

ACHIEVING READING READINESS IN EARLY YEARS

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Abstract

Reading is one of the important skills every individual needs to acquire. If a child is able to speak a language, then it is pertinent that he knows how to read in that language especially for languages with written forms, as this will help him communicate better as well as acquire more knowledge from written texts. However, most individuals today are not reading-ready and if an individual fails to acquire this skill at an early age, it becomes more difficult. Hence, this paper tries to examine how reading readiness can be maximally achieved among early year's pupils as the foundation for reading fluency should be laid at their level, to enhance productivity. The paper examined reading readiness indicators, possible factors that could limit reading readiness and ways to achieve reading readiness.

Keywords: Reading, Reading-readiness, Fluency, Early-years, Language

Introduction

Reading ranks among the very important skills to be acquired if effective communication is to take place. If one lacks the basic foundation of the reading skill, it can lead to one's inability to comprehend a text, communicate properly, as well as, deterioration in academic grades. The earlier a child is taught to read, the easier it is for him to learn. Reading is one form of communication that must be developed in children right from their early years. It is an activity that every child engages in, from the day the child commences the educational career at the pre-primary level then through the long years at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education (Akpojotor 2013). According to Akpojotor, the best opportunity to teach children the skills of reading is in the early grades (2013), or earlier if possible. If this window is missed, then children who have not begun to read and understand what they read will continue to fall behind unless swift action is taken (Gove & Cvelich 2011).

Reading yields benefit in the lives of pupils, it develops critical thinking skills in pupils and enhances their ability to comprehend various concepts with

immense ease. It also improves pupils' vocabulary, command on the language and communication skills thereby improving their writing skills (Ogbemudia&Alasa 2014). This is to say that being able to read and indulge in the activity of reading, exposes one to the entire world. One is able to travel round the world by merely being able to read and understand from books, what others have written from their wealth of experience. Unfortunately, for someone who does not know how to read, words in books would mean nothing but mere gibberish.

Reading is the foundation for other learning activities in the classroom. The point of reading is comprehension, and the point of comprehension is learning. Children who fail to learn to read in the first few grades of school are handicapped in later grades because they must absorb increasing amounts of instructional content in print form. Poor readers cannot develop proper writing skills or become self-guided learners in other subject areas. The basic reading skills necessary to become 'literate' do not develop naturally; we have to learn to adapt the part of our brain that recognizes images to be able to recognize written letters and words (Wolf qtd. in Gove & Cvelich 2011). It can be deduced that reading is of utmost importance as it helps not only in enhancing critical thinking, but in comprehension, as well as, broadening the wealth of experience if one would have been able to read a wide variety of information. Hence, it is important that this communication skill is developed in people, right from their early years.

What then does reading-readiness mean?

Concept of Reading Readiness

According to Smith and Chapel (1970), reading readiness is the time at which a child is capable of learning to read. Zarry (1985) defines reading readiness as that state which enables a child to learn to read without undue strain or difficulty.

Previously in the past, it was believed that the state of readiness was closely aligned to age, whereby the mental age of six was considered the time to introduce reading skills to a child (Zarry,1985). However, this belief no longer holds strongly as scholars now believe that children's learning age could vary from child to child depending on the needs of the child. While some might begin to pick up reading at birth; others might become ready at ages one, two, three or even six or later than six. This is why no two persons should be compared, rather the needs of each child should be considered and the best instructional method on how to learn should be adopted depending on individual needs.

Ausubell (1959) defined reading readiness as the adequacy of existing capacity in relation to the demands of a given learning task. Asubell qtd. in Petrich (1997) suggested in this definition of readiness, that what learning to read demands of a child is not one thing, rather a collection of abilities and that the selected teaching method is an important variable. This definition of a child's readiness for reading has a two-fold focus: (a) the child's capacity in relation to (b) the particular instruction that will be available. Because differences in instruction make for differences in demands, what is adequate for dealing with them also differs (Durkin qtd. in Petrich 1977). The instructional strategy employed by a teacher in the teaching-learning process is of great importance to the pupils' readability level. This is because it helps the pupils to have a good understanding of the subject matter being taught by the teacher and it also motivates the pupils to learn and be actively involved in the learning process. Hence, in teaching reading, there are different instructional methods or strategies that could be employed such as;

1. Jolly phonics instructional strategy and
2. Conventional methods – such as
 - i. Whole method (look and say method)
 - ii. Alphabet methods. (Ogbemudia and Alasa 2014)

To a large extent, this is to say that the learning process is facilitated by the instructional method being employed. Hence, it is of great importance to know which method is most effective before making use of any of them.

