



## ADVANCED STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION AMONG OPEN DISTANCE LEARNERS

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### Abstract

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Reading is a mandatory requirement for academic success. It is the tool through which knowledge is passed to the faculty of the brain for further usage. This paper is of the opinion that reading as an important part of educational acquisition has been ignored from the angle of less attention paid to essential strategies for boosting reading comprehension. It recognizes that the lack of reading enthusiasm among University, college and school students is partly because of the non-knowledge of reading comprehension strategies. Some of the reasons advanced for this fault bordered on the non-inclusion of reading comprehension strategies in the school curriculum; such that the teacher resigns his teaching topic only to reading and answering passage reflected questions. The paper is specifically tailored to address the reading comprehension requirements of the Open Distance Learners (ODL); who would mandatorily do independent reading throughout their programmes of study. The task would be easier if the ODL students and others learn and master these reading comprehension strategies. This paper recommends analogy, reading and reasoning, note taking and notation and others as some of the strategic measures that could boost and equip the ODL students to handle independent reading of selected course materials, especially those at the undergraduate level. The paper concludes that the ODL students could advance their reading comprehension capabilities and success by adopting these advanced strategies.

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**Keywords:** *Reading, comprehension, open distance learner, strategies, inference.*

## **Introduction**

The then governor of the State of Texas and later president of the United States of America (George W. Bush) once charged Texans to pay undivided attention to the most basic of education goals — teaching all children to read” (Texas Reading Initiative 2000). This points to the fact that reading is fundamental to the process of educational acquisitions - an indispensable requirement in an academic pursuit. Reading is an important aspect of learning enhancement which instructors and learners have always ignored or taken for granted. This implies that both parties consider it as something that is automatic; like seeing, speaking, walking and sleeping as among toddlers. Whereas all these are innately imbued and achievable tasks by human, reading must be learned as any other subject of language studies for maximal performance. As a final year law student of the ODL programme, it is clear that even the current distance learning technologies, which are supposed to help the ODL participants minimise reading and comprehension difficulties are not available. In cases where these technologies are available, lack of electricity or constant electricity outage constitutes serious setback.

## **The Reading Malady among Readers**

It is obvious that learning reading experiences of the child-learner in majority of schools' language curriculum preclude the teaching of reading comprehension techniques. This could be due to curriculum limitations. The language curriculum does not include the specific and fundamental instructional techniques for instructing the learner, apart from the *read-answer* approach. The damage done to reading comprehension as a result of this regrettable negligence is yet to be identified by educational practitioners. This non-recognition and negligence escalate and consolidate the addictive concept among most learners that the act of reading does not require learning. Indeed, this is damaging and undermines the reading and comprehension capability of learners because comprehension is unachievable without reading. Floyd (1985) agreed that “barriers of understanding may occur when you lack the necessary or appropriate experiences....” Williams (1990) also held that learning approaches in the classroom should include reading strategies for different purposes. This lack of the necessary reading and comprehension skills affects mostly the independent reader, who may not have had the opportunity of instruction on reading comprehension. The Open Distance Learners fall into this category. Many learners in this

category are faced with reading problems ranging from the lack of knowledge of the dynamics of vocabulary, meaning differentials, inability to identify various syntactic constructs and their structural implications to comprehending the intended message of a text. All these are capable of constituting barriers to the expected success of the Open Distance Learners (ODL). This reading comprehension challenge, due to students not conversant with the relevant reading strategies, may be overcome by the advanced learners in the ODL programme, but not the majority of the undergraduate students. The academic danger which the lack of knowledge of the strategies for reading comprehension may pose for the open distance learning participants have not been given considerable attention. No matter the course type into which the Open Distance Learners is enrolled, reading lesson should take preeminence in the learning process. The ability of a learner to recognise the phonic implications of words or capture non-complex meanings in a text material may not be reliable indications of developed reading capacity. It requires strategies, that must be learned and mastered; without which the virtues of comprehension may elude the learner.

### **Preparing to begin Reading**

Before engaging the course textual material, the ODL participants should prepare their mind-sets prior to beginning the reading. Primarily, it must be borne in mind that the reading task about to be undertaken is for academic purpose, and not for pleasure. The implication of this is that attention must be paid to details, stress, and mechanics of the grammar among others. Besides, it must be remembered that there should be some level of critical involvement in the reading task. This means that the reader must avoid being a docile reader who accepts all facts without examining them. The same level of skill and zest must be accorded to whatever reading materials that are assigned by the open distance instructor. Muller (2003) agreed that some good strategies to note while beginning reading is to read the author's biographical note, draw some inferences from the title/subtitles of the text, etc. On criticality of the reader, he interestingly instructed as follow:

Preparation for reading also means understanding that you bring your own knowledge, opinions, experiences, and attitudes to the text. You are not an empty

glass to be filled with the knowledge and opinions of the author, but rather a learner who can bring to bear, your own reflections on what you read, even if you think your knowledge is minimal.

