REVISITING READING: A VERITABLE CATALYST FOR SOCIETAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
Reading is a veritable catalyst for achieving societal growth and development. It is the bedrock for a truly great democratic, politically united, economically prosperous and socially organized country. No nation of the world attains any form of development when its people are not literate. This paper defines reading as the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It underscored the importance of reading in societal growth and development. The paper discussed the paradigm shift in reading in 21st Century networked society. It highlighted the constraints for the development of reading culture such as absence of school libraries, lack of conducive and stimulating environment, radical change in value system, harsh economy and high cost of books. Major strategies for the development of reading culture including initiation of family literacy programme, early introduction of children to reading, subsidization of book publishing, promotion of reading culture by libraries and librarians among others were discussed. The paper urged librarians, parents, teachers, publishers and government agencies to work together to build a virile reading nation. It recommends the implementation of the UNESCO minimum benchmark of twenty-six percentage of a country's national budgets for education and adequate funding of educational sector by all tiers of government which will help to promote reading culture.

Key words: Reading, Reading culture, National development, Nigeria

Introduction

Reading is the bedrock for a truly great democratic, politically united, economically prosperous and socially organized country with equal opportunity for all. A reading nation is a leading nation. This is true because reading is a veritable catalyst for individual and national development. Reading is the purveyor of knowledge and ideas that rule the world. Regular reading and thorough examination of the existing knowledge births great discoveries, inventions and innovations which are indispensible to sustainable national development. Busari, Folorunso and Folarin (2025) stressed that a nation with a poor reading culture and low level of literacy cannot develop significantly. Robinson and Good (1998:iv) describes reading as:

> *"the key which admits us to the whole world of thought and fancy and imagination, to the company of saint and sage, of the wisest and wittiest moment that enables us to see with the keenest eye, hear with the finest ears, and listen to the sweetest voices of all times".*

What is Reading?

Anderson, et al (1985:7) authors of Becoming a Nation of Readers defined reading as "the process of constructing meaning from written texts," and noted that, "it is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information" . This definition is as true today as it has ever been. It also emphasizes the role of the reader in reading. Reading is a skill, which must be consciously developed and nurtured Karfa, B.M.; Ibrahim, G.; Ibrahim, D.M. (*2023)* According to Ogunbodede and Sawyerr-George. (2023:1) "reading refers to a person's capacity to recognize letters and symbols and derive meaning from them". However, Biogera and Utami (2024:81) opined that "reading is a complex cognitive process of decoding symbols in order to construct or derive meaning (reading comprehension)". The RAND Reading Study Group (2002:11) also defined reading as "the process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language". They proposed that reading comprehension occurs through interactions among the reader, the text, the activity, and the larger sociocultural context. We therefore conclude that reading is socially, culturally, and historically rooted. These definitions also point out the fact that reading is a process. It is a process that entails the understanding or interpreting the meaning of written or printed words or symbols (Obanya, 2001).

Reading process according to Oyediran-Tidings and Anasi (2013) commences from understanding of words and continues until themes are ultimately formed (Figure 1). Therefore, the ability to understand words is very fundamental to attaining literacy proficiency.

