has acquired his first language (mother tongue). In Nigeria, English language is the second language and official language which is used as the language of instruction from upper primary school to the university. It is also the language of politics, religion, commerce, administration, sports and the language used to conduct the activities of the national and state assemblies. This paper therefore explores the interconnectedness of reading and second language learning, highlighting the bidirectional relationship between the two.

Keywords: Reading, Second language learning, Language acquisition, Literacy development, Reciprocal relationships.

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Introduction

The relationship between reading and second language learning is a complex and reciprocal one. Reading is a crucial skill for second language learners, as it provides access to a wide range of language inputs, vocabulary and grammatical structures. Moreover, reading comprehension is a critical component of language proficiency, enabling learners to understand and interpret various texts, including academic, professional and social materials. In Nigeria where English language is the second language, the ability to read equips the learners to read and enjoy literature in English and other books related to other school subjects. According to Williams (1990: 19), reading provides most of vicarious experience for second language learning. On the other hand, second language learning also influences reading development. As learners acquire a new language, they must also learn to read in that language, which requires developing new skills, such as decoding, fluency and vocabulary recognition. Furthermore, reading in a second language can enhance language proficiency, improving vocabulary acquisition and foster a deeper understanding of cultural contexts.

The interplay between reading and second language is bidirectional:

- Reading skills enhance language proficiency.
- Language proficiency improves reading comprehension.

This reciprocal relationship highlights the importance of integrating reading instruction into second language learning and vice versa. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of reading and second language learning, educators can design more effective instructional approaches that foster both language proficiency and reading skills development.

First Language

Language is a preeminently characteristics of human activity. Language is a means of understanding ourselves and our society and of resolving some of the problems and tensions that arise from human interaction Crystal (1985:9). Again, language is so natural to man that one cannot imagine human existence without a language. Nobody is born with the ability to speak a particular language. Rather, man is born into a language system according to his destiny. Therefore, the first language of a child is the language he learns from birth or his early childhood.

It can also be called the child's native language or mother tongue (MT). Typically, he learns this language from his immediate environment. It is the language that is acquired naturally without formal instruction and it is often the language that is most deeply ingrained and instinctive.

A new born baby communicates his feeling through cry and gestures. As he grows, he gets accustomed to the sounds people around him make as they try to communicate with him. After a while, he is able to discriminate the aural laments and before long, he has started imitating such sounds and is able to associate them with certain concepts. In this way, the child learns the language of his immediate environment. He learns to share his views and feelings with other members of linguistic community. In other words a child first language is typically:

- The language spoken by his family and caregivers.
- The language used in his daily life and interactions.
- The language he uses to think, dream and express himself.
- The language that is mostly closed tied to his identity, culture and emotions.
- Based on the afore mentioned functions, language is culturally transmitted. It is an integral part of culture, reflection of many features of a given culture. Akindele and Adegbite (1995).

Second language

A second language (L2) is a language a person learns in addition to his first languages (L1) or native language. It is a language that is not naturally acquired just as the first language, but instead, it is learned through formal education, self-study, or exposure. Second language can occur in various contexts such as:

- Foreign language learning: That is learning a language that is not commonly spoken in one's country or region.
- Second language acquisition: Learning a language that is widely spoken in one's country or region, but it is not learner's native language.
- Heritage language learning: This means learning a language that is a part of one's cultural heritage or family background.

- Language immersion: This is learning a language by being immersed in an environment where the language is spoken.

In Nigeria context, English language is being regarded as the second language as well as the official language. According to Akindele and Adegbite (1999:61),

English language performs a vital function of accommodation, participation and for social mobility. According to them, English language accommodates people of various cultures in multilingual societies of Africa and links them with the international communities. It is also used as the language of international politics which allows Nigeria to participate effectively in the activities of some international organizations such as commonwealth, African union (AU) and numerous others.

