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## **Extending the frontiers of L2 reading instruction in the African ESL context: A 21<sup>st</sup> century imperative**

Reading instruction practices in many African societies, and the attendant views regarding text readability, are based on the tacit acquiescence among reading instruction practitioners that it is ‘normal’ for readers in typical ESL contexts to experience difficulties with English texts from L1 contexts. Such reading difficulties tend to be very obvious and are therefore usually not addressed as problems in the instructional sense. They are often seen as inevitable in L2 reading. This paper opines that this perspective must change in favor of an approach that not only views this situation as problematic, but also involves training readers to read texts from L1 sources. This will help African ESL readers become better integrated into the information age where the bulk of knowledge comes in L1 varieties of the English language.

### **1. Introduction**

One of the criticisms often raised against the well-known tests of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is that they often contain culturally extraneous elements which make them unfair or inappropriate for many people from a cultural background that is radically different from first language (L1) contexts. This is the view expressed by Onochie (1985) in a study of readability assessment in a second language (L2). Onochie supports the view that many of these tests need to be subjected to readability checks before they are administered. Tswana (2005), arguing in the same direction, claims that a number of empirical studies have shown that the origin of texts, the attendant cultural and experiential matters, as well as rhetorical styles, impinge more heavily on poor L2 reading comprehension than linguistic factors. To this extent, L2 readers are often seen to be at a disadvantage, such that a fair comprehension assessment is often thought to be

possible only when texts based on the L2 reader's own cultural contexts are used. Obviously, this position appears quite logical, and has conditioned the perspective of many L2 instructors and scholars in Africa. This perspective has benefitted from the works of Edward Fry who, in the 60s, worked with English Language teachers in Uganda. Fry observed the tendency among L2 learners to read below the standard of L1 readers and came up with a test of readability which he designed bearing the L2 situations in mind (Appelt, 2006). The implication of this work and these observations is that L2 readers are seen as victims of unfair reading assessment systems when L1 standards are used. Fry's test responds to this situation by reducing the demands on test takers. The implication is that L2 readers are, in principle, not expected to read and fully understand texts that L1 readers would be expected to read and understand, especially when these texts are sourced from L1 contexts. However, the realities of this century have created a situation in which people are communicating across cultures more than ever before, with ex-colonial languages (especially English) playing crucial roles in this situation. These languages are vehicles for the dissemination of new knowledge and bridges between peoples. From a nationalistic perspective, this is an uncomfortable truth. Yet, it is a reality which people in post-colonial countries must live with. People from developing societies, where English is used as an L2, have to read plenty of materials from L1 sources as a result of increasing levels of contact brought about by globalization. If the current, near total reliance on local content for teaching adequately serves the purpose of preparing readers to read texts from new contexts, then the well-documented problems that some African readers have with L1 texts (reflected in poor TOEFL scores), would not exist.

Some salient questions inevitably arise:

- i. Is it wise to continue to adopt a perspective of reading competence that ‘condones’ inability to read texts from foreign context, and treat such inability as normal?
- ii. Do the realities of globalization not demand cross-cultural reading ability, especially among those in the developing world who are acquiring the knowledge and skills already developed in the advanced world?
- iii. In this regard, would a new view of readability and competence assessment emphasizing international and intercultural functionality not be required in the African English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) context?

These issues are discussed here primarily because they relate to the African ESL context and, by application, as they relate to all post-colonial societies. However, general issues relating to L2 reading and readability will be explored to provide the appropriate background.

## **2. L2 Reading in Africa**

The use of the term *L2 reading* in this paper must not be taken to mean that the people being referred to usually read in an L1. The term is used in the more restricted sense of describing reading in a post-colonial language. In this case, the L2 is often seen from the perspective of the role of the ex colonial language as official language and as language of education. The sequence of acquisition is often of little consequence in this perspective because sequence of acquisition tends not to be uniform among people. Yet, a post-colonial language like English in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya Zambia and so on, is often broadly referred to as an L2. The post-colonial language is, in many instances, likely to be the only language in which reading is available.

Regardless of some great strides in the use of indigenous languages in English-speaking post-colonial countries, English remains the main language of reading in post-colonial Anglophone countries. This situation can be understood better when one considers the role of English language in these societies.

The advent of English into these societies was originally a result of colonial expansion. However, even after independence, English remains the official language in many of these African nations and a crucially important means of contact to the outside world. Also, it is the predominant (or in some cases the sole) language of tertiary education. It is also useful as a bridge builder between different and competing language groups.