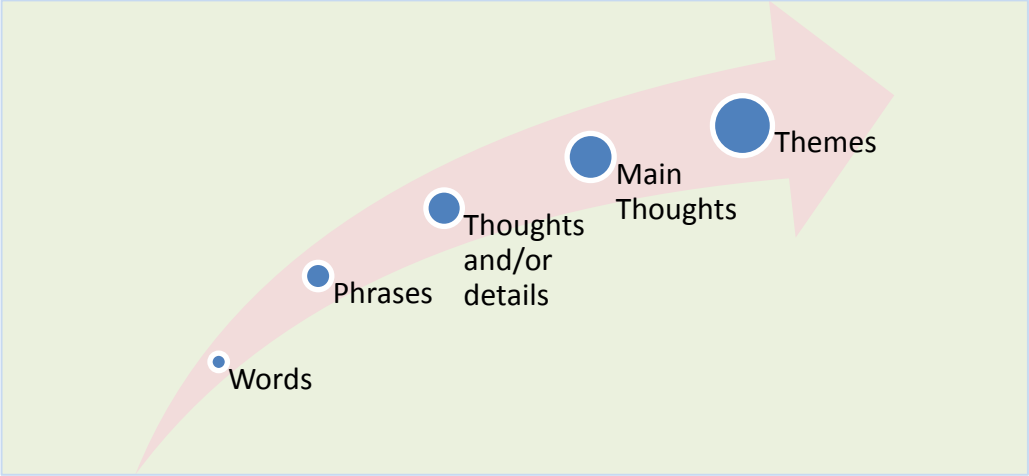


Figure 1: Reading Process

Source: Oyediran-Tidings and Anasi (2013)

Do Nigerians Read?

Nigeria is one of the countries in the world with the lowest reading culture (Pulse Nigeria, 2024). The World Culture Score Index (a survey on hours of reading per week per person) shows that India is leading in reading culture with a score of 10.42 hours per week, followed by Thailand with 09.24 hours and China eight hours. Only two African countries of Egypt and South Africa were listed in the survey, with Nigeria not being listed at all (Agbakwuru, 2017).

Statistics from the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education shows that 38 per cent of Nigerians are illiterates as four in ten primary school children cannot read for comprehension (The Guardian, 2018). While China has a 96.4% literacy rate, Nigeria has about 62% literacy rate. Nigeria is home to the highest number of out-of-school children (Kazeem, 2018). In 2017, 10.5 million of the 20 million children who were out-of-school worldwide were from Nigeria (Umoru, 2017). There is also a disparity between literacy for women

and men. While 7 in 10 men can read, only half of women can do so. According to Sotiloye and Bodunde (2018:288) "the average Nigerian reads less than one book per year and only one percent of successful men and women in Nigeria read one non-fiction book per month". The stark truth according to Busari, Folorunso and Folarin (2025) is that the culture of reading among Nigerians is poor and that the literacy level generally in the country is equally low. Butressing this view, Akinfenwa (2019) stated that in the world, Nigeria is one of the countries with lowest reading culture, because 38% of Nigerians cannot read, while 4 out of 10 primary school pupils lack effective reading skills.

Reading in the 21st Century Networked Society

The advent of information and communication technologies has heralded a paradigm shift in reading. Biogera and Utami (2024) observed that the Internet is one of the most fascinating phenomena that have revolutionized the cultural, social, economic life including reading in a dramatic way. Bana (2020) examined how students perceive the use of the Internet to foster a love of reading. The findings revealed that the Internet had positively influenced students' reading habits, and they considered the Internet as their primary source of information for completing their homework. Loan (2012) also showed that the Internet has pervasive impact on reading practices all over the world. It has broadened the scope of reading sources. Now a reader has to select from a wide range of sources which include web pages, e-books, e-journals, e-papers, e-newspapers, e- magazines, e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs, wikis, and other multimedia documents (Loan, 2012).

Increasingly, the 21st Century has witnessed a drastic change in reading platforms. In the networked society, reading is no longer confined to the print reading (Loan, 2012). The screen-based reading behavior has emerged. Isik (2023) observed that reading is not only done on paper but also on the screens of many different technological devices such as computers, tablets, smart phones and so on. The screen-based reading behavior is characterized by more time on browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, non-linear reading, and more reading selectively; while less time is spent on in-depth reading and concentrated reading, and sustained attention is decreasing. In today's information-intensive environment, reading or browsing the websites, audiobooks, e-books, and even social media platforms is becoming a popular reading pattern (Spjeldnæs and Karlsen (2022)

Doiron (2011) stressed that reading material is evolving into new formats. E-readers and e-reading apps such as Kindle created by Amazon, the Nook developed by Barnes and Noble, Kobo is an e-reader produced by Toronto-based Kobo Incorporated, Apple's iPad tablet computer, Sony's Reader are gradually becoming popular(Cull, 2011). Google also provides access to volumes of full pages of digitized books that are out of copyright or the copyright owner has given them permission. Similarly, page turning software like the innovative PageSuite software that delivers exceptional clarity with zoom capability, enhanced with page view, content search, offline usage, social networking and email tools was launched since 2006.

