Fictional Stories: The Learning Strategy to Mitigate the Challenges of Reading Comprehension for University Students

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ABSTRACT
Reading comprehension is the ability to understand a text, decode and infer its meaning according to reader's level of comprehension. Similarly, reading is the ability to deduce, critique and construct the attributes of a text. Hence, reading and reading comprehension are intertwined and embedded as a skill to analyse the meaning of the text in general and synthesise the interpretation of your own understanding of a particular text. Despite this prerequisite skill, there are challenges that impede reading comprehension, and as a result, the paper intimates these challenges of reading comprehension using critical theory as a conceptual framework. It further employs participatory action research as a technique whereby co-researchers were purposively sampled and interviewed in a free attitudinal interview. Equally, the results are analysed using critical discourse analysis, where it is established that lack of collaborative learning, exposure to informational text, students' prior knowledge and punctuation marks are the core attributes of the challenges of reading comprehension. In brief, the paper contends that the use of fictional stories as a learning strategy can enhance the reading comprehension of first-year students.
KEYWORDS
Reading comprehension; reading; collaborative learning; informational text; challenges.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Countries pride themselves with their high rate of literacy and numeracy and the steady growth in which these skills are emerging grants every nation the opportunity to grow economically. Therefore, the significance of these skills cannot be negated but rather under-emphasized because the population prone to literacy and numeracy has the propensity to solve socio-economic challenges compared to the less literate one. This contention is endorsed by Zua (2021) who purported that the most literate nations like Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark have the greatest and impeccable skills to solve their domestic challenges and affairs. In addition, the highly literate nations can be measured against the degree and extent to which their Human Development Index develops (Max, 2014). Notwithstanding these benefits, Africa, in general, is confronted with the challenges of literacy (UNESCO, 2019) and South Africa is not immune to these devastating ripple effects of illiteracy.

As a result, Wilfred (2017) depicted oblique margins of reading literacy in the South African context, whereby the reports inferred that, on average; a grade four (4) learner cannot read for meaning. This infers that our learners do not have the requisite skills of reading comprehension and they cannot read for meaning; hence the former is the ability to discern, deduce and interpret the meaning of the text (Graves et al., 1998), while the latter is the ability to understand the text and infer its main idea (Klapwijk, 2016). Now, the primary objective of having these abilities is to demonstrate the levels of literacy among our nation and be able to aptly solve socio-economic challenges as there is a direct proportion between the high levels of literacy and socio-economic factors. This notion is contended by McGarvey (2007) when argued that the propensity of people who are not educated or literate to be unemployed is higher than those who are educated and literate. Hence, literacy and education directly impact our economic trajectory and development.

Equally, Gruenbaum (2012) asserted that the poor state of literacy is largely attributed to insufficient reading skills. This implies that the failure of a nation to address reading skills and abilities shall have a negative ripple effect on its economic development and thus perpetuates the entrenched socio-economic challenges such as poverty, crime and unemployment. Lind (2011) conceded that poverty and illiteracy are intertwined and irreversibly dire in our political-economic dimension, and this impact shall delay the attainment of the National Development Plan forecasted to be completed and achieved in 2030 with sustainable development. In contrast, reading skills cannot be expeditiously attained if reading comprehension challenges are not addressed. Hence, this paper aims to identify the challenges of reading comprehension by using fictional stories (FS) as a learning strategy to enhance first-year university students' reading comprehension (RC).

Research Questions

The paper aims to identify the challenges of reading comprehension by proposing the use of fictional stories as a learning strategy. This aim is achieved under the auspices of the following research question and objective.

- How can fictional stories be used to minimise the challenges of reading comprehension?
- Its objective is to determine the challenges of reading comprehension for first-year students using academic and fictional texts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Amid the aim and objective of the paper, this section critically discusses the relevant literature on the use of FS to enhance RC. To begin with, the literature review is the general view of the research title and/or topic and seeks to provide relevant, significant and empirical answers to the research title/or topic (Alexiades, 1996). The significance of a literature review is to establish the organisation, the evaluation and the synthesis of the study to provide critical thinking to the reader (Antshel et al., 2014; Johnson, 2020). Moreover, the literature review provides an executive summary of scientific facts that depict the authors' knowledge and understanding of phenomena, constructs and theories (Alvin, 2016); hence this section focuses on the aforementioned objective.

