TEACHING BEGINNING READING AND READING COMPREHENSION IN THE LOWER PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

A direct relationship exists between the act of learning to read and reading to learn. It is the duty of the language teacher to employ appropriate pedagogical strategies for the achievement of the purpose for which beginning reading and reading comprehension is taught. This paper, therefore, highlights the diverse strategies of teaching beginning reading and reading comprehension in the lower primary school. It discussed the concepts of oral language foundation, print, and the speech-writing connection within the ambit of reading readiness videlicet how they facilitate beginning reading and reading comprehension. When the learner has adequately mastered the stage of learning to read, he transits to the reading comprehension stage where he interacts with written and/or printed materials. This paper finally analysed the pre-reading, while reading, and post reading stages of reading comprehension highlighting what the language teacher is expected to do at each stage.

INTRODUCTION

There are four basic language skills which are broadly classified into listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These are sub-classified into receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive or expressive skills (speaking and writing). The importance of reading as a preschool and primary school activity is rather evident. Clearly, skill in reading is a basic factor enabling the pupils to succeed in school, be efficient at work, and interact in everyday life. To be specific, failure in such subjects as social studies, Bible knowledge and arithmetic may be the result of failure in reading. Moreover, there is evidence that in some instances the emotional strain caused by lack of success in reading and the attendant failure in other subjects is partly responsible for unsatisfactory social adjustment (Ncharam, 2007). It is similarly evident that outside the school the individual's mental growth and progressive social adjustment depend largely on his ability and inclination to read. Indeed, if the field of reading is closed to a child, his outlook on life and his vocational efficiency in the future are incalculably restricted.

THE PURPOSE FOR READING

Comprehension of a text totally depends on the interest and intention of the reader. A reader reading for the purpose of pleasure is likely to skip various passages unless he thinks that his overall understanding is not affected. David and Dale (1978) categorized the purposes for reading into (a) getting general information from the text (b) getting specific information from a text and (c) for pleasure or for interest. McDonough and Shaw(2004) have listed the following examples of some of the reasons for reading:

- to obtain information for some purpose or because we are curious about some topic
- to obtain instructions on how to perform some task for our work or daily life . to keep in touch with friends by correspondence or to understand business letters . to know when or where something will

take place or what is available . to know what is happening or has happened (as reported in newspapers, magazines, reports) . for enjoyment or excitement

TEACHING BEGINNING READING

In teaching beginning reading which is also referred to as learning to read, there is need to develop reading readiness skills and concepts. This means developing readiness from non-reading to beginning reading. In order for the task of the language teacher to be successful, he has to activate the interest level of the learners so as to ensure their persistence and deliberate engagement in the beginning reading tasks (Ainley, Heidi & Berndorff, 2002). The language teacher guides learners through reading readiness activities by (i) laying oral language foundation, (ii) teaching the concept of print and (iii) exposing learners to the speech-writing connection (Oyetunde & Muodumogu, 1999). These are discussed below.

Oral Language Foundation

Oral language provides the foundation for literacy development. English language learners (ELLS) need daily opportunities to learn and practice oral English in order for their literacy skills to flourish. Pupils learn English primarily by listening to language in use around them while using context to figure out what the spoken words mean. The words people speak in the course of interactions serve as the data that learners internalise and use to express their own meanings as they engage in mutual linguistic interaction with other people around them. Punkoney (2013) suggested four main ways in which oral language foundation helps the development ofreading skills in learners. According to her, oral language foundation

1. develops vocabulary concepts

ELLS learn to develop their knowledge of words and improve their pronunciation of words as they listen to other people use the language around them. They learn vocabularies relating to colours, shapes, and objects. They also learn to use words in their interactions which name or describe feelings, ideas, people, animals, and places.

2. teaches language structure

   Language is a complex phenomenon. Words are borne out of thoughts and are used in phrases, clauses, and sentences to express feelings or ideas in a variety of ways. Here, ELLs learn how linguistic units are used in a particular way in a language to express good communicative meanings.

3. teaches cultural nuances

   The meaning of a word may vary from place to place as a result of how it is used in the light of culture. ELLS get to learn words, pronunciations, and phrases that vary from one region to another. Cultural nuances are dialectal subtleties which could be accentual, syntactic, and lexical differences (Victoria, Robert & Nina, 2011).

4. builds desire to use language

   Teachers of language are models to ELLs. When a teacher uses language in a manner that appeals to the sensibilities of the learner, it inspires the learner to use language in similar ways as they listen to someone speaking, speak out their own opinions, or read meaning from/into written texts.

Learners learn language by listening to and imitating the models of their parents and teachers at home and in school. Learning to read requires time and everyday practice and learners mimic not only the actual words their parents and teachers use, but also the way in which they are used. When parents and teachers pronounce words erroneously or use grammar inappropriately, learners will make the same mistake as they use language. In order to lay a very good oral language foundation, it behoves the teachers of ELLs to:

1. realise that ELLs are potential communicators. They should be encouraged to dialogue among themselves for when they express their ideas and feelings their oral language skill is strengthened.
2. reinforce the good speech habits of ELLs. While the teacher models appropriate language use, he should praise the learners' good use of grammar, vocabulary, and general expression.