In Nigeria, efforts to entrench the use of indigenous languages in the early years of primary education have not been very successful (Awobuluyi, 2013:2; Dada, 2011:89). Even effort to make secondary school pupils study at least one Nigerian language has not succeeded due to a shortage of trained language teachers and required material development (Ajibola, 2003). Writing about the situation in Ghana, Owu-Ewie, (2006: 83) observes English remain(s) so dominant that publishing houses are reluctant to publish in Ghanaian languages due to limited marketability. Indeed Ghanaian authorities eventually gave up promoting the use of indigenous languages and declared English as the language of education at all levels in 2002 (Owu-Ewie, 2006: 78).

In countries like Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, Swahili has been a quite successful national language (Lodhi, 1993). Yet, these societies still extensively rely on English as the main language of education in Kenya, while in Tanzania it fills the gap

created by the fact that Swahili is “not the language of technological and global development” (Nganyi, 2006).

In South Africa, the presence of English appears overwhelming despite relatively few people speaking it as an L1. Indeed, in 1996 when the population of the country was 46 million, only 3.6 million used English as an L1 (Crystal, 1997: 39). Yet the language today is used and viewed favorably by most indigenous peoples in South Africa, as it was and is still viewed as an acceptable alternative to Afrikaans which “came to be perceived by the black majority as the language of authority and repression” (Crystal, 1997, p.40). Of course, Afrikaans was the L1 of most of the white people. The sentiment of the indigenous people is understandable in view of the peculiar issues of race relations in that country.

Issues that repeatedly emerge in the study of L2 reading in all post-colonial societies where the post-colonial language remains the most visible are numerous. In this paper an effort will be made to provide brief overview of some of the most immediately relevant ones. These will include the issues of L2 reading competence, texts readability and instructional philosophy. These are some of the issues that require radical adjustment in this age of globalization.

### **3. L2 Reading Competence**

One of the crucial issues that often emerge in L2 reading is the issue of learners’ level of competence in the L2 and how that impacts reading. Wallace (2001) in a general overview of L2 reading argues that competence levels of L2 readers in the target language, unlike those of L1 readers, often falls short of expectations. In addition to this, Wallace points out the tendency among L2 speakers of English to use an “inter-language”

which may show systematic syntactic and phonological departures from “standard English”, thereby creating a situation in which many L2 readers may experience difficulties reading texts written in varieties of English they find unfamiliar. Against the background of poor teaching, reading (at an early age) may prove to be a drudgery from which many never fully recover.

Wallace (2001) also claims that such L2 readers may end up manifesting the problem of miscues as they would anticipate the line being read on the basis of their inter-language and not on the basis of the system of the standard variety being read. A way around this problem according to Wallace is the use of the language experience approach in the teaching of reading, since it involves the creation of reading materials by pupils and teachers with the advantage that the learner can have relatively predictable materials available to read.

Wallace emphasizes the form of the language; and form (that is, the syntactic and phonological) may not be the only problematic area for second language readers. Having the appropriate background knowledge (schemata) is another area where L2 readers are known to experience problems. Schemata required understanding texts are often inextricably tied to the culture from where the language originally evolved. There has been some considerable debate regarding whether it is linguistic inadequacy or issues of readers’ experiential background that account for the obvious reading difficulties of L2 readers. While Wurr (2003) opines that both linguistic and experiential difficulties account for this problem, Onochie (1985) and Tswana (2005) lay emphasis on the experiential factor. On the other hand, Landry (2002) regards the issue of reader

background knowledge or schemata as an untenable explanation of reading deficiencies among L2 readers.

Whatever the case may be, it is clear that both factors must, in one way or another (albeit in varying degrees), be responsible for L2 reading difficulties which undoubtedly exist. They must be factored into policy and instructional strategies in this century if readers in Africa would benefit from the information age.

It must be said that the competence factor in question is usually measured using reading tests of different forms, based on carefully selected passages. The selection of such passages is more credible when they are not merely based on what Daggett (2003:1) calls “academic benchmarks and norms that are not connected to any observable external standard”. Some more scientific benchmarks must form the basis of tests with which those passages are deemed readable for specific literacy levels. The ability or inability to read such passages can then yield conclusions about competence levels. Such benchmarks which often define texts readability can be controversial, though. This is discussed in the next section of the paper.

