

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF DISCUSSION METHOD ON NIGERIA'S JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Rashida Umar

Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin Kebbi, Nigeria.

Aisha Abdullahi Ibrahim

Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, Faculty of Education and Extension, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

Abstract

The discussion method is an instructional teaching method that utilises guided interaction to highlight a particular subject matter to facilitate the student. It is generally assessed as a successful teaching method that enhances learning through collaboration and gives students room to develop their communication, men, and critical thinking skills. Through applying Social Constructivism, a classical learning theory developed by Vygotsky (1968), we explored the impact of the discussion method on Nigeria's junior secondary school students' reading comprehension. Our findings reveal that an understanding of reading comprehension should be based on the social constructivist nature of reading. Teachers must be responsible enough to carry out their duties in the class, and motivation is central in inculcating knowledge in students. We recommend that Nigerian teachers consider students' learning environment, cultures, and social experiences and tailor their lessons to accommodate these factors.

Keywords: Discussion Method, Reading Comprehension, Social Constructivism, Nigeria, Junior Secondary Schools

1. Introduction

Reading can be seen as an "interactive" process between a reader and a text. To learn how to read, learners must constantly engage their reading materials, rehearse the words to decipher their meaning, and invest time to achieve reading fluency. The above fact means that reading exercise is not as simple as some learners thought. Before a learner becomes a fluent reader, the learner will have to undergo constant practice and revision. Since reading is a complex process, Alyousef (2016, p. 379) argues that to examine the technicalities of reading exercise, researchers need to analyse the reading process "into a set of component skills." Learning to read and comprehend meaning is not an easy task; it is challenging; however, the learning outcome is satisfying and productive (McLaughlin, 2012).

To effectively teach reading comprehension to students, teachers should begin by acknowledging the social nature and processes of learning and adopt appropriate teaching

methods that align with the social nature and functions. Education scholars argue that learning occurs when new information is integrated with what is already known; the more prior knowledge and experience readers have with a particular topic, the easier it is for them to connect what they are learning and what they know (Anderson, 2019). The literature on social constructivism also suggests that teachers should utilise instructional conversations and assisted learning models to guide and empower learners in schools and classrooms. The utilisation or adoption of group discussions among students will help them collaborate with their peers in class and co-create knowledge among themselves (Akpan et al., 2020).

Drawing from Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory, this paper argues that Language is an essential element in teaching and learning, but human experiences and social interactions enhance effective learning. Thus, since lessons are interpreted and understood by students' experiences and interactions within a

cultural setting, learners construct knowledge through active participation. The paper is organised into five sections, including the introduction. Section two reviews the literature on social constructivism, discussion method and reading comprehension. Section three discusses the methodology employed in this paper. The fourth section introduces the results and discussion of the significant findings. Finally, section five concludes the article.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Constructivism

According to the social constructivism theory, collaborative learning theory, education and learning are not specific and limited to the purview of the interaction between a teacher and a student alone. Instead, learning is a social phenomenon. It is more ingrained and influential when teachers allow their students to interact within their circle of peers and enquire and explore what they know and did not know among themselves (Vygotsky, 1968). In simple terms, Akpan et al. (2020, p. 49) define social constructivism theory as an "active participation" of learners among themselves (with little support from their teachers) with a view of creating or constructing knowledge through "enquiry and discovery." Social constructivism began with the developmental work of Jean Piaget (1896-1980); it was propounded by Lev Vygotsky in 1968 and later developed by many education and psychology scholars, such as Carl Bereiter, among others.

The basic tenants of social constructivism rest on three main prisms: First, Language is a social activity; and an essential element in teaching and learning. Second, effective learning is enhanced by human experiences and social interactions. Third, since it takes a group of people to communicate through Language and construct cognitive structures, knowledge is a socially constructed phenomenon. Social constructivism does not undermine the power of student-teacher interaction; it does not undermine the authority of classroom lessons either. On the contrary, the founding fathers of this model recognised the influence of teachers. Still, they also realised that Language, culture, and human experiences are the frameworks humans make sense of learning

concepts (Vygotsky, 1968). Thus, Akpan et al. (2020) argue that in the real world— not just in classroom situations—social interaction between groups of people plays a significant role in shaping an individual's learning and comprehension. This fact mentioned is why it is logical to argue, according to the constructivists, that knowledge is constructed (by learners through active participation and collaboration).