But how can a reader examine the selected textual facts in the course materials? This would require the student taking note of facts which need confirmation and expansion. They can then be cross-checked in other text materials. This research-like task opens another door for new knowledge acquisition and authentication of those facts in the reading materials.

### **Reading and Reasoning**

The strategy of reading and at the same time reasoning what has been read is a skill which comes only by development. It is like praying and discussing with someone simultaneously. Commonly, the one praying may not wish to talk because that is conceived as a distraction. But it is possible to do the two tasks concurrently and achieve commendable results. We should bear in mind that reasoning is a subject of the mind while reading is mainly coordinated by the brain. The major task of the reader in this regard is to coordinate this composite task. Most readers have the habit of following the thoughts of an author without reasoning the facts that have been read. Again, Muller (2003) opined thus in this regard:

Often we do not know just how much ability we have in thinking about a topic until we actively respond to what others confront us with in their writing.... Reading frees up your ability to express your own opinions. For this reason, most English [language] teachers look upon reading as a two-way process: an exchange between writer and reader.

One way to do this is not to lump the two tasks together in one act, but to apportion each task (i.e. reading/ reasoning) to its co- coordinator- the brain or mind. Remember that this composite task may not be achieved with good results, where one of the co-ordinates is redundant or dominant. Let us consider some practical ways through which this strategy can be used by the

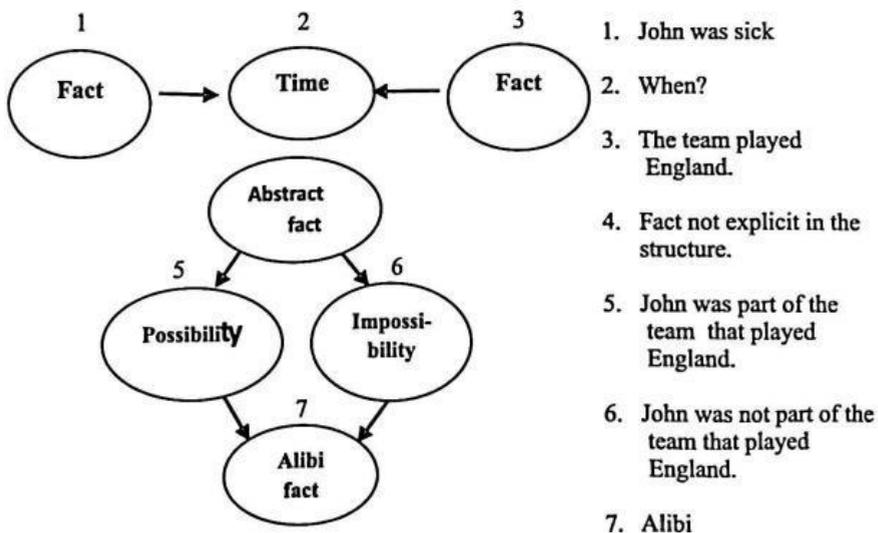
reader, particularly the open distance learning participants, who should be able to read and reason independently.

### Deciphering Associative Sentences

In this type of sentence, the reader is saddled with the task of discovering the possible implications associated with grammatical expressions. Whereas the reader is not expressly required to do this, it is an unavoidable duty which a reader must fulfill in order to achieve the meaning of an expression. Put in another way, the reader would have to read beyond the lines or between them. Now let us consider the sentence example below:

John was sick when the team played England.

This sentence is a conjunct set construction; although, *when* in the construct is a time adverb, which also joins the clauses: 'John was sick' and 'the team played England'. The reader's ability to decipher the semantic values of the structure in order to unveil the meanings which it intends to convey is a task of the *mind*. It takes the mind to think or reason what the writer actually means beyond the meaning which the syntactic structure commonly inputs. Here *when* is the key player. Consider the schema below:



The facts above show that reasoning what has been read from the assigned reading material is very important; without which the student will not comprehend or come to terms with all that the structure is designed to convey.

### Analogy

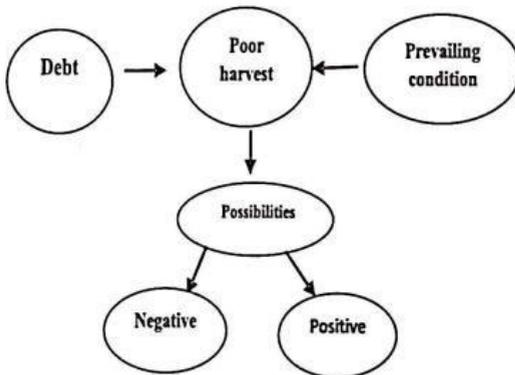
The skill of analogy is an indispensable stratagem in reading comprehension. This reading ploy draws comparisons in order to arrive at a conclusive answer. The reader may logically reason thus:

If **A.** is \_\_\_\_\_  
**B.** is \_\_\_\_\_ because of A's condition.

