

## REVAMPING READING FLUENCY IN THE CLASSROOM VIA POSITIVE VERBAL REINFORCEMENT

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### **Abstract**

*Literature indicates that reading is one of the basic language skills that prove problematic to children learning English as a second language. The study is an assessment of the impact of verbal reinforcement on pupils' motivation in teaching reading skills to secondary school students. The purpose was to investigate whether verbal reinforcement in teaching reading fluency skills influences the motivation of this group. B.F Skinner's theory of positive reinforcement was used as a theoretical framework to back this study. The session discusses the findings.*

**Keywords:** Language skills, Motivation, Verbal Reinforcement, Literacy, Revamping

## INTRODUCTION

In our global world today effective teaching and learning of language has become pertinent because of the indispensable role language wields in our society. These roles of language specifically, English language cannot be over emphasized. English language can be described as pivotal to literacy. Literacy however, is the ability to read, write, speak, and listen and to attain sustainable development thus, language (English) and literacy cannot be separated. English language remains an indispensable instrument of knowledge in Nigeria; the language holds the key to academic progress because this situation makes English a necessity for people to master. Mastering a language requires learning all the four basic skills of the language; Listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among these basic language skills reading is very important because it is a lifelong skill to be used both at school and throughout life. In fact, it is a corner stone for a child's success in school and, indeed throughout life. Without the ability to read fluently, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success will be lost inevitably. Despite its importance, reading is one of the most challenging areas in our education system. At the primary and secondary level students are required to read comprehension passages, notes written on the whiteboard and story books. Teaching them reading is very demanding. It is very demanding because at this stage the child sees reading as something very difficult and therefore needs to be adequately motivated. Here the teacher's choice of words in relation to the child's productivity makes impression in the heart of the learner. A bad choice of word (s) stifles the child and reduces productivity.

Motivation is a psychological feature that arouses an organization to action towards a desired goal (wiki.org Brummellen (cited in Kefas 2007) affirms that in motivating students thus,

“A teacher must be able to understand the students by treating them as individuals that have feeling, faith, interests and targets on their own. The teacher must regularly give personal attention and appreciation towards the students. Also, the teacher does not expect them to do things that need skills they have not mastered but to reinforce students positively”.

The above statement corroborates the importance of reinforcement as a tool in language teaching and learning. Verbal reinforcement is an aspect of social reinforcement in which language is used to reinforce the behavior of learners. The issue is that despite the enormous role of reinforcement in teaching and learning process, most teachers do not give adequate attention to reinforce the weak students in classes especially in developing reading skills. To many, reinforcement is only given to intelligent pupils. To some, such skills are not even in their teaching techniques. Those that appreciate the essence do not have adequate knowledge of reinforcement which is an essential feature of motivation, instead, they harass students and create anxiety, fear, tension, depression and frustration in them and reduce their productivity.

It is against this background that these researchers considered investigating the effect of positive and negative verbal reinforcement on students reading fluency in two selected secondary schools in Owerri North L.G.A of Imo State.

### **Aim/ Objective of the study**

The aim of the study is to ascertain the role of positive and negative reinforcement in achieving reading fluency in the classroom as the main objective of the study is to highlight the importance of using positive verbal reinforcement in teaching reading in the classroom and to identify the effects of using negative verbal reinforcement.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided this work:

1. Is positive verbal reinforcement effective in promoting reading fluency in the classroom?
2. What are the effects of using negative verbal reinforcement in the classroom during reading?

## Scope of the study

The study was delimited to two secondary schools in Owerri North Local Government Area of Imo State. This study was carried out in the junior secondary school. They are;

\*Girls' secondary school Akwakuma along Owerri Orlu Road.

\*Comprehensive secondary school Amakohia, Uratta near Rapour Hotels, Owerri, Imo State.

## Significance of the Study

This paper is significant in ways more than one, for teachers because in promoting reading fluency there is effective communication in the classroom which is the key to teaching and learning. Since education is learner centered, it is necessary that students respond fluently in reading. Students on their part will benefit from this work as the read fluently they communicate to the entire class. This study will benefit students to become even more aware of the need to become fluent in English to cope with the flow of natural speech. There is likely to be a greater demand for replication activities to all learners to practice reading fluently in the classroom, not simply at utterance level, but at discourse level.