The Role of Reading in Societal Growth and Development

Reading is a veritable catalyst for achieving societal growth and development. No nation of the world attains any form of development when its people are not literate. Nations are built and developed through knowledge; and all forms of knowledge are acquired through education. Reading is not only a basic tool for education, it is crucial to being able to take part in society. In fact, people need to understand and act on textual information to fully participate in society as citizens, employees or consumers (Dewan, 2016). Reading in all its variety is vital to being better informed and having a better understanding (Jegbefume, et al, 2017). An illiterate society is no doubt a limited society. But a highly intelligent and informed society is "the watershed for progressive and innovative ideas which is capable of transforming the entire society for growth and development. The ability to read is an act capable of transforming life and society. No society and nation can dream of meaningful development if its citizens cannot read" (Jegbefume, et al, 2017, p.68).

Reading and information are fundamental ingredients for national development (Tella and Akande 2007; Uhegbu 2007). It is the foundation of national transformation and development. Reading is the catalyst for the achievement of national development plans as spelt out in the National Policy of Education (2004:7), which aims at:

- The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
- The inculcation of the right type of values and attitude for the survival of individuals and the Nigerian society;

- The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around; and
- The acquisition of appropriate skills and development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his society.

The strongest building block in societal development and nation building is literacy. There is also a strong link between reading culture and national development and the pace of development in any nation is determined by the pace of reading culture imbibed by its citizens. Fabunmi (2011) also observes that reading is an indispensable element in the task of nation building. Igwe (2011) opines that leading nations do not only pride themselves in the promotion of reading but see a high level of literacy as a major source of their competitiveness. Supporting this assertion, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study reported that "per capita incomes are higher in countries with larger proportions of adults at the highest levels of literacy" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013a:26). Dewan (2016) maintains that:

> creating a more literate population has a direct impact on poverty reduction, standard of living, labour productivity, unemployment reduction, political participation, social and cultural engagement and social justice. Indeed, the well-being of society depends upon the literacy of its citizens. By helping people become more literate, we reduce barriers to a full functioning society. Literacy, as studies have shown, is the lynchpin and cornerstone of a thriving society.

Constraints to the Development of Reading Culture in Nigeria

A number of factors hinder the development of reading culture in Nigeria. Some of the major constraints are:

Absence of school libraries

Reading culture is acquired early in life. Formal reading in particular is developed at the school age. At this formative stage, school libraries are expected to lay the foundation of reading culture and stimulate reading skills of children (Esan, 2022). In Nigeria, this is hampered by the absence

of school libraries and the deplorable state of the ones available (Esan, 2022). Most schools rarely have functional school libraries. Anasi and Nwalo (2012) reported that in Lagos State most public schools do not have school libraries. Karfa.; Ibrahim and Ibrahim (*2023)* observed that in Nigeria very few schools can boast of functional libraries and in a situation where a library exists, they are poorly organized, ill-equipped, managed by unqualified personnel and do not satisfy any purpose.

Lack of Conducive and Stimulating Environment

Owolabi and Okebukola (2009) stated that "reading requires a stimulating environment to arouse and enhance interaction with the print, symbols and ideas presented". A stimulating environment is an enabling environment for active learning rather than the passive learning. This is absent in most schools and homes in Nigeria. According to Aina, et al (2011) an environment that does not encourage reading make young people to spend more time with their friends than to remain at home reading.

Radical Change in Value system

Nigerian value system has changed drastically, hence, we are now in an era where people and especially youths, not only worship money but can sacrifice all things at the altar of money. Rich people are being celebrated in our society by both young and old, nobody seems to care about their source of wealth. Today, most teenagers instead of laying foundation for a bright future through pursuit of knowledge are rather obsessed with getting rich at all cost(Odunewu and Odeyemi, 2019). They would prefer to cheat in examination, pay for "expo" and special centres during external exams such as WASCE/NECO or buy fake certificate that they can never defend than to burn midnight candle. Many of them are always seeking to become millionaire through electronic fraudulent transactions. Reading, to them is an old way of life. Nobel Laureates, University dons and scholars are no longer the role model for students, football stars, rastafarians, musicians are their heroes.