Components of Reading Readiness

There are several elements that can aid reading in children without necessarily creating panic. These elements are what this paper has termed as the components of reading readiness.

1. Alphabet recognition- languages have their alphabet and letters (grapheme). In achieving reading readiness in early years, children should be able to recognize and identify the different alphabets in the target language, as well as, match the alphabet with the different sounds.
2. Vocabulary development- Having a strong build of vocabulary in a language helps to facilitate understanding when reading. When readers come across familiar words, it becomes easy to read them without tension. But in the case of not being familiar with a lot of words while reading, the level of comprehension of what has been written will be low. This is why vocabulary development is an essential part of reading readiness and any child who must become a fluent reader must consciously develop his vocabulary in the desired target language.

3. Good word pronunciations- correct pronunciation will be realized when a child is phonologically aware of the target language and is able to blend and decode words rightly.
4. Good auditory discrimination- auditory discrimination has to do with how we are able to perceive sounds. As part of reading readiness, children are supposed to know how to differentiate the different sounds in their target language. A good understanding of the phonological structure of the language will go a long way in determining how well their auditory discrimination will be. Learning to decode sounds and blend sounds to pronounce words is important and is an integral part of reading readiness.
5. Good visual discrimination- a child should be able to see and differentiate printed texts. Reading requires adequate skill in differentiating words. Being able to distinguish the similarities and differences between words is an important skill to be learned.

Reading Readiness Indicators

How do you know if a child is ready to read? There are several signs or indicators that a child is ready to read. Nonetheless, not every child will show all the signs before you know they are ready to read. Some may possess a few at an earlier age and add up others as they grow and progress in reading. What is important is that they begin to develop the signs. The reading readiness indicators include:

1. **Keen Interest-** The best and fastest way to learn is to have an interest in what you want to learn. It is that interest that becomes a drive to learn more. If a child must learn how to read, he must have keen interest in reading. Therefore, it is an indicator that the child is reading-ready.
2. **Correct Alphabet Recitation-** This paper had earlier listed alphabet recognition as one of the components of reading readiness. That is to say that correct recognition and recitation of the alphabet of the target language is important and is a sign that the child is ready to read.
3. **Decoding and Blending-** When a child is phonologically and phonemically aware, to the extent that he begins decoding sounds and blends them appropriately to pronounce words, that child is reading ready.
4. **Proper Book Handling-** There is a right way to open books and read and there is a wrong way to do so too. When given a book to read, if the child can hold up the front and the right-side-up, it then means he understands that books should be read from right to left and back to right again. He would also be handling the book properly if he is aware that he should turn one page at a time.

However, Smith and Chapel (1970), are of the opinion that a child is ready to read when he has reached readiness in four different aspects of growth; physiological, psychological (emotional and intellectual), educational and sociological (cultural and environmental).

Factors Responsible for Low Level Reading Readiness

1. **Economic factor-** The economic state of a parent can affect the reading readiness of a child. This can happen when the parents or guardian of a child do not have enough resources to get the required materials such as books, internet and many more for enhancing reading. It's only rational that children who are exposed to these things at an early age are likely to start reading early and *vice versa*.
2. **Educational and socio-economic background of parents-** The educational background of the parents or guardians have great influence on how well a child will do when it comes to reading. If the parents happen to come from homes where they had sound education and come from a good socio-economic class, the chances that they are fluent readers is high. The children begin to follow suit as even the parents would not want anything less for their children from what they already have. If a child comes from a family that is poor and have no form of formal education, chances also have it that they will not be fluent readers, hence, will not be able to teach their children how to read neither will they have the resources to employ someone who can coach the children on how to read.
3. **Parental knowledge and Experience-**It is one thing to have the resources needed and another thing to know exactly how to channel those resources for the benefit of the children. Parents need to be aware of the books, games, and activities to engage their children with to enhance their reading readiness. Proper exposure will spur the interest of the children to read more. Parents could also take out time to read stories to their children from colorful, interesting and educative books during their playtime or bed time. Parents who do not have this knowledge or experience may fail in this aspect. This is why it is necessary to make them aware.
4. **Insufficient Phonemic Awareness-** One of the basics for knowing how to read is to have a good understanding of the sound structure of the target language. A child who is not Phonemic awareness is characterized in terms of the facility of the language learner to