#### **4. The Factor of Readability in the African ESL Context**

The concept of readability is obviously closely related to reading competence. The concept as earlier mentioned, often arises in discussions of the suitability or otherwise of reading materials in schools. In contexts where competence levels are a serious concern, as in L2 contexts (as discussed above), the matter of the suitability of texts (particularly foreign ones which tend to dominate education especially at intermediate and higher level) become paramount. It is in this way that an overview of this concept may be important at this point.

This concept refers to the extent to which a written text can be easily read by a given group of people, such that one can conclude that the text is neither above nor below them in terms of level of difficulty. The reader should be able to read and understand the passage without difficulty. The text should however not be too simple and unchallenging.

Onochie (1985) reveals that the essence of this concept is to “match the text with the reader” (p.220). This of course brings to mind the fact that the concept of readability is a function of both the text and the reader. For the text, the extent to which it can be readable is usually determined by linguistic elements of syntax, lexis, punctuation, figurative expression and style. Also, aspects of content such as facts, fiction, topic, source of derivation, are important. Other important elements in readability include print size, format and illustrations. Apart from these text based elements, there are factors that depend on the reader. These include level of maturity, psychological situation, experiential background, and educational level.

Dillner and Olson (1977:119) in their own case also stress the fact that there are aspects of a written works that determine the extent of readability. Such areas include content, word length, sentence length, structural complexity, and the ratio of abstract and concrete terms. All these are viewed against the background of the fact that the readability level of books is often expressed in terms of educational grades of the reader. In the sphere of reading instruction, this concept is crucial for decisions about the appropriateness of text for different classes. Clare (1978) makes it clear that “one of the problems in public education is how to tell whether a particular piece of writing is likely to be readable to a particular group of readers” (p.248). Beyond the education context however, the concept is also of great relevance in general reading. According to Moyle



(1978) in the USA... reading materials and subject texts are often assessed for readability before publication.

According to Clare (1978), there are generally two ways of carrying out this assessment. The first is to generally estimate based on the target group's perceived skill development and based on assessor's experience as well as feedback. The second approach is to carry out a test; especially when/where precise index of readability is needed (p.248).

There is a predominant and definitely correct view that if many of the foreign books available for use in African education are tested for suitability to African users, using appropriate tests, they will be deemed not to be readable. This is the view expressed in Onochie (1985) and Shoki (2007). Indeed, Shoki sees this as a major problem in the selection of materials for libraries in African schools. He declares that most materials stocked in these libraries are actually not readable for the learners. This is an issue requiring attention. Relevant measures are suggested in this paper.

The magnitude of the readability problem would depend on the benchmarks that form the basis of whatever readability test is used. A myriad of statistical methods is available to test readability. Readability can be tested by the use of any of the available formulae, or more empirical options. While some tests seek to establish universal norms, as is the case with the modern computer-based lexile analyzer (Daggett, 2003), others like the variant of the Cloze System which Onochie (1985) favors takes readers' peculiarity into consideration. In a second language situation, the Fry formula remains a particularly popular system of determining the readability of texts. This is for two reasons. Firstly, it is believed that L2 peculiarities were considered while Edward Fry

was working on the system (Appelt 2006). Secondly, it is probably the easiest to use, as it does not involve administering tests to large numbers of people to determine the average in readability. According to Appelt (2006) the said readability assessment system was (as previously pointed out) developed by Edward Fry in the 60s while helping teachers in Uganda teach English as a second language. Fry developed this system bearing in mind the linguistic and experiential peculiarities of the second language learner. The implication of Fry's readability test is that the expectations placed on the reader in terms of reading ability and language proficiency are much 'lower'.

Whichever benchmarks are employed, foreign texts would indeed turn out not to be very readable in African contexts as Shoki (2007) has observed. This situation, as well as other matters verging more on pseudo nationalistic tendencies has created a situation where reading instruction materials tend (in the view of this writer) to be too locally based. This may not be good for the practical long term good of learners and the society.

## **5. Implications for Reading Instruction**

In Nigeria, for example, there is a near total Nigerianization of all reading materials used in the schools, not necessarily as a result of any articulated policy decision but as a result of the emergence of some consensus among educators. In the colonial days and shortly after independence, foreign texts held sway. Today, materials are mainly locally sourced. This situation probably has a lot to do with what Osofisan (2001) calls "pseudo-nationalism". This is understandable when viewed against the background of the major fault which people found in colonial education. The elite that emerged in African societies after independence felt that colonial education was essentially Eurocentric. Thompson (1981) captures this view by pointing out colonial education was condemned

for being divorced from the life and culture of the people and does not really help the learners to function properly in their own communities.