English language serves as the only acceptable communicative medium between different ethnic groups. In education, it is the medium of instruction in higher learning. English language is the language of politics and economic activities of the country. Therefore, everybody in the country deems it very necessary to acquire English language in order to function properly in the environment. Because of this, there are a lot of problems which emerge in the process of learning this language. This paper therefore, views the significant relationship between reading and second language learning to decode skills that are essential for reading in a second language.

Literature Review

Reading proficiency is the way to knowledge. It is very vital to the success of all academic subjects. Currently, learning largely depends upon people's ability to interpret written materials, both printed and screen based correctly and accurately. Reading is a process of decoding those materials and gaining meaning from them, then applying them to daily living. It has been proved that the more one reads, the more he acquires knowledge. Reading often relieves emotional tension and gives insight into personal problems. Reading provides experiences through which an individual may develop his horizons, identify his interest and gain deeper understanding of himself and other human beings around him and the world at large.

According to Ruth strong et al (1967:26), reading takes out our country and ourselves. Reading is act of decoding the act of a writer. As the writer creates a situation of thought so that the reader

creates the pattern of words and discovers for himself the essence of the author’s idea. In any literate society, it is not easy to find any skilled work that does not require reading skill. In fact, for one to function actively in the society he requires reading skill, According to Terry O Thomson, reading is “The interpretation of printed or written symbols into speech of mental equivalent as an unifying force rendering to unite social group by providing common vicarious experiences and by cultivating common attitudes, ideas, interest and aspiration. Reading materials such as literary works, magazines and books help the learner to gather information and knowledge.

“Active reading requires a lot of mental activities. It involves much more than looking at the literal meaning of words” Ekpunobi (1997:38). Derivation of meaning from the text is fundamental to many tasks in reading. For learning to occur, learners must know the purpose of reading; is to construct meaning and to adapt reading behavior to specific task. Research reveals that successful learners tend to relate information in texts to previous knowledge, while less successful learners showed little tendency to use their knowledge to clarify the text at hand. It is also discovered that readers tend to use the most effective strategy that leads to a thorough processing of the text while bad readers do not.

Furthermore, reading involves using strategies or approaches to texts to meet certain goal. More so, active reading involves thinking about what is read rather than simply trying to memorize the content. When one reads actively, it is with a view to understand and relate the information to other readings, ideas and teams from lectures. Active reading involves thinking as one reads and directing his thoughts to achieve certain goals.

The difference between thoughtful purpose readers and mindless readers as stated by Knuth and Jones (1991.3) are stated below.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POOR READERS	CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL READERS
Thinking-understanding occurs from getting the words right: rereading	Understand that they must take responsibility for constructing meaning using their prior knowledge
Use strategies such as rote memorization rehearsal, simple categorization	Develop a repertoire of reading strategies, organizational patterns and genre
Are poor strategy user: They do not think strategically about how to read something or solve a problem	Are good strategy users; They think strategically, plan, monitor their comprehension and revise their strategies

ii. they do not have an accurate sense of when they have good comprehension readiness for assessment	ii. They have strategies for what to do when they do not know what to do
Have relatively low self-esteem	Have self-confidence that they are effective learners: See themselves as agents able to actualize their potentials
See success and failure as the result of luck or teacher bias	See success as the result of hard work and efficient thinking

Knuth and Jones (1991:3)

From the above table, we can see that reading cannot be separated from thinking, successful reading requires asking questions at deeper levels and also thinking deeply. It has observed that if one asks only basic questions, he thinks only basically and therefore becomes a poor reader.

Theoretical framework

According to Lev Vygotsky's theory: Sociocultural theory, cognitive development is influenced by cultural and social factors. The theory comprises of concepts such as cultural specific tools, private speech and the zone of proximal development. According to this theory, language does not only supports writing and reading but also thinking and reasoning. This means that active reading involves thinking about what is read rather than simply trying to memorize it. That is to say, thinking is aimed at mainly constructing a comprehension of the text by finding information related to one's goals. Hence, it has been observed that purposeful reading involves some conscious attention to written messages, extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible. It thus helps to eliminate the wasteful and mindless repetition that is necessitated by forgetting what one has read. This approach helps one in selecting information relevant to a purpose. It also ensures better results. According to Obah and Otagburuagu (1992:10), success in reading entails one knowing why he is reading and particularly what one gets from the text. Therefore, purposeful reading enables one to go beyond the bare minimum and engages in the materials in a way which arouses his interest and curiosity. It helps a person to be flexible in his approach to different kinds of materials for different purposes.