The Use of BICS and CALP in the Context of Reading Comprehension

The dutiful task of informational disseminators (lecturers, facilitators and teachers) is to ascertain that collaborative learning (CL) is not only effectively implemented but is incorporated and intertwined into Basic Interpersonal Communicational Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in order to fuel RC skills. Cummins (1981, 1991, as cited in Taboada and Rutherford, 2011), distinguishes between BICS as the basic interpersonal communication skills used in our social interaction and CALP as the cognitive academic language proficiency, which is a literacy-related skill for academic writing, vocabulary, presenting and speaking. As such, the requisite for merging CALP, BICS and CL into FS constitute the crucial aspect of accomplishing RC. According to Howie et al (2017), universities' solution and accomplishments rely on using CALP – the literacy-related skill for academic writing, RC, presenting and speaking. This was endorsed by Bailey and Heritage (2014) that academic language (CALP) is distinct from the social dialect used in universities because CALP contains the skills of synchronisation of ideas, syntax, semantics, comprehension, deduction and decoding. Secondly, this premise suffices the requisite to implement collaborative learning (CL) to the latter because CL improves students' communicative skills as they will have to converse in the medium of instruction (Molotja & Themane, 2018).

This implementation improves students' RC skills since the medium of instruction contains similar principles of fluency and fluency in English, which can increase students' RC

skills, and serves as a critical vehicle for academic success. Furthermore, CL, as conceded by Molotja and Themane (2018), has the advantages of students exchanging ideas, completing tasks in time, establishing sustainable friendships and sharing knowledge. This infers that mutual understanding is attained as a result of CL and thus, creates significant opportunities for students to acquire RC skills. Initially, it was depicted that ineffective implementation of CL can deter RC. The crux of FS features pertinently on CL as one would recall that FS presents diverse fictional content comprising fantasy and generalisation, which will require students to transfer such fantasy and generalisation into RC and real-world knowledge.

As a result, a direct correlation is established between CL and FS as the former emotionally and socially challenges students, ultimately enabling them to establish a conceptual framework of ideas and textual meaning (Molotja & Themane, 2018). In contrast, the latter challenges students cognitively and abstractly to formulate ideas from fiction into RC and real-world knowledge (Walker et al., 2015). So, the implications of espousing CL into FS as a learning strategy to enhance RC is that students will be afforded the opportunity to simultaneously (1) learn and have comprehension, (2) establish friendships primarily to exchange ideas and knowledge while learning, and RC takes place cumulatively, (3) to instil conceptualisation presented by FS for them to debate, establish and distinguish fiction from facts and lastly, (4) to have a common understanding on how fictional content influences factual content and thus, ultimately having a holistic universal view of the reading.

Reading Engagement and Motivation

It was initially alluded that one of the deterrents of RC can be attributed to the lack of reading engagement and motivation that students are anticipated to possess. Hence, according to Alexiades (1996), an ample output of scholarly research does regard intrinsic motivation as a dominant impact on RC, especially when students read for internal reasons such as to address a certain level of inquisitive, curiosity, interest and for fun. This premise emphasises the necessity to equip our students with reading engagement and motivation, which according to the bulk of research (Alvin 2016; Antshel et al., 2014; Rosenbaum, 2016), can be solicited from the use of FS, as fiction has a solution to provide students with a significant level of motivation, interest, pleasure and engagement. Although fictional materials contain enormous fallacy and pretence, students have the potential to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Barness & Bloom, 2014), which can be attributed to the propensity to acquire and attain reading engagement and motivation because these two concepts cannot be achieved insofar as RC is not achieved.