## 2.0 Language Skills

Acquisition of skills is important in language learning. A skill is a special ability to do something well, especially as gained by learning and practice. The four basic language skills are; Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Listening and Speaking are classified as the oracy skills because they enable us to hear and speak a language while Reading and Writing are grouped as the literacy skills because they enable us to read and write the language we speak.

### Listening Skills

Listening is the first basic skill that a language learner acquires. The child, for example is continually bombarded with speech and noises of different types from the moment he is born. Gradually, he learns to attach meaning to the sounds he hears and, with time, begins to imitate those speaking to him (Nwachukwu, U. 2007:13).

Listening is a receptive skill although the listener is at the receptive end; it is not a passive skill. Rather, it is an active skill. This is so because whenever we listen to a conversation, debate, talk, an argument or an interview, we have to make some effort to understand and interpret what the speakers are saying, and how they are saying it. Therefore, we can infer that what is involved in listening is the acquisition of skills that will enable the user to hear the speaker well and to interpret the speaker's message.

### **Speaking Skills:**

Literature has proved that human beings have innate ability to learn how to speak a language or languages. The basic speaking skills are acquired early in life. As the child grows up, he refines these skills and begins to communicate more clearly and effectively.

### **Reading Skills**

Smith and Robinson (1980), define reading as “an active attempt on the part of the reader to understand a writer’s message”. Reading from the above definition involves two things;

\*Looking at words of a language used in a passage, that is the vocabulary.

\*Interpreting the message in the context of the passage.

### **Writing Skills**

Writing is a complex skill. According to Maduekwe, A. (2007:157), “writing is quite a technical skill that involves complex and varied processes some of which may be going on at the same time”. It involves not only the psychomotor skill of forming letters but also the ability to spell words correctly, apply grammatical rules to sentences, punctuate sentences, construct good paragraphs and write effective letters, essays and reports.

### **What is Reading?**

Pang, et al (2001), defines reading as a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Reading is said to involve two related processes word recognition and comprehension. Word on one hand refers to the process of perceiving how written symbols correspond to one’s spoken language. While comprehension is the process of making sense of words, sentences and connected text. Leipzig (2001) defined reading as the motivated and fluent co-ordination of word recognition and comprehension. According to him reading requires the following processes:

- Identify the words in print – a process called word recognition.
- Construct an understanding from them – a process called comprehension.
- Coordinate identify words and making meaning so that meaning is automatic and accurate. Therefore, reading simply means weaving together words recognition and comprehension in a fluent manner. Pang, et al (2003:7) further outlined some principles on reading.

#### **1. Oral Language**

According to them early progress in reading depends on oral language development. Speech and language abilities are developed naturally without effort. Learning to read according to them is a different process because it involves learning about a symbolic system (writing) used to represent speech. Before children begin to learn to associate the written form with speech, they need to learn the vocabulary, grammar and sound system of the oral language. Speaking precedes reading ability.

#### **2. Phonological and phonemic awareness**

Phonological and phonemic awareness are closely associated with reading ability. Phonemic awareness is how to break apart and manipulate the sounds in words.

### **3. Fluency**

Fluency is important because it is closely related to comprehension. It simply means being able to read text accurately, quickly and with understanding. Fluent readers can also do this because they do not have problems with words recognition. Research has shown that fluency depends on the ability to group words appropriately during reading. This means fluent readers recognize words quickly but also know where to place emphasis or pause during reading. This means fluent readers recognize words quickly but also know where to place emphasis or pause during reading. Word recognition is also important for fluent reading.

### **4. Vocabulary:**

Vocabulary is critical to reading comprehension. In order to understand a text, readers need to know the meanings of individual words. Words that are recognized and in print have to match reader's oral vocabulary in order to be understood.

### **5. Prior knowledge**

Readers use prior knowledge to understand texts. Having more prior knowledge aids comprehension. A reader's knowledge of the world depends on lived experience. This differs from country to country, regions and cultures. Reading task should be sensitive to the types of prior knowledge that are needed for the reader to understand a text. Reinforcement is a stimulus that furthers and is contingent upon a behavior and increase the probability of a behavior being repeated verbal reinforcement can increase the probability of not only desirable behavior but also undesirable behavior.