manipulate the sounds of oral speech. The question then is; how can phonemic awareness work to facilitate reading readiness?

5. **Poor Reading Culture-** Some children find it difficult to read due to poor or no reading culture at home. Parental involvement is of great necessity in helping their children develop good reading culture at home. If they are exposed to reading a lot at home, it is likely that they will be stimulated to read more.

Strategies for Enhancing Reading Readiness in Early-Year Pupils

If we must achieve reading readiness among the early years, then several strategies must be considered and implemented.

- i. It is important to build a strong foundation. The early years which consist of all the levels before the primary stage should be the focus in starting to learn reading as they are the foundation on which reading fluency is laid. Once it is missed at this stage, it becomes a little more difficult at the next stage. Thus, parents, teachers and the pupils should ensure that reading starts taking place at this stage.
- ii. Identifying the needs of each child. Each child has his own peculiarity and needs. This is why no two children should be compared. It is very important to identify the specific need of every child to enable the child learn how to read through the best method to meet his needs. Children with special needs such as autism, dyslexia etc. have to be put into consideration, hence, they will not be expected to learn at the same pace and with the same method as everyone else.
- iii. Adopting the right instructional method. It is not enough to identify the needs of a child. One needs to go a step further in ensuring that the child learns how to read by employing the best instructional method to suit the child's needs.
- iv. Parental Involvement- Parents need to get involved in the educational progress of their children. This can be achieved by implementing some practices in the home. They can make substantial financial commitments to aid getting the resources for learning how to read and by reading to the children on a daily basis. If daily reading of books by parents to the children isn't achievable on a daily basis, then some days of the week could be picked out for this exercise. There is also need to build a healthy reading culture by allowing your children see you read daily. It is most likely that children will do the same things they see their parents do, so when they see you obtain useful information from

reading books and other written texts; it will spur them to develop a reading culture as well. As parents, time could be created for reading and telling interesting short stories right from their early years. As you read together with them, you can teach them some of the sounds and how to blend them to pronounce some of the words they might find difficult while reading. It is important to start with stories with simple short words. Once they have mastered how to blend those short words and pronounce them rightly, it will become easier for them to learn how to read more difficult and complex words.

- v. Another thing that can help children to get ready to read is if they are frequently made to read books, particularly, interesting stories for their age and then made to retell those stories. This practice exposes learners to reading. The learners progress through various stages of reading, by looking at pictures in books, then reading the pictures, and then making up a story about the pictures. Eventually learners learn letter sounds and make words by liking the sounds together. Learners then start incidentally, reading words that they see often, such as simple CVC words and logos (Plessis, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the concept of reading and how important it is to acquire the reading skill especially at an early grade level because children at young ages tend to be more receptive at that age. If the reading skill is missed at that early stage, it doesn't necessarily become impossible to read, but rather, a bit difficult. Hence, pupils are advised to become reading ready at an early age. As simple as this may sound, it does not come without various problems when it comes to acquiring the reading skill. There exist several factors that could limit reading readiness in early years. These factors include poor reading culture, lack of parental involvement, parental educational and socio-economic background, inadequate phonological awareness of the target language and lots more. However, these limiting factors do not exist without a working solution. Some ideas were recommended in this paper to help enhance reading readiness in early years. Some of these ideas include, identifying the needs of each pupil, adopting the right instructional method to suit the individual needs of each child, improving the phonological awareness of the pupils, parents making out time to read stories to their children, as well as, making substantial financial commitments, developing good reading culture in the home, exposing the young ones to books at early ages to enable them start reading and retelling the stories and lots more. If these ideas recommended in this paper are put to work, reading readiness in early years will be achievable.

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