3. the teacher should read story books and other materials regularly, and also encourage his learners to do same. This is according to Punkoney (2013).

The Concept of Print

The concept of print refers to the process of creating the understanding in ELLs that each phoneme (one of a small set of speech sounds that are distinguished by the speakers of a particular language) is represented by a graphic symbol. The development of this understanding is demonstrated as learners begin to write letter like shapes as well as letters to represent words and then later when they attempt to spell words. It is not until the onset of this principle in literacy development that learners are able to move on to the concepts associated with word recognition and reading.

When ELLs are introduced to the concept of prints, they are guided to appreciate:

- Where to begin writing or reading (going from left to right)
- Where to go after the end of the line (return sweep)
- That the print, not the picture, carries the message
- The relationship between print and the spoken word - Word by word pointing (one-to-one correspondence) . The concept of a letter, word, sentence
- The concept of first and last part (of the word, sentence, story)
- That letter order in words is important
- That there are first and last letters in words
- That upper and lower case letters have purpose
- That different punctuation marks have meaning
- The different forms of print— signs, newspapers, books, etc.
- The purpose of print (that it carries meaning)
- How to hold a book
- The parts of the book
- Directionality — how to read (left to right, top to bottom) (Reutzel & Cooter, 2012).

Concepts about print can be divided into three distinct and different print aspects, these are:

The functional aspects of print

Functional print is the print learners see around the classroom. They use functional print to gain information about routines, procedures, and schedules. It includes the print on labels and charts. Because it is often presented before learners can read actual words, it is accompanied by pictures, colour coding, and repetitive symbols. The purpose of functional print is to help learners develop the knowledge that print is made up of symbols that help people communicate. Examples of functional print include: Morning Message, Job Chart, Attendance, Calendar, Weather Chart, Daily Schedule, and Centre Chart.

The mapping aspects of print

Learners are guided to understand that what is written can be read and what is read can be written. They also realise that they can match/map/attribute speech sounds onto printed symbols. This includes environmental print knowledge and knowledge that the message is in text, not just visuals. For example, learners can become aware that the letters of the alphabet on the container of a favourite biscuit packet could be read and what is read out could be the name of what is contained in the packet.

The technical aspects of print

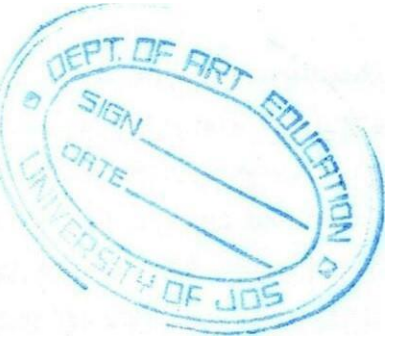
This refers to the rules and conventions that govern the written aspect of English language. The levels of language concepts which are covered under the technical aspects of print are:

1. Ordinal

- First, second, third, etc.
- Beginning, end/ last
- Letter, word, sentence, paragraph, book

2. Visuals embedded in books and print

- Cover, spine, pages
- Margins, indentations
- Spacing, print size, punctuation



3. Location concepts

-Top, bottom, left, right

-Beginning (front, start, initial)

-Middle (centre, medial, in between)

-End (back, final)

Classroom Practices that Support the Acquisition of Concepts of Print for Emergent Readers

Parents and teachers can help learners learn concepts about print by exposing them to print and practicing the skills listed above. The following list supports a print-rich environment and provides opportunities for beginning readers to learn such skills.

- Have class helpers search for distinguishing features of the front of books as they clean up the class library and arrange them properly in book display racks.
- Model directionality and one to one matching by pointing to words while using enlarged text in a big book, pocket chart, poem, or song chart. With repeated readings, the language of the text is learned and the learners can practice following along or eventually match the words they say with the print on the page independently. They may practice by pointing to words with their fingers or any number of home made pointers.
- Leave multiple pieces of familiar text (songs, poems, rhymes, etc.) posted in the room at a child's eye level to be available for students to "read around the room" independently.
- Write a brief, familiar rhyme or poem on individual word cards and assemble them on a pocket chart. Construct and reconstruct the text on the pocket chart with the learners developing an awareness of directionality,

one to one matching of the print to spoken words, spacing conventions, punctuation, etc.

- Have learners search a familiar text to locate an upper or lowercase letter, a known word, punctuation, etc.
- Highlighting tape, sticky notes, wikki sticks and learners' fingers can be used to isolate and locate a variety of conventions of print in a piece of familiar text.
- Use interactive writing to provide opportunities for constructing text with learners. Model, share and support the writing task for emergent writers. As the teacher "thinks aloud" throughout the task, learners have the opportunity to hear about a variety of print concepts and practice using them (E.g. should we put our first word at the top or the bottom? Will the first letter go on the right or the left? Should we use the upper or lowercase? What goes at the end of our sentence?)
- Use magnetic letters, word titles even name cards to complete sorts emphasizing similarities and differences between words and letters. (E.g. put all the upper case letters in a pile. Ask the learners to find all the words that have the letter B.)