Since it stresses the need for social engagements with peers in the school environment, social constructivists' scholars suggest that teachers adopt "assisted discovery learning" to enhance students' interaction, knowledge sharing, and social discovery (Omrord, 2007). Teachers' use of "assisted discovery learning" entails applying specific teaching methods, such as whole-class discussion, small group discussion method among students, or grouping students together to collaborate in completing a class assignment. These teaching strategies "allows for a range of groupings and interactive methods" (Akpan et al., 2020, p. 51).

In Nigeria, for example, where teaching facilities and infrastructures are scarce, teachers can guide their students on how to read and comprehend what they read through the discussion method, allowing the students to read passages, deliberate on them, and ask questions among themselves. Such learning strategies can give students the freedom to read, make mistakes, and learn from their peers; it allows them to brainstorm, share ideas, discover cause and effect, or create something new to add to existing knowledge" (Akpan et al., 2020, p. 51). However, while social constructivism is an essential learning model, the theory is not limited. For one thing, the learning model has not factored the analysis of learner's behaviour in its explanation since learning takes place with the acquisition of new behaviour (Barash, 2005). Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, the theory makes an intuitive sense; it emphasises the need for providing opportunities for young students to participate in the learning process and co-create knowledge among themselves, their teachers, and other elements of teaching and learning processes.

2.2 The Effectiveness of Discussion Method in Teaching Reading Comprehension to Junior

Secondary School Students

Educational scholars have generally agreed that reading comprehension is a difficult task; it comprises different complicated exercises for learners, such as cognitive, linguistic, and socio-cultural variables (Alenizi, 2019; Ismail & Tawalbeh, 2015). Therefore, there is a need for effective teaching methods to promote adequate reading comprehension among junior secondary school students to prepare them for the future. The fact mentioned earlier is why Alghonaim (2020) has urged teachers to use valuable reading techniques and methods to promote reading efficiency and critical thinking skills. Alghonaim's suggestion is consistent with the views of many educators who have prioritised the value of both the instructional materials and teaching methods in classroom education. In simple terms, teaching methods consist of instructors' strategies to deliver their subject matter to the students (Dorgu, 2015).

For junior-level students learning reading comprehension, it is more crucial for teachers to apply suitable teaching methods to help those students understand the intricacies of reading—how words are structured and constructed, the pronunciation of words, the meaning of texts, etc. In addition, professional instructors should understand that since learning is socially constructed, education is, therefore, co-created by learners. Thus, any teaching methods that do not leverage learners' social interaction, environment, and culture may not succeed in aiding students to understand their lessons in the classroom (Kapur, 2018). The views mentioned earlier presented by different scholars have contributed to the literature on teaching methods and reading comprehension, but most scholarly views are general and random. For instance, Kapur (2018) and Alghonaim (2020) have made a case for the need for instructors to capitalise on adequate methods that facilitates learning. Still, they do not point out specific teaching methods that will be effective for learners. Unfortunately, the views of these scholars are valid. Still, they do not enrich the understanding of the essential question in the study: Which teaching methods are most suitable for teaching reading comprehension? How best should teachers use such techniques and strategies to enhance the reading comprehension of junior

secondary school students in Third World countries like Nigeria?

A narrow, more specific approach to what teaching method is most appropriate is absent in the literature. It would make a teacher lose hope after he spends all his time teaching students, but they all seem not to comprehend what he taught them. It would make English as a second language (EFL) students run away from the reading class, knowing that they could not comprehend the complex exercise of reading English texts because the teachers' methods do not align with their cultures and experiences. The thrust of the current paper is the most appropriate method for teaching reading comprehension to junior secondary school students in the discussion method. Omwirhiren (2015) defines the discussion method as a "method that utilises guided interaction to highlight a particular subject matter," aiming to enhance students' learning process. It takes the form of debate, think-pair-share, role play, brainstorming, field trip and other socially interactive forms of teaching/learning. This teaching method encourages critical thinking, research, speaking and listening skills, and evaluating other people's opinions. Although the discussion method is time-consuming, Jegede (2010) argues that it enhances learning by giving students room to interact and develop their communication skills, reflective thinking and evaluation.