Lack of Reading Culture

Historically, Nigeria, like most African society, is an oral society which lacks reading culture (Ike, 1998, Mulindwa, 2001). According to Ike (1998):

"Nigeria does not have a reading culture. We are reminded that our ancestors had an oral tradition. A change from the oral culture to the book culture would require a process of sustained conditioning to open up the consciousness to appreciate the indispensability of books to our overall mental wellbeing and turn us into book lovers" (Ike, 1998:2, cited in Jegede,2010:1).

A paper presented on reading habits promotion in the Association of South- East Asian Nations (ASEAN) libraries by Sangkeo (1999) indicated that Africans are not a reading society but a chatting society. He reported that people would rather converse than read and that traditional educators were great narrators of stories which are accompanied with dramatization and demonstrations. In many African countries studies conducted by researchers also expressed concern about the lack of reading culture in Eastern, Southern and Western Africa (Rosenberg, 2003; Magara and Batambuze, 2005; Commeyras and Mazile, 2011). In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, most people have little access to books and other information resources and without adequate access, the development of reading culture will be a daydream. This challenge is fundamental as children and adults according to Makotsi (2005) need access to a wide range of reading materials to help them acquire and maintain fluent reading skills, broader horizon and be able to think independently and critically. Hence, the importance of literacy not only in Africa but worldwide cannot be over stressed.

Technological Distraction

In 21st century information technology has intruded into the way of life and has impaired the culture of reading. It is common place to hear of "Black Berry generation" "Face Book generation" or "Millennium generation". It is a generation that is shifting from the "old" orders to a new order of gross aversion to reading. The advent of home videos and entertainment media, online games, Naira Bet and other sports betting has diverted the attention of youths and children away from reading. Today, young people spend their time browsing all night on internet enabled phone, watching TV all day long, connecting with every celebrity, uploading meaningless videos recorded by their restless fingers on Youtube, posting every photograph they take on Flicker, pinging their life away on Blackberry, always busy on Yahoo and other sites or registering their presence on every available social network sites (Ambali, 2013).

The social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, telegram, palmchat, WhatsApp and other social media sites have brought about shift in concentration from the reading pattern adapted from the inception of civilization to technology freaked society (Kolajo and Agbetuyi, 2021). A study conducted by Akidi, Agbese and Chukwueke (2021) affirmed that the negative influence of the use of the Internet outweighs its positive influence on the reading culture of students. Another study by Idachaba, Eruvwe and Ureki (2021) also reported that real-time chatting, watching of movies, listening to music, and the use of social media affect reading culture in Nigeria.

Harsh Economy and High Cost of Books

The current economic recession in Nigeria and the rising cost of books and other information resources is also another constraint to the development of reading culture. The harsh economy makes it increasingly difficult for many parents to cater for their children's book need even at primary school level (Omole and Ladan, 2011). Reports by global development institutions show that Nigeria is the poverty capital of the world after recently overtaking India (Kazeem, 2018). The report also indicated that over 86.9 million people living in extreme poverty (Kazeem, 2018). Poverty has not only prevented children from enrolling in school but also made reading materials to those who have enrolled too expensive. The increasing cost of publishing makes it difficult for school children to have access to books and other reading materials (Sanders, 2007).

Strategies for Promoting Reading Culture

The challenges posed by the foregoing factors should lead to the development of workable strategies to develop a reading culture that will promote national development. The strategies are well articulated taking into consideration the current trends and the need to use creative and innovative approaches to promote reading culture. The following strategies, among others are considered relevant.

Initiation of Family Literacy Programme

Family literacy is a powerful way to support parents with few skills and show them how they can support their children to become confident and effective communicators (National Literacy Trust, 2011). Family literacy according to National Literacy Trust (2011) is "any programme or initiative that aims to work through parents to improve the reading and writing of their children.