Furthermore, reading engagement is defined as the combination of motivation and cognitive processes that occur during the reading process (Williams, 2013). By analysis of this definition, there is a blatant suggestion that RC can be achieved and readily available during the reading process. In contrast, readers need to master ninety-eight per cent of the fictional text in order to achieve effective RC (Biesta, 2010), meaning that an individual student needs to have a combination of motivation and cognitive processes incessantly sustained if one has

to master this percentage. However, fictional materials hinder and impact a reader's interests adversely if that interest is directed on insignificant content material which cannot add insightful value to the students' knowledge (Campbell, 2014). In addition, the use of fictional materials does not necessarily mean that students will definitely have an interest, since these materials differ in terms of the quality of content, degree of complication and logic (Bronner & Kellner, 1989). However, these submissions do not disregard and dissent the use of FS for enhancing RC since FS can be resourceful in assisting students to be critical viewers and readers insofar as they are concerned. In a nutshell, the use of FS can really enhance RC because the catalyst to this process is reading engagement and motivation that can be found from using FS.

Students' Achievement

It is evident that the majority of students no longer have a keen interest in reading fiction (Garro, 2016) and this has an adverse impact on the RC, as there is a distinction between reading for fun and reading for understanding. According to Cohen et al. (2011), reading fiction assists students in enhancing their vocabulary, fluency and moral choices. This influence from fiction results from characters' role, actions, and abilities to make decisions. Therefore, this infers that students' achievements in their academic work will have a positive impact as they gain a range of skills in terms of reading, decision making, problem-solving and expanding their vocabulary. Furthermore, students' achievements are ignited and encouraged by developing eReaders or eBooks to motivate fictional reading (Guthrie, 2003). This inculcates the culture of reading for fun and reading with comprehension so far as fiction is concerned. It is also indicative that reading fiction enables students to have a significant vocabulary that will enable them to consider their actions, ponder about the consequences, compare the pros and cons before taking hasty decisions and eliminate or elude sources of problems.

Fiction reading has the propensity to release people from the complexities and challenges of life and negate the fictional world with fascinating imaginations that trigger fun, interest and emphasis (Heuman, 2014). The relaxed and subdued mind can forecast the future, and weigh the dynamics of life without any interferences or distractors; hence fiction reading significantly benefits students' achievement. However, some challenges prevent people from reading fiction, such as the lack of interest, finding it difficult to read, outdoor activities, social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) and television. Despite these obstacles, eReading can change students' perspectives and mentality as there are many programmes and online applications such as M-Reader and Cahoot, among other things, which seem to function effectively. Therefore, these programmes can greatly benefit students' achievement as their critical thinking and writing skills could be enhanced.

In concise, the solutions mentioned above can significantly bring stability and enhance RC if the implementation of reading fiction can be executed to the latter. This implementation means considering the students' achievement, ascertaining reading engagement and motivation subsistence and imparting the skills of BICS and CALP. If these can be done

accurately, the challenges of RC can be history and the determinants of such history depend on the implementation of these factors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper aims to identify the challenges of reading comprehension by proposing the use of fictional stories as a learning strategy. Therefore, this aim is achieved by the pertinent use of the theoretical framework, the theoretical framework can be defined as the designed plan or guide that serves as the basis for inquiry of study and its main purpose is to review and interpret the conceptual elements which originate from the existing theory (Adom et al, 2018). Hence, the designed plan provides the significant direction of the study as to what it entails in terms of its aim, objectives and goals.

This designed plan is well compared to Howie et al. (2017) as the map the traveller uses to reach their final destinations. As a result, this comparison is well adopted into this paper because the theoretical framework provides the necessary direction in terms of understanding the phenomenon, the significance of the study, the research question and its aims. In addition, as stated by Kidd and Castano (2013) that theoretical framework provides a significant structure to cement the theories together; this clearly indicates the importance of a theoretical framework as it demarcates the study into the area of interpreting, predicting, criticising and synthesising the existing theories to generate the new knowledge (Creswel, 2008).