The discussion method is appropriate for teaching reading comprehension in the classroom (Hein, 2019). For example, by applying the discussion method, both the teacher and students can exchange ideas about a chosen topic and negotiate what stories or passages to read. After an agreement has been reached, the teacher guides the reading discussion while all students air their views on the reading material. Rules are established from the beginning to avoid rowdiness in the class. Kelly (2012) argues that the discussion method also promotes democratic thinking among students as they freely share their ideas and challenge each other to arrive at a consensus. By so doing, the students develop reflective thinking skills, which help them to analyse and understand issues deeply.

2.3 Teaching Students How to Read: The Role of a Teacher

There is a consensus among scholars in the education literature and teaching and learning, in particular, about a teacher's role in imparting reading comprehension in students. Even though learning is a by-product of social experiences and interaction between students, many scholars argue that a student needs a teacher to guide their behaviour and learning outcomes in the social learning process (Akpan et al., 2020; Mohamad & Romli, 2021). The explanation above implies that teachers should adopt learner-centred teaching methods, such as discussion. Since the learner-centred approach focuses more on the students than the teacher (Akpan et al., 2020), when teachers focus on students, they will get the opportunity to express themselves and share their experiences with their peers. Students will also develop their ideas, questions, definitions and make-ups.

Teachers who use collaborative learning and teaching approaches will emphasise learning through social interaction—by making students work in groups to solve problems, investigate and explore topics/situations to arrive at conclusions. For instance, Kelly (2018) and Akpan et al. (2020) have reiterated the impact of teachers' guidance in helping students better interact in groups as they explore their class lessons. Fortunately, the views of these scholars are valid. They help enrich the essential question in the study—the teacher's role in assisting students in learning in class. Mohamad and Romli (2021) claim that the teachers encourage students to develop and use their initiatives, discourage rote learning and passivity. These developments have implications in teaching and learning, and they serve as an addition to essential concepts in education, such as scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The latter is the level of development of a person under the guidance of older people or peers; the former entails the assistance given to the student (completely then gradually reduced) so that the student can perform a task on their own (Slavin, 2019).

However, the teacher must play their part well to ensure effective teaching and reading in all of these. When teachers play their role, they will help students learn better and faster. This is because the students will no longer sit down to be

informed or loaded by the teacher but discover lesson contents by themselves as they respond to the teacher's promptings by giving them questions, assignments, and project works. The implication of this in education is that the students become co-custodian of knowledge as they share and build on their previous experiences to create new knowledge.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This paper uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as its research design. In simple terms, SLR as a research method connotes a process for identifying relevant research materials and analysing data from the researched materials (Snyder, 2019). A systematic review aims to identify all empirical evidence that fits the pre-specified inclusion criteria to answer a particular research question or hypothesis. Moher et al. (2009) argue that researchers minimise bias when employing the SLR technique.

3.2 Literature Search

The literature search was conducted using the Joana Briggs Institute's (JBI) format. The investigation was completed in December 2021; the researcher uses Sage's and the Ahmadu Bello University's subscriptions to access the following databases: Education Resources InformationCentre (ERIC), PsycINFO, Scopus and Taylor and Francis. These databases were searched for articles published between 2010 and 2021. The subject and keyword searches were conducted in three parts.

1. Discussion method and its cognate terms: "Discussion method" OR "What is discussion method" OR "Discussion methods" OR "discussion method" OR "teaching strategies" OR "Group discussions" OR "Group discussion among students" OR "Instructional conversations" OR "Learning in groups" OR "Group assignment" AND

2. Reading comprehension and its cognate terms: "Reading OR learning how to read" OR "Reading comprehension" OR teaching how to read_ ORcompelling reading strategies_ OR teaching junior secondary students how to read" AND

3. Social constructivism and its impact on teaching and learning: "Social Constructivism Theory OR Social Constructivism OR Social Constructivists

OR Social Constructivist Learning Approach."