In this context, reading materials from post-colonial masters are bound to be resisted. A simple survey of reading materials used in Nigerian schools reveal that 90% of them are local materials. Also, Amu Djoletto (1985) reveals that at a point in time, the advent of local publishing in Ghana put local materials at the fore front. These changes are naturally inevitable. They are indeed necessary for the local book industry and for meeting local needs in education. There is however a significant catch. Near exclusive use of local reading materials could limit people's linguistic and experiential range to local contexts, thereby reinforcing readers' difficulties with non-African materials. The reason for this possibility is explained below.

L2 readers living in Africa generally have relatively limited access to the data of the target language outside instructional environments. Even those for whom English is a day to day language of interaction at home are often exposed to inappropriate data of the language. The most reliable source of data is usually reading. Indeed, in L2 context such as the case of post-colonial languages in Africa, reading is a crucial aspect of vocabulary development as well as the enhancement of syntactic competence. New data is acquired via reading material and old data is reinforced from the available reading materials.

The linguistic and communicative capacity of the reader is therefore conditioned to a large extent by the materials available. In a situation where the learner is only able to access texts that are of their own worlds, they are limited to the linguistic and rhetorical peculiarities of their own world. But as this paper has earlier pointed out, the reality of globalization raises questions about the appropriateness of this situation. Intercultural

communication has reached such a dimension that people reading in an international language like English must be prepared for the challenges of fluent reading regardless of the origin of the English texts they are reading.

Although the challenges of international and intercultural reading affects all users of English across the globe, be it in L1 or L2 contexts, it must be stated emphatically that the burden to achieve this kind of reading is more on people in developing societies like those of Africa. This is required to avoid shutting these societies from “the current of information by which all societies question themselves and grow” (Osofisan 2001, p.31). In a related but somewhat different discussion, Crystal (1997) observes that there is a real need for people in developing L2 situations such as Africa to learn the English language. The scholar points out the fact that the bulk of scientific innovations in the world are published in English language. Consequently, “those from abroad who wished to know about them would have to learn English and learn it well if they wished to benefit” (p.72).

It seems obvious that the proven, well-documented inability of readers in Africa to read materials from L1 contexts well has become a problem and must no longer be simply a matter only viewed from a pseudo-nationalistic perspective that accepts the situation as ‘normal’. This point of view can be made more obvious by citing a research report by Onochie (1986), cited in Tswana (2005) that compared the performance of a group of secondary school pupils in two separate reading tests. One of the tests was a story sourced from an L1 context. It was a story based on the underground rail system which is a common thing in the more advanced countries, but totally nonexistent in Nigeria. The second test passage was sourced from the cultural environment of the readers. It was a story based on the concept of the spirit child, which the learners were

quite familiar with. Mean score for the former was 16% while it was 35% for the latter. The researcher used test results to prove the need to use locally relevant contexts in reading instruction, based on perspectives that have been highlighted in previous sections of this paper. One must emphasize the hard fact that the situation revealed by the report can no longer be acceptable in today's world. To be modest, this kind of situation is disastrous if viewed against the backdrop of the need for people in the developing world to tap into the knowledge base that has shot the advanced world so far ahead. A situation where young readers find the concept of a subway train so strange cannot be condoned simply because there are no subway trains in their own environment. The knowledge of diverse social, political and even geographical contexts in the outside world is crucial as background knowledge for anyone in African societies who would benefit from the volume of information that is freely available today via Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Closely related to this is the need for readers of English in Africa to be familiar with usage patterns of L1 situations especially in relation to idiomatic expressions and other vocabulary items that are either not in use in their own environments or used in different ways. People in the advanced L1 culture are not under any obligation to condition their writing in, either print or electronic media, to the linguistic and experiential peculiarities of African and other developing world readers, although it would be nice if they did. In actuality, it is the responsibility of reading instructors in Africa to work out ways of conditioning their learners to prepare them for the reading challenges of keeping up with developments in the world of today where the pace

continues to be set by those who ‘own’ the languages in which the bulk of our reading is done and in which the overwhelming proportion of new knowledge is disseminated.

## **6. A Model of L2 Reading Instruction in the Age of Globalization**

This section of the paper provides broad principles and guidelines that can form the backbone of more appropriate reading instruction policies and the attendant standards of readability assessment in a typical L2 post-colonial context. Obviously, every society has its own peculiarities (which would dictate specifics). Approaches to reading instruction vary from place to place. For example, the balance between extensive reading and intensive reading is handled differently in different places. Also, reading instruction may be viewed in some places as part of a language teaching program while in some other places reading programs may run separately. The role of literature as a subject in language development may also vary in theory and practice. However, there are some broad issues that may be legitimately raised and it is possible to fine tune them to fit into different scenarios.