Thus, critical theory (CT) is utilised as the conceptual stanza in an attempt to understand, analyse and interpret the social phenomenon that informs our learning in general. In this context, the use of FS as a learning strategy to enhance RC of first-year university students possesses salient features similar to that of the society whereby the inherent status quo of inequality, oppression and lack of liberty and freedom are depicted in the way of narration from these stories. As a result, the institutions of learning such as schools and universities have not escaped the jaws of oppression and inequality; hence, the impediments presented by these factors contribute to the challenges of reading, especially RC. Therefore, the notion of emancipation plays a critical role in the context of reading since the primary goal of reading is to be informed, entertained and educated (Biesta, 2010). This notion premises the necessity to liberate students from various forms of oppression and powers manifested by the traditional approaches and practices of society. The independence and freedom of students as human capital to function optimally come from CR.

This inference endorses the fact that students' abilities, skills and expertise to interpret, view and conceptualise phenomena are fundamentally embedded in the impetus of emancipation. Hence, CT seeks to make sense of the world and insists that thoughts should respond to new challenges and solutions (Hannel & Bradly, 2009). This inference was endorsed by Bronner (2011) when stating that CT responds, in a way to cognitive process, to the problems arising and possibilities around the pre-existing circumstances. Furthermore, it asserts Vygotsky's view (1978) that CT's characteristics do not invariably concern how things

were but rather seek to conceptualise and comprehend how things might and should be. Issues of emancipation play a vital role in equipping students to be independent and critical thinkers on societal phenomena. This view is further propelled by Carrington and Selva (2010) when they cited that in quality education, students are infused with the competencies and abilities to unlearn and relearn new concepts in the quest for emancipation. Indeed, to conclusively test the veracity of quality education, students ought to showcase these abilities without interference from power relations that are at loggerheads with the independence and freedom of students.

In brief, it is patent that competencies and reading skills cannot be achieved if intellectual emancipation is not addressed and attained. Suffice to appreciate the extent and impact the effective reading skills has on our learning abilities and reading comprehension; hence the challenges which manifest themselves during RC are evident as there is limited scholarly work that has a primary focus on the use of FS to enhance RC (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Baldwin, 2015; Molotja & Themane, 2018; Taboada & Rutherford, 2011). Therefore, this paper's primary aim is to discover how the use of FS can enhance the RC of first-year university students. In addition, it was deemed necessary to undertake this research amid the challenges of RC indicated by a number of studies such as the International Reading Literacy Study Report (2016), Walker et al. (2015), and Klapwijk (2016) that the challenges of RC, if not expediently addressed, shall be perpetuated if there are no sustainable modern solutions to reading comprehension. Therefore, this paper has the potential to contribute immensely to providing solutions needed in the current era of education so far as using FS is concerned with improving the RC of first-year university students.

METHODOLOGY

The study relied on the principles of the qualitative method espoused by participatory action research as research design. This research design (PAR from now on) relies on the qualitative method and is the umbrella of interpretive and critical emancipatory inquiry (Gilbert et al, 2018) argue that PAR is a long-term investment: that is, both intervention and research; hence it develops in the research cycle. As a result, PAR is implemented with the participation of first-year university students during an intervention, usually with their help and with the aim of emancipation for the co-researchers. Data generation is conducted with co-researchers who are purposively sampled from the first-year university students at the University of the Free State (Qwaqwa Campus), which is geographically located in the Eastern rural part of the Free State. A purposive sample of thirty (30) African/Black first-year students between the ages of 18-22 years, on a 50/40 pro rata basis of females and males proportion across all faculties, is drawn from the students' population as students tend to experience the most common challenges of reading comprehension. Furthermore, the procedure is that co-researchers must be first-year students doing an English Academic Literary module. Similarly, five (5) module facilitators are sampled as the study seeks to propose fictional stories as a learning strategy to

improve reading comprehension. Therefore, their insights and expertise are deemed necessary given facilitators' inherent experiences in teaching English as Academic Literacy.