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The current study uses (a) peer-reviewed English articles that were published within the last 11 years (2010-2021) and (b) articles that are available in full text. Studies included in the final analysis were original research articles that focused on the effectiveness of the discussion method on reading comprehension through the

perspective of social constructivism theory.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the reviewed articles revealed three significant themes: an understanding that comprehension should be based on the social constructivist nature of reading, demonstration of responsibilities on the part of teachers, and motivation to facilitate student learning, as illustrated in table 1.

Table 1: Emerging themes in the literature on reading and social constructivism

Themes	Authors	Year
Reading as a social construction	Harris and Hodges	2015
Teachers must be conscious in their teaching practices	International Reading Association	2000
Motivation encourages learning	Gambrell	2016

4.1 An Understanding of Comprehension should be based on the Social Constructivist Nature of Reading

Today's reading researchers suggest that comprehension is a multifaceted process. Factors such as constructivist beliefs, influential teachers, active readers, text, and type of instruction play essential roles in constructing meaning. The above factors markedly changed from the 1970s when Durkin (1978) reported that little comprehension instruction occurred in classrooms. In current thinking, Harris and Hodges (2015, p. 39) suggest that reading comprehension is viewed as:

Meaning resides in the intentional problem-solving, thinking processes of the interpreter... and the message so constructed by the receiver may or may not be congruent with the message sent.

Many junior secondary school students would do better in terms of engagement with reading texts and storytelling if they were allowed to engage with their peers in a discussion method in the class. This view is in line with many studies in the literature on the subject. According to Kapur (2018), professional teachers must be conscious of the social nature of the learning process. The truth of the matter is that learning is a phenomenon that

both the teachers and students create; therefore, only teachers that adopt the proper teaching methods that leverage students' discussion among themselves can effectively inculcate learning in students.

4.2 Teachers Must Take Charge

Studies on reading comprehension and social constructivism suggest that teachers must become influential because they are highly valued participants in the reading process. For example, the International Reading Association (2000) reported that:

The teacher's role in the reading process is to create experiences and environments that introduce, nurture, or extend students' abilities to engage with the text.

This finding, which reveals that teachers must be responsible in their roles in the classroom, coincides with learners' experiences in reading classes. Teachers must understand that, in classroom situations, they are more than just there to teach; they are there to help, support, and transform their student's behaviour, which is why they need to take charge and act responsibly in class. This view is congruent with many studies in the literature on the subject. Teachers should adopt the instructional conversation method because it

promotes democratic thinking among students and utilises guided interaction to stimulate learning (Kelly, 2012; Omwirhiren, 2015).

4.3 Motivation Facilitates Learning

Motivation is a critical factor in incomprehension. Highly motivated readers read for a wide variety of reasons, including curiosity, involvement, social interchange, and emotional satisfaction. For example, Gambrell (2016, p. 20) suggested that:

Classroom cultures that foster reading motivation are characterised by a teacher who is a reading model, a book-rich classroom environment, opportunities for choice, familiarity with books, and literacy-related incentives that reflect the value of reading.

The finding of Grambell above reveals that teacher motivation encourages learning and coincides with learners' experiences in reading classes. Many junior secondary schools in Nigeria prefer to engage with positive teachers and have the courage to push them beyond their comfort zone. According to Baker et al. (2016), since reading is a complex exercise, teachers should persevere in engaging readers to transact with texts and construct understandings based on connections between prior knowledge and new information. This fact could be achieved through group discussions and professional development

guidance because when readers are engaged, they will "participate in meaningful social interactions around reading" (Baker et al., 2016, p. 453).

Conclusion

This paper explores the effectiveness of teaching reading comprehension to junior secondary school students in Nigeria through the social constructivists' perspective. As clearly explained in the preceding sections of the paper, reading is an energy-intensive and challenging subject; therefore, teachers need to adopt the correct teaching methods to ease the reading process among students. However, a teacher does not only group students together and leave them to deal with lesson materials on their own; when adopting the discussion method, the teacher should act as a facilitator and guide the students throughout their discussion.

Furthermore, Nigerian teachers should view learning as a social phenomenon and allow students to construct their learning rather than teach concepts and many reading topics. In other words, Nigerian teachers should consider students' learning environment, cultures, and social experiences and tailor their lessons to accommodate these factors. In the end, teaching a concept or a topic is all about resonating with learners as classroom lessons are interpreted and understood by students' experiences and interactions within a cultural setting

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