### **What is the difference between positive and negative reinforcement**

Negative reinforcement is not the same as punishment; it involves using the delivery of an aversive (unpleasant) stimulus to decrease the likelihood that a behavior will recur (Smith, 2017). Reinforcement must be delivered immediately and students should know when they can expect verbal reinforcement. If you wait until the end of the day to reinforce a student for reading fluently, the effect of reinforcement is reduced if not lost. Verbal reinforcement should be given and the student should be told when he or she can expect to receive it. In the way, a contingency between behavior and reinforcement will be strengthened or maintained. Improvement in reading fluency should be reinforced (as students progress in reading). Do not wait until the student's are perfect. You should recognize improvement and students should be made to know that you recognize their effort. Negative reinforcement can be very effective, especially to create an environment that feels safe to a student. It is often more naturally occurring than, for example tangible reinforcers. To demonstrate what negative reinforcement looks like if a student is sent out of the classroom due to disruptive behavior, the teacher as actually been reinforced. The teacher is negatively reinforced for removing the noise student because this act has removed the unpleasantness of the student's behavior (Mang, 2001). When the disruptive behavior is negatively reinforced, it can even lead to socially inappropriate behavior of other students who also wish to escape a situation (Rumfola, 2017). It is claimed that positive reinforcement strategies are more effective than punishment for increase and shaping positive behaviours (Rumfola, 2017).

In young children, positive reinforcement can be used as a behavior modification technique (Morin, 2018). It can also be used to support the learning of prosocial behavior e.g.

sharing, following directions, and taking turns. The classroom is a commonplace for teachers to favour harsh punishment, including using the cane! Now however, it is recognized that there are more effective ways to teach and to manage classrooms.

Several research works have concerned themselves with the use of verbal reinforcement in motivating students to speak English, the type of verbal reinforcement that is frequently used in teaching speaking. Some of such words include; Kefas (2017), study of ‘the use of verbal reinforcement to motivate 11<sup>th</sup> grade students of Sma Budya Wacana Yogyakarta to speak English’. The research work discussed mainly the types of verbal reinforcement that can motivate them to speak English are in forms of words and sentences. In another study carried out by Yuli Eka Putri, on ‘An Analysis of Teachers’ reinforcement towards student’s interaction in teaching speaking at SMPN 7 Padang’, discussed the types of reinforcement that is frequently used in teaching speaking to this group. The study used descriptive research and the instruments used are questionnaire. The result revealed that the teacher used for the study used both verbal and non verbal reinforcement in teaching speaking. There is however paucity of research on the use of verbal reinforcement in teaching reading in the classroom. This study specifically investigates the effects of positive and negative verbal reinforcement in teaching reading in the classroom.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Theory of Positive Reinforcement**

This paper is hinged on B.F. Skinner’s theory of positive reinforcement. B.F. Skinner in relation to the theory of operant conditioning introduced positive reinforcement. It is a form of learning whereby the contingency between a specific behavior and a desirable consequence help increase the likelihood of the behavior recurring. Reinforcement refers to “a stimulus which follows and is contingent upon a behavior and increase the probability of a behavior being repeated” (Smith, 2017). The simplest way of conceptualizing positive reinforcement is that something pleasant is added when a specific action is performed (Cherry, 2018). When thinking about positive reinforcement in teaching and education, the overarching purpose is to provide an in certain for students to repeat desired behaviours (Revermann, n.d)

### **3.0 THE DATA/AREA**

The area of study is Girls’ secondary school Akwakuma and Comprehensive Secondary school Amakohia, all in Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo State.

This study investigates the use of verbal reinforcement as one of the motivating factors in revamping reading fluency in pupils and the type of verbal reinforcement used. The population of the study comprises 50 teachers and 50 pupils of the selected institution. The researchers decided to do a purposive sampling of 50 students in the junior secondary section using random selection.