The Relationship Between Reading and the Second Language Learning.

The significant relationship between reading and second language include:

- Decoding skills are essential for reading in a second language, but the student's native language can affect their ability to decode words in the second language.
- Orthographic mapping, which is the brain's ability to recognize familiar patterns in words, can be affected by the student's native language.
- Bilingual students can use the same orthographic mapping process for both languages, but the language of instruction can affect the ability to do so.
- Skills used for reading in a student's native language can transfer to reading in a second language.

Based on the above relationship between reading and second language learning, there is a need for a learner to be structured to a content-based language teaching in order to promote the development of general second language skills. Whereby each content will illustrate a different balance between content area and second language learning outcomes. Continuous reading of numerous content-based texts will help the learner have more insights in any related text he comes across in the future. Researchers in reading process postulated that information is stored in a long-term memory. In learning to read, the new information is linked to previous knowledge about the topics. This method will help a reader learn how to decode words instantly and effortlessly from a reading passage. Thus, Knuth and Jones (1991) agreed that,

Comprehension results from an interaction among the reader, the strategies the reader employs, the materials being read and the content in which reading takes place (2).

In learning to read in a second language, context has been shown to have a powerful effect on student's comprehension of words and sentences. Context is useful in resolving ambiguity and in suggesting a possible meaning when a word is unknown to the reader. Furthermore, context helps to accelerate reading as well as fluency with text which also enhances comprehension and higher order thinking. It has also been observed that majority of new words that a learner learned are done by encountering those words in context, reading enormously is therefore paramount for the learner to increase his vocabulary and then learn the language better.

Furthermore, it has been observed that good decoders read a lot of books and have the best context available, a great reading volume and build up lots of vocabulary. Reading volume

contributes to the development of other aspects of verbal intelligence and it also facilitates growth in comprehension ability. The volumes of materials learners read, determine to what extent they will succeed in mastering the language. Generally, it is agreed that reading a lot of materials is very important in language learning. However, the emphasis is on materials the learner can easily understand at a given time must be put into consideration. In other words, the comprehension ability and reading volume are in a reciprocal relationship. The thought process also plays an essential role in understanding any passage, therefore, it is required that successful readers should think constructively as they read, the faster one thinks, the better he comprehends and greater volume he reads.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between reading and second language learning is intricate and mutually reinforcing. Reading plays a vital role in second language acquisition, as it exposes learners to a wide range of language inputs, vocabulary and grammatical structures. Conversely, second language learning influences reading development, requiring learners to acquire new skills and strategies to read effectively in the target language.

The theoretical framework and research studies highlighted in this review demonstrate the interconnectedness of reading and the second language learning. By acknowledging this relationship, educators can design instructional approaches that integrate reading and language learning, fostering both language proficiency and reading skills development.

Ultimately, the synergy between reading and second language learning has significant implications for language teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive approach that addresses both language and literacy development. By recognizing the reciprocal relationship between reading and second language learning, educators can provide learners with a strong foundation for language proficiency, literacy development and lifelong learning.

Implications

- Reading instruction should be integrated into second language teaching.
- Authentic materials and texts should be used to promote reading and language learning.
- Learner's critical thinking and comprehension should be developed and emphasis should be laid on vocabulary acquisition and linguistic knowledge.
- Learner's should be encouraged to be involved in extensive reading, and pleasure reading, however, learners individual differences and learning styles must not be overlooked.

Suggestions

- Educators should implement content-based instruction and task- based language teaching.
- Learners should be given opportunities to engage in reading and writing activities.
- Government should make available technology and multimedia resources to enhance reading experiences.
- Teachers of second language should be given opportunities for professional development to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching reading and second language learning.

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