At the elementary level of reading instruction, where the emphasis of teaching is to build the appropriate foundation, it seems most appropriate that objects, ideas and concepts that are within the conceptual range of the learners must form the basis of the teaching. Therefore, text that will be used for both intensive and extensive reading must be of local content only. This situation may have to continue throughout the elementary school level to properly entrench the ability of the learner to connect reading with the real world around them.

The ultimate aim of this would fit somewhat into what Nganyi (2006) refers to as the “immediate aims” of reading instruction. Such immediate aims include enabling

learners to access information from various texts, and developing their vocabulary. Learners are expected to attain reasonable levels of comprehension for different texts in order to develop study skills such as skimming, scanning, prediction, textual function and inference. Acquisition of relevant reading speed, accuracy and fluency is also expected.

As the level of intellectual maturity increases however, there is the need to broaden the learner's horizon in line with the principle earlier espoused. This process can begin at the junior secondary school level with the gradual introduction of non-local content into reading schemes. At this stage, reading schemes may still consist mainly of local content. However the process of transforming the learners into 21<sup>st</sup> century readers must gradually commence.

The question arising at this stage may be: What proportion of the reading should be local and what proportion should be non-local? One must stress that this is one of the specific issues which may only be dictated by such local issues as availability of texts, learner's level of exposure (which may depend on environment) and so on. Whatever the case may be, the junior secondary level reader must begin to get familiar with (via reading exercises) thoughts, concepts, objects, and linguistic nuances of the kind of English in which either all reading, or the bulk of it will be done. There is, therefore, the need to specifically prepare learners for the task of reading text from the outside world

A concentrated focus on this imperative must form the back bone of the teaching of reading at the senior secondary school level. The developmental needs of African countries often requires that many people with secondary education must be sent to the better developed English speaking societies to acquire tertiary training in many specialized fields where these African nations are in desperate need of manpower. Also,

those who would not have the opportunity of being trained abroad would still rely extensively on books and other materials from the advanced world. Scholars like Nganyi, (2006) acknowledges this goal as one of the long-term goals of a typical reading syllabus. Thus, a well-designed reading syllabus must prepare learners for overseas studies and competent communication with foreigners from other countries, especially European countries.

In spite of the awareness of this imperative, there seem to be no clear cut or adequate strategy to address the observed deficiencies of African ESL readers in this regard. Nganyi (2006) only notes the shortage of “authentic” reading materials, and advocates improvement, but does not go into specifics. Shoki (2007) observes that most books used in African schools are published abroad and are usually not so comprehensible for the learners. For this reason, he advocates making readability assessment a major prerequisite in book selection for schools’ libraries in Nigeria. He also advocates focus on locally acquired texts.

It is however important to stress that there appears to be little or nothing anybody can do to stop the incomprehensible western textbooks from flooding our libraries. The option of producing a locally written alternative and selecting them for libraries is (for now) still a pipe dream as the bulk of the new knowledge we need will, for some time to come, continue to come via people who do not see any need to write to suit the African L2 or ESL reader. As earlier mentioned, it is the reading educator in Africa that must help learners acquire the ability to read and understand these texts. The increasing tendency among students of tertiary institutions in Africa to use internet-based materials must also be noted in this regard. In view of these, the senior secondary level must involve robust



efforts to familiarize learners with texts from the advanced world. These would involve the introduction of articles, essays, and creative work from the advanced world, covering diverse themes like social life, science, politics, sports and so on. They must be systematically selected in a way that will ensure thematic diversity and diversity of settings in order to provide an appreciable picture of the socio-cultural and psychological peculiarities of the advanced world, and vocabulary enrichment. The objective of this is to fill problematic gaps in schemata or background knowledge which (as earlier mentioned) has been found to be a crucial factor in foreign text difficulties. This will also help to inculcate essential linguistic elements.

The emphasis on the importance of building background knowledge (schemata) is hinged on the schema theory of reading. This theory attempts to explain how experiential knowledge which the reader brings with him into the reading task shapes the information on the page. The theory is based on the notion that text only provides direction for the listener or reader as to how he should retrieve or construct the intended meaning from his own previously acquired knowledge (Adams & Collins, 1985, 406). In cases where this previously acquired knowledge is paltry or nonexistent, readers tend to misconstrue meaning.