For instance, in 2001 the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) indicated that in Sweden the amount of books and reading material in a family was the deciding factor influencing the reading scores of pupils (Stiftung Lesen, 2004:56). Another study of the German Foundation Stiftung Lesen on "Reading Behaviour in Germany in the new century" showed that the positive attitude of parents and the availability of reading materials at home are important factors in creating positive lifelong reading motivation in children (Stiftung Lesen, 2004:30). Parents, therefore, need to acquire skills to inculcate reading culture to their children.

Early Introduction of Children to Reading

Reading culture can be inculcated early in life if parents and teachers begin to read story and picture books with the children. According to Busari, Folorunso and Folarin (2025) pre-reading skills are first inculcated in the children by their parents, especially literate parents. Parents should promote reading culture creatively by reading story books aloud, creating a learning environment by setting up a home library, and visiting libraries and bookshops with their children (Sangkeo, 1999). Spending time to read books with the children is the pathway to literacy. Busari, Folorunso and Folarin (2025) emphasized that parents should stock their homes with books with pictures, story books, preprimer and reading materials that can thrill the children at home in line with the principle of 'catching them young'. Supporting this view, Redford (2011) stated that the most effective strategy to develop reading culture is to introduce books to the children at an early stage in life. When a strong foundation is laid both in the school and at home by the teachers and parents, the nation will surely metamorphose into a reading society. Rosenberg (2003) also opined that reading should be promoted as a pleasurable activity, which means that pupils must start to read for fun and not just because they have to prepare for examination. Teachers also should teach reading regularly and systematically and time allotted for reading on the school timetable (Nnam, 2003).

Promotion of reading culture by Libraries and Librarians

No institutions are better situated than libraries to champion the promotion of reading culture. Libraries and librarians should create a more robust culture of reading by promoting it as a desirable activity. Libraries need to market the experience of reading, transforming their promotions from a book-centred model (with information about the authors, genres and awards) to a reader-focused one (Van Riel, et al, 2008).

To promote the culture of reading librarians need to attract readers with enticing book displays, bookmarks and booklists which will assist readers in finding the book they need. Incorporating into the library building features such as cafes, vending machines, reading rooms with comfortable chairs and popular reading collections will also help attract readers and make reading an enjoyable library experience (Dewan, 2010).

Book Fair and Exhibition

Book sellers can partner with school librarians and teachers to organize book fairs, exhibitions and book talks. These can be carried out in the school environment where pupils and teachers will be exposed to a variety of learning resources. Book exhibitions and fairs are part of marketing and promotional strategies and should be used to stimulate reading culture among school children.

Subsidization of Book Publishing

The cost of publishing books is soaring higher every day. This is exacerbated by epileptic power supply and high tariff placed on imported printing materials such as ink, plates, papers, films, boards and acquisition of machineries. To promote reading culture, the Federal Government should subsidize the publishing of books and reduce import duties on publishing materials. This will stimulate local publishing of culturally suitable books for children, prevent cultural imperialism and also promote our cultural heritage (Elley, 2001).

Uninterrupted Power supply

The engine of life the world over is constant power supply. In Nigeria, electricity supply is still at its lowest ebb. For a country that requires at least 100,000 MW, all she can generate is between 3,000MW and 4,000MW (USAID, 2019). Access to and reading of online resources is impossible without electricity. In fact, reading in the e-environment depends on adequate power supply.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper underscored the importance of reading in societal growth and development. The constraints for the development of reading culture were highlighted. The strategies for the

development of reading culture were discussed. Librarians, parents, teachers, publishers and government agencies should work together to build a virile reading nation.

To promote the act of reading, government and non- governmental agencies should invest heavily in the development of school and public libraries. The UNESCO minimum benchmark of twenty-six percentage of a country's national budgets for education should be implemented and the funds should be properly utilized. Adequate funding of educational sector by all tiers of government will impact positively on libraries which is a veritable catalyst for the development of reading culture. Government should also tackle the problem of epileptic power supply frontally.

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