### **INSTRUMENT FOR DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Questionnaires were distributed for the study. This was to find out if positive verbal reinforcement improves reading fluency in the classroom setting and also to identify the effects of using negative verbal reinforcement. The questionnaire consisted of 15 structured questions on the benefits of positive verbal reinforcement in reading and the disadvantages of



using negative verbal reinforcement. The questionnaire was prepared for the two groups using a four Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree and disagree.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Research Questions 1

1. Is positive verbal reinforcement effective in improving reading fluency in the classroom?

### Research Question 2

2. What are the effects of using negative verbal reinforcement in the classroom during reading?

**TABLE 1**

S/NO	QUESTIONS	RESPONSES							
		SA 4	A 3	SD 2	D 1	Total	EFX	X	Remark
1.	Students need verbal reinforcement in reading.	40 160	35 105	10 20	15 15	100	300	3.00	Accept
2.	Positive verbal reinforcement instills confidence in the students during reading comprehension passages in the classroom.	35 140	30 90	25 50	10 10	100	290	2.90	Accept
3.	Teachers in your school do not use adequate verbal reinforcement in reading.	10 40	10 30	45 90	35 35	100	195	1.95	Reject
4.	Teachers in your school use negative verbal reinforcement like derogatory address terms like 'please sit down', 'as old as you are you can't read,	40 160	45 135	10 10	05 05	100	310	3.10	Accept
5.	Positive verbal reinforcement gives students boldness to read in the classroom.	36 144	32 96	18 36	14 14	100	290	2.90	Accept
6.	Teachers' use of negative verbal reinforcement makes students to shy away from reading in the classroom.	30 120	50 150	10 20	10 10	100	300	3.00	Accept
7.	Negative verbal reinforcements put fear in students.	43 172	47 188	05 10	05 05	100	375	3.75	Accept
8.	Positive verbal reinforcement helps students to develop more interest in reading.	40 160	35 105	05 10	15 15	100	290	2.90	Accept
9.	Positive verbal reinforcement does not remove fear and anxiety from students.	15 60	10 30	40 80	35 35	100	205	2.05	Reject
10	Positive verbal reinforcement relieves tension from student.	50 200	40 120	05 10	05 05	100	335	3.35	Accept
11	Negative verbal reinforcement adds tension to the students during reading.	47 188	43 129	05 10	05 05	100	332	3.32	Accept
12	Negative verbal reinforcement stifles the students during reading.	60 240	27 81	07 14	06 06	100	341	3.41	Accept
13	Positive verbal reinforcement promotes reading fluency in students.	70 280	25 75	03 06	02 02	100	363	3.63	Accept

$$\text{MEAN RATING} = \frac{4+3+2+1}{4} = 2.50$$

The answer to research question 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, and 13. The responses by computing and comparing the mean of all the items with the mean rating of 2.50 as a yardstick for the validation of the items in research question 1. Hence, if the mean is less than 2.50 as the mean rating signifies the item is rejected or otherwise the item is not rejected. The findings are as follows: From item 1, the total is 300 and the mean score is 3.00. Item 2 have a total of 290 with mean score of 2.90. Item 8 have a total of 290 with mean score of 2.90. Item 10 have a total of 335 with mean score of 3.35. Item 13 have a total of 363 with mean score of 3.63.

Research Question 2: what are the effects of using negative verbal reinforcement in the classroom during reading?

The answer to research question 2 is offered by the responses to question 3, 4, 6, 7 and 12 as follows: from item 3 the total is 195 with mean score of 1.95. Item 4, the total is 310 with the mean score of 3.10. Item 6 total is 300 with the mean score of 3.00. Item 7, the total is 375 with the mean score of 3.75. Item 12, the total is 341 with the mean of 3.41.

### **Conclusion/ Recommendation**

From the analysis of this study, positive verbal reinforcement is important in the classroom during reading because of the following reasons:

1. It instills confidence in the students.
2. It gives them boldness to read in the classroom.
3. It helps them to develop more interest in reading.
4. It promotes reading fluency.

However, the effects of the use of negative verbal reinforcement are as follows;

1. It demoralizes and stifles the students.
2. It makes them loose interest in reading which invariably affects their fluency.

Therefore, from the results of the study it strongly established that positive verbal reinforcement improves reading fluency in the classroom while the negative verbal reinforcement hinders it.

This paper recommends that:

Students on their own part should develop the zeal towards reading while Teachers should be encouraged to acquaint themselves with the basic teaching skills which include verbal reinforcement.



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