The schema theory of reading is an adaptation of a psychology theory elaborated by Fredric Bartlett in the 1920s, and more recently adopted for computing and reading (Ajideh, 2003, p.3). The theory has been fairly popular in second language reading pedagogy as a framework for managing deficiency in background knowledge. The most common approach to making up for schemata deficiencies appears to be the use of pre-

reading activities to build up learners' background knowledge in the L2 classroom, an approach recommended by Ajideh (2003) and Tswanya (2005).

While it is true that pre-reading activities are important for teaching reading, especially at the elementary level, the point must be made that the issue being emphasized in this paper is the matter of the origin of texts in the L2 reading classroom. Specifically, it is recommended that African L2 reading teachers adopt what one may refer to as an 'exocentric' approach to text selection, which favors the systematic predominant use of non-African text from the advanced world.

This must be done against the background of drastic adjustment in reading instruction practices on the continent. Reading instruction practices in many English speaking African countries are not satisfactory. Nganyi (2006) considered the situations of some East African countries and observes that reading instruction often involves inadequate preparation on the part of teachers, and non availability of proper reading curricula. Teachers simply impose their ideas on students. Nganyi (2006) further points out that:

In most cases, some students do not respond to the text at all! There is no focus on reading skills and strategies, textual structure, sentence types, language level of learners nor is there any form of learner involvement in topic choice and scope of assessment. It is a hands off kind of style that completely ignores salient language skills such as speaking, listening, note-making and summarizing. The approach is also non-interactive. Consequently, it hinders speech and personality development.

Similarly, research in Nigeria has revealed that teaching reading is extremely defective, as either adequate attention is often not given to the teaching of reading (Unoh, 1980), or teachers are simply not adequately knowledgeable about the theory and practice of teaching reading (Oyetunde & Umolu, 1989). This is a crucial factor in the general reading situation of many African ESL contexts where low reading proficiency and inadequate post-school reading have been observed. In these situations, proficiency levels are low in both local and foreign texts. The situation only appears to be much worse with foreign text. Obviously, strategies that would make non-African English language texts readable for African ESL contexts must involve an overhaul of existing practices. There must be new approaches that would involve teacher training, improving the place of reading in school curricula, and the adoption of extensive reading-based reading instruction system to help develop interest in reading and expose learners to the data of English, especially vocabulary. Adequate pre-reading and post-reading activities, geared toward expanding the schemata base of the learner, must become part of reading pedagogy. This must be focused considerably on familiarizing learners with essential non-African political, social and geophysical concepts and the associated vocabulary. This will go a long way in demystifying non-African reading material.

## **7. Conclusion**

The challenges of L2 reading are well documented. There is no doubt that on average, there are clear deficiencies in the reading performances of L2 readers. In many instances, scholars have traced the problem to unfair assessment parameters which do not take account of the cultural and linguistic peculiarities of the L2 reader. This is a notionally valid position. The problem is that this position inherently ‘exonerates’ the L2 reader

thereby masking the danger of raising generations with limited capacity to freely consume useful information from every part of the English-speaking world. The situation is not helped by the pseudo-nationalistic response to the cultural insensitivity of colonial education. This response encourages the alienation of foreign reading materials. Though it is always necessary to develop local initiatives in all sectors of society including education, there is a need for caution.

The major thesis of this paper is that the current situation is not rewarding in view of the need to access knowledge and information from L1 contexts from where the bulk of –knowledge and information required for advancement emanate. It would never be possible to completely harmonize the linguistic and communicative competence of L1 and L2 users of English in view of the obvious experiential differences involved. As such, reading English texts from different cultures would always pose new challenges for an average reader. However, it may be possible to create a situation where reading difficulty with L1 texts would not be as problematic as it tends to be for many ESL readers in Africa now, thereby enhancing ability of learners to take greater advantage of the benefits of the information age.

The suggested response in this paper centers on the role that factors of cultural differences evidently plays in difficulties with foreign texts. Cultural differences deprive L2 readers of the appropriate background knowledge needed to extract meaning. This is a crucial factor recognized in reading research, especially by the schema theory school of thought. This paper goes beyond the traditional response of recommending pre-reading activities, and offers a phased process of increasing the use of foreign texts in the African L2 reading classroom.

Obviously, these kinds of suggestions are better confirmed via empirical verification. But the ultimate objective of this paper is to sensitize reading researchers and teachers to the 21<sup>st</sup> century imperative of broadening the capacity of African readers in ESL contexts.

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