The study aimed to propose the use of fictional stories as a learning strategy; therefore, the reading skills of first-year students are rigorously subjected to tests using the M-reader online system, which is a designed quiz of extensive reading geared to assess the reading comprehension of the students. Data generation is critical in research, as data enhance comprehension of the phenomenon towards the theoretical framework (Bronner & Kellner, 1989). As a result, the choice of purposive sampling is based on the fact that this technique is based on the qualities of informants or co-researchers, and is a non-random technique that does not require underlying theories or a set number of informants. Free attitudinal interview (FAI) is utilised to generate data wherein co-researchers are divided into fictional and textual fans; each group of fans read either the fictional or comprehension texts and respond to contextual questions. The first fifteen cohorts of co-researchers collected and read the graded books from the university library and after reading, co-researchers had to take a quiz from M-reader where contextual questions were structured. In contrast, the other fifteen cohorts of co-researchers were assigned reading comprehension and academic texts (textual fans) to read and respond to contextual questions. Thereafter, co-researchers and principal researchers discuss the responses based on each text in conjunction with the FAI questions. FAI is an instrument of data generation embedded in the principles of equality, mutual respect and social justice, which reciprocates the personality traits of co-researchers in social inquiry (Tshelane, 2013). Hence the choice of this instrument is that it reinforces the qualities and values of PAR which are proponents of empowerment, self-liberation and social emancipation. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to interpret and analyse verbal and tacit words. According to van Dijk (2014), CDA is the basic study of the methods of the alteration, rebirth, promulgation and defiance of specific descriptions within social and political settings of social power and inequality. It seeks to understand, interpret and explicitly challenge social inequality and herein, the use of CDA to analyse the generated data is to reflect explicitly on the effect of poor reading comprehension, which leads to social inequality in a sense that knowledge empowers individuals and produces critical thinkers (Mogashoa, 2014). Hence CDA is utilised to analyse the spoken and written words whereby the co-researchers' responses are analysed verbatim in order to infer and denote the meanings. In addition, co-researchers' responses are presented verbatim to decipher and interpret such meanings in the context of reading comprehension to propose fictional stories as a learning strategy. Furthermore, the use of pseudonyms is adopted to conceal the identity of co-researchers, and reserve and respect the rights of anonymity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is initially indicated that RC demonstrates the reader's competencies and abilities to understand the world and its reasons for existence (Kozan et al., 2015). As a result, the opportunity to demonstrate these abilities must be presented during the process of reading,

where students can discern meanings and have abilities to draw inferences. However, the challenge that emerges from the disengagement of the text, which in turn constitutes miscomprehension, is because of insufficient exposure to the text (Pennington et al., 2014). Therefore, to overcome this challenge, it was crucial to significantly expose co-researchers to the informational text to determine the RC, bearing in mind that the aim is to propose the strategy to enhance RC using fictional text. Co-researchers had to be exposed to different informational texts, such as academic and fictional texts (materials/books).

Furthermore, the exposure aimed to intrigue collaboration, trigger existing knowledge, encourage and maintain reading engagement and sustain the concentration of co-researchers. The reading process occurred in a serene environment where distinctive variables such as social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram) are limited to solicit reading comprehension. Thus, the following findings promote the use of fictional stories as a learning strategy to enhance the reading comprehension of first year-university students:

Informational Text

This is one of the challenges discovered after the co-researchers are subjected to the process of reading both academic and informational text. Therefore, the empirical findings attest those fictional texts are more relevant and suitable to attain RC as co-researchers can maintain engagement with the text. It is noted from this excerpt of a verbatim response of one of the co-researcher:

> Mr. Moloi: While reading the fictional text, were you able to identify hidden meaning?
>
> Mr. Mbewu: Yes, I could identify hidden meaning because of the use of figures of speech.
>
> Mr. Moloi: How will you relate the meaning from the fictional text to reality? In other words, is there any reality check between what you read and what you understood?
>
> Mr. Mbewu: Of course, based on the fictional story I read, which was about the issues of governance and government, I could relate that the government is more powerful; hence it finds itself engaging in corrupt activities just to enrich itself.
>
> Mr. Moloi: So do you think, based on the story you read, its events can be transferred into real-life situations?
>
> Mr. Mbewu: Definitely, because this fiction has taught me not to trust the government and also to have a full idea of how the government operates. Although events were not true, I could easily relate and understand them.
>
> Mr. Moloi: How will you say this goal of identifying hidden meaning was achieved?
>
> Mr. Mbewu: It was achieved because the story was interesting and I enjoyed it from the beginning to the end.

According to the excerpt, the analysis of the graded book *Love of money* indicates that the co-researcher elicited the meaning or main idea of the book. The co-researcher can read to the events and apply events in reality by evaluating and comparing socio-political issues that prevail versus the events from the book. It is because FS provides details about the

setting, characters and main event, which are the fundamental aspects of themes related to the main topic/title. However, informational text requires critical thinking and reasoning, which a reader must have while reading. As a result, an academic text presented no opportunity for co-researchers to reflect, think, stop, connect and ask questions. As it is reflected upon in this excerpt which is written verbatim:

Mr. Lekwala: During the reading of the academic text, were you able to identify hidden meaning?

Female student: Iyoh! It was difficult to understand what the text was talking about until I had to read it more than three times, and I couldn't finish it because time elapsed when I was reading it for the third time.

Mr. Lekwala: How will you relate the meaning of the academic text to your life? In other words, is there any reality check between what you read and what you understood?

Female student: Ouch! I could say that…mmmm…the ideas from the text's ideas were quite confusing because I couldn't relate to the main ideas and supporting ones as to which ones can relate to reality. So I am not sure.

Mr. Lekwala: So do you think, based on the academic text you read, that its main ideas couldn't be analysed and related to the context of reality?

Female student: I could say, Yes and No, sir! Yes, because the ideas were quite congested and, as such, difficult to comprehend what is the main idea. And no, in the sense that these were authentic events of an idea, one needed not to think out of the box.

Mr. Lekwala: How will you say this goal of identifying hidden meaning was achieved?

Female Student: Jrrrr! It was a challenge to achieve the goal of identifying the hidden meaning because the text was boring and full of rhetorical meanings.

Even though academic texts are predominately used as a learning strategy, fictional texts manage to present an effective opportunity for the reader to stop, think, ask, connect and reflect. This results in co-researchers' ability to remain engaged, entertained, and captivated throughout the fictional text. In concise, informational texts succeeded in attaining reading comprehension because co-researchers are holistically involved and the strategy described above assisted in challenging the critical thinking and reasoning capacity. This proves that FS IS a suitable learning strategy to enhance RC amid the engaged reading attained.

Collaborative Learning

Co-researchers, as per empirical findings, are able to establish synergy in order to achieve RC. During data generation, in one instance, a female researcher sought to solicit an intervention or assistance of the other fellow co-researcher. However, because of significant restriction, RC was deterred as a result of this particular lack of collaborative learning, as evident from this excerpt:

Mr. Lekwala: During the process of reading academic text, were you able to understand some of the words while reading?

Female student: Absolutely not, iyoh! I wanted to ask the next person sitting apart from me, but it was difficult for me because I was not allowed to interact with anyone.

Mr. Lekwala: How will you describe reading in isolation?

Female Student: It is very difficult because silent reading is boring and overwhelming. So it would be better if we had to read in groups and   consult each other in terms of pronunciation of words and stuff.