Let us consider the dialogue and diagram below

**Peter:** Pay the money you owe me.

**John:** This year's harvest was poor. Analogy-John may not be able to pay the debt, or he may not be able to pay all that he owes.



- a. Based on John's claim, the reader would make assumption based on comparing the obligation to pay and the prevailing condition of the debtor.
- b. Will Mrs. D. pay the debt, reschedule it, pay some or fully?

### Note-taking and Annotation

For the independent reading, which the Open Distance learner would do all through the period of his/her programme, note-taking and annotation are very good strategies for comprehension enhancement of assigned study materials. Note-taking entails noting or writing down relevant points that are contained in the study material. The reader takes note of the main ideas of the text in a separate notebook or piece of paper. This note is only a sketchy

outline of the main and probably sub-ideas of the topic, which should not include examples, illustrations, etc. Inclusion of the latter could make the note-taking bogus and complex. This strategy saves the reader's time which may be spent to read the entire text, especially in heat periods such as examinations. Memorisation is easier to achieve with note-taking. Muller (2003) confirmed that making an outline of the text material makes the main ideas readily available and the overcoming of forgetfulness of the relevant text information.

On the other hand, annotation does not require noting facts on a separate writing material; rather, it is the act of underlining a relevant fact, or indicating symbols such as question mark, asterisk etc. in the text material as a measure to enable the reader remember, where in the text, the main point or a fact he considers relevant is located. Without this device, it may be impossible for the reader to recall all the main or relevant facts and their locations in the text. It is advised that very brief notes could be made in the blank area close to the marked or underlined lines of writing. The underlined facts can be compiled according to chapter heading for the purpose of making a summary note of the text material. In the words of Muller (2003) annotation surpasses underlining and highlighting, because one could forget their relevance. He noted that drawing attention to a fact is not enough, without a personal note, since the accomplishment of learning is achieved by "restating of ideas in your own words".

### **Inference Capacity**

The ability of a reader to build and sustain inference capacity of a select reading material is a boost to comprehension. This strategy requires that the reader makes conclusion on issues whose facts are not obviously stated but insinuated. Let us consider the sentence below:

John was spoon-fed by his parents.

What conclusion or inference could be drawn from this statement?

- i. John's laziness results from this fact.
- ii. John has no initiative capacity.
- iii. John's arrogance stems from this upbringing.

The reader should be able to arrive at an inference by considering the textual

context. This inference capacity enhances the reader's ability to resolve statement of ambiguity which may be encountered during independent reading. Littel (1992) stated that:

You are making an inference when you draw a conclusion based on your observations or prior knowledge of the world. For example, if you read in a short story that a character wakes up in the morning and sees that the street is wet, you infer that it rained even though the writer didn't say so.

A reader must develop and maintain the ability to identify facts that are not obviously mentioned in the text. This is important because the author may not have mentioned obviously all the facts of his/her text.

Lack of this ability deprives the reader of all the facts, explicit and implicit, which he/her should comprehend.

### **Following-up Research**

For the open distance learners, having read an assigned course text material may not enable the production of impressive answers to an instructor's expectation. After all, the course material may not have full details, but some summarised discourse, in which case the open and distance learner may be required to make further research. While it is true that some course instructors may want the students to restrict their answers to the selected course material, others in good practice of scholarship award more marks to the students who have given more points related to the topic and question.

Manzo (quoted in Tierney, R. J. & Readence, J. E. 2000), suggests that a reader could engage in acts that may enable the application and verification of the information gained from reading. This, he opined, may lead to evaluation and further discussion. The ultimate value of this is that it is an advantage for the Open Distance learner to read other materials related to the course text. This equals what happens in a face-to-face tutorial. The instructor apart from relating the details in the course content may sometimes include or mention out of text examples or facts related to the lesson being taught. By attempting further reading, the Open Distance learners involuntarily fill this lacuna.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that the act of reading for academic purpose requires more than the target to pass examination. The open distance learners who would have to do self-reading and learning, need to develop strategic skills, for better reading capacity and comprehension. These strategic skills of note taking and annotation, inference, research etc. should range from the time of beginning reading and through the course. The open distance learners should adopt strategies such as note-taking and annotation, analogy among others. These strategies, if adopted, can enable some elevated reading and comprehension capabilities necessary for successful programme tenure.

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