Therefore, collaborative learning is essential to reading activity to achieve RC purposively. In comparison, FS depicts the sense of synergy where characters collaborate to achieve a specific goal. As a result, students happen to learn these skills from fictional texts and are enticed to adopt and implement them in their daily life roles. Once this form of ability manifests itself, assurance is attained that RC was certainly achieved because the reader acquired a certain and peculiar set of skills that are requisite for effective learning. Furthermore, collaborative learning enhances communication skills, emotional intelligence and tenacity. These skills and traits manifest across the plots in a fictional story wherein a particular character must communicate unequivocally and without contradictions in an attempt to fulfil a mission. Similarly, the character must maintain composure, demeanour and perseverance to realise the set goal. Conversely, the prospects of a fictional story reader acquiring these traits and skills are high as the reader's critical thinking is not only challenging but anticipated to visualise how these tenets can be applied in a particular situation. In brief, fictional stories propel independent thinking in a manner that requires initiatives or situations holistically, that is-intellectually, emotionally and physically have a rapport with the dynamics of the environment with the society.

Prior Learning or Existing Knowledge

When reading, prior knowledge is activated and interest invigorated so that the leverage to sustain the reader through the text is dominantly maintained. However, this was a challenge when using academic text as RC is not optimally achieved because prior learning or knowledge is not triggered by readers. It is discernible from this excerpt:

Mr. Lejoi: Were your preconceived ideas changed after reading fictional text?

Male student: Yes, initially, I viewed women's dignity as drained by abuse while I didn't consider that values can play an important role...to change a woman's confidence.

Mr. Lejoi: Based on your prior knowledge, between fictional text and academic text,   which one is difficult and why?

Male student: Huh….! I thought that fictional texts were difficult to understand because fictional materials are imaginative, but as I read, I   realised that imaginative things happen in real life, so reality is based on imagination… you know!

Mr. Lejoi: Have your knowledge been tested by fictional things?

Male student: Mmme ja! Because, for example, I thought crime could be an alternative for surviving but, eish! After reading fictional material, I realised that it is   not   an alternative.

Relatively, the fictional text contains the features that potently challenge the reader to apply the existing knowledge to what is being read. This was identified during empirical data generation, where Mr Lejoi asserted that his preconceived ideas about women were drastically changed after reading fictional text. Amid this assertion, the findings conclude that fictional texts activate prior learning or knowledge, which is critical and essential for one to have RC. This prior knowledge is activated when certain events from the fictional text test the existing knowledge about the reader, such as the use of criminal acts as a means of survival. This tested the co-researchers' prior knowledge, who thought crime was an alternative means of surviving. However, after reading about crime and its effects in fictional text, he learned that crime is not an alternative means of surviving as its consequences are death and prison. In other words, the co-researchers' preconceived ideas are changed during the reading of the fictional text, indicating that his prior knowledge is activated, linked to the text and changed after reading, thus showing comprehension.

In contrast, it is established that prior learning exposes the reader to the learning curve where an assessment of what is known and not known is established based on empirical data, and the concept of transition into reality check mode (RCM) is coined. This RCM is the mode that enables the reader to juxtapose the fact and fiction extracted from fictional materials through critical thinking, which in turn, reflects to the level of comprehension that one has optimally attained. Invariably, RC might be blurred once prior learning is not equated to generating the flow of thoughts and reasoning. However, the credence of empirical data attests that FS has the potency to equate the thoughts and critical reasoning into prior learning; thus, it affirms the use of FS as the alternative learning strategy to enhance RC.

Obstacles to Reading

Social networks and related media are the distractors that impede RC. Therefore, findings conjured the concept of reciprocal reading (RR) as the process whereby reading fictional texts is simultaneously intertwined with the thoughts and feelings of the reader. FS produces this to avert the situation whereby the reader incessantly solicits entertainment, interest and attention from social media because there is a significant lack of RC. Once there is a lack of RC, it is a vivid sign that interest and attention are not captured in the reading process thereof, which propels one to detour his/her cognitive processes into social networks and related media.

Moreover, to curb this challenge, FS must be used as the learning strategy for RC, wherein readers' challenges of concentration bred by lack of attention and interest will be overcome by RR espoused by the potency of FS. Insofar as FS is concerned, the lack of attention and interest during the reading process is sealed by the use of FS as they present flexibility,   induced   entertainment,   adaptation   and   relaxation   demonstrated   by

characterisation and conflating of a sequence of events from fictional materials. This surmises that FS is used as the learning strategy for RC which is significantly imperative to overcome the challenges of RC.

Other Challenges

The aim is to propose using FS as the learning strategy to enhance RC and as a result, the inquiry conducted managed to generate empirical data that discovered other challenges as some of the barriers to RC. These challenges are among other things but not limited to the use and application of comma (,) and colon (;) in the sentences of the texts. Although related studies educate us about the use and application of punctuation marks, there have not been significant studies that focus on how their use and application enhance RC. Therefore, this necessitates future studies to focus on how the use of punctuation marks enhances RC. Amid these identified challenges by empirical data, it is conceded that even during the reading of FS, the use and application of punctuation marks perpetuated the need for future studies as they constantly kept on appearing as one of the barriers to RC. However, during the reading of FS for the purpose of RC, these challenges were attributed to the lack of exposure of readers to these punctuation marks, which caused them not to be in possession of what the researcher, influenced by empirical data, coined the concept: linguistic dexterity. This linguistic dexterity is defined as the mental touch and understanding of perceived punctuation marks' use and application in the text during the reading process and is derived when the reader can clearly notice the punctuation mark's position in the text and relate the meaning of the entire text without deviating from the main idea. Therefore, this poses a challenge and invitation to future studies and scholars to focus on how punctuation marks enhance RC, thus constituting the research gap in the body of knowledge. Decisively, this concludes that punctuation marks are still a perpetual barrier that seeks further studies in relation to RC. Therefore, the use and application of punctuation marks constituted a delay in the acquisition of the term coined by the researcher, such as linguistic dexterity.

CONCLUSION

One of the major social skills which are required is the sense of collegiality and in relation to proposing the learning strategy of using FS to enhance RC, empirical findings confirmed the assumption of literature review those challenges such as collaborative learning, illogical informational text and prior learning can be overcome by using FS. Collaborative learning is very significant in reading because it not only instils a sense of belonging but also derives communication skills that are paramount to learning. In addition, informational text and prior learning are the challenges that are mitigated during the reading of FS, wherein the co-researchers' prior experiences were ignited by fictional events in relation to certain themes on which the theme was known to be in a particular way. However, after reading the fictional text, the readers (in this instance, the co-researchers) were able to adapt a new sphere of

knowledge by synthesising and interpreting the fictional events in the manner that beset reality.

In concise, these reasons are the fundamental aspects that qualify the proposed learning strategy as the best alternative strategy that can be used to enhance RC. Therefore, this paper, based on its empirical findings, analysis and presentations of results, recommends FS as the learning strategy to enhance RC. This means that scholars, students and stakeholders in academia can use this learning strategy to address the relative challenges that confront RC in various spheres of education. It is because there is a patent indication that FS provides the content that succinctly gives informational text as readers can maintain concentration throughout it. In contrast, they also activate readers' previous learning experiences, which could be linked to what has been read, rather than changing the existing perception during the reading of FS.

Moreover, FS mitigate the challenges of collaborative learning as, by their nature, FS enables a conducive environment of reading where collective engagement and discussions are encouraged and optimally used among students. Irresistibly, FS defeated the obstacles to reading, such as interruption sourced by social networks and other related media, which were empirically vibrant given the fact that these are the incessant challenges that are endemic and keep on prevailing among readers. Hence, FS is structured to maintain and preserve interest, attention and concentration. However, the paper restricted its scope to the challenges of reading comprehension and there is a necessity to examine the methods used in both primary and secondary schools to teach reading skills, particularly in relation to the use of fictional stories such as short and long stories. In addition, further studies are required to determine the use of literary texts such as a poem, to teach reading skills for reading comprehension. Although the paper recommends fictional stories as the learning strategy to enhance reading comprehension in first-year university students, it is essential to review some of the literary texts used in primary and secondary school to understand the significant impact these texts have on the comprehension levels of learners.

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