Create a pocket chart activity using a few known sight words, learners' name cards and periods, exclamation marks and question marks. Practice reading simple sentences. Students can develop an understanding of the importance of punctuation as it alters the reading of such simply constructed texts.

SPEECH AND WRITING CONNECTION

Learners commence learning language from their very first day of life. While they undergo the complex process of physical growth and development, their speech and language skills also progressively develop. They learn to understand and use language to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings, and to communicate with others. During early speech and language development, learners learn skills that are important to making sense out of written or printed materials.

Learners see and interact with print (e.g., books, magazines, picture books) in everyday situations (e.g., home, nursery school) well before they start primary school. Parents can see their child's growing appreciation and enjoyment of print as he or she begins to recognize words that rhyme, scribble with crayons, point out street signs, and name some letters of the alphabet. Gradually, learners combine what they know about speaking and listening with what they know about print and become ready to learn to read and write.

In order to develop learners' speech-writing connection skill, there are three approaches that are apt to the teaching of the skill. Umolu (1998) and Oyetunde and Muodumogu (1999) identify these approaches as:

i. Literary Awareness Programme (LAP): This is a language activity where the teacher reads interesting stories to the learners every day. The essence of this, according to Mangvwat (2001) is to help provide both the experience and language backgrounds of the learners in addition to generating learners' interest in reading.

ii. News on the Board (NOB): This involves the learners sharing their experiences in class. While they do this, the teacher writes their report on the board as news items. This assists the learners to see the basic correspondence between their speech and what their teacher writes on the board as their own utterance. What the teacher writes on the board becomes the learners' reading "text". NOB has the power to boost the confidence levels of the learners as they see their personal experiences written on the board

iii. Language Experience Approach (LEA)and News on the Board share a lot of similarity in their features. However, while NOB dwells on more general story plots, LEA relies on specific themes. The "experience" which will be written about may be a drawing, something the learner brought from home, a group experience planned by the teacher (field trip, science experiment, film strip, party, etc.), or simply a topic of common interest to discuss.

A teacher of beginning readers may adopt a simple procedure as below when utilizing the LEA:

a. The learner is asked to tell about his/her experience.
b. The learner then dictates his or her story or experience to the teacher, aide, volunteer, or to another learner.
c. The writer copies down the story exactly as it is dictated (not correcting the reporter's grammar while the story was being written down).
d. The teacher reads the story back, pointing to the words, with the learner reading along. With young children at the beginning reading levels, it may be necessary to read back each sentence as it is dictated.
e. The learner reads the story silently and/or aloud to other learners or to the teacher.
f. The experience stories are saved and can be used for instruction in all types of reading skills. When learners are ready, they can begin to write their own experience stories. A good way to introduce this is to discuss the experience, write a group experience story, and then have learners write their own stories.
g. Learners can re-write their own previous stories as their language development progresses, and then illustrate them to make books for other students to read.

Another component of the LEA suggested by Carolyn (1990) is the shared reading strategy. It involves the following step by step presentation:

a. The teacher chooses a text--a story, song, or poem
b. He enlarges the text so all learners can see it at once. This can be done by using commercial big books, making his own big books, copying the text on cardboard paper, or using an opaque projector or overhead projector
c. He reads the text to the learners, pointing to each word as he reads
d. He encourages prediction by covering words that are easy to predict (because of context, pictures, rhyme, etc.) and having learners guess them

e.Uses masking devices to uncover parts of words, teaching learners how to use phonics to confirm predictions. Masking devices can also be used to show prefixes, suffixes and roots, or to fix attention on any words for whatever reason

f. After learners have heard the text several times, they join in while the teacher is reading. The teacher continues to point at each word as it is read

g. The teacher could invite individual learners to read and point

h. The teacher also could make small copies of the text available for learners to take home and read to their parents

READING COMPREHENSION

Reading as an act has been described variously. For instance, Gough (1995:4) says reading consists of two parts, "one is recognizing the words on the page, the other is understanding the words once you have recognised them."Ngwoke (2006:45) defines it as "the recognition and conscious reproduction of written or printed symbols, letters, words, word groups, and sentences either mentally or vocally by means of eye or finger contact." Besides, Saucier (2001 : 158) considers reading as involving more than the mechanical skill of pronouncing to oneself or to others the words of a writer. He asserts that "real reading is fundamentally comprehension and reconstruction of ideas that have been expressed in printed form."

From the foregoing, it is apparent that English language learners need to be able to read any material with a good level of understanding for themselves and independently too. The learner must have the degree of intelligence necessary for him to see the relationship of words in sentences, sentences in paragraphs, and paragraphs in in the whole written production. Basic reading competence is consolidated by developing the skills of "surveying, skimming, scanning, identification of main ideas, summarization, retelling, and the ability to answer literal, inferential, and

critical questions based on what is read" (Oyetunde, 2013: 18). For the purpose of this paper, the last three skills will be treated below.

TYPES OF COMPREHENSION

Comprehension of reading texts is especially important for ELLs in the upper primary school according to Sweet and Snow (2003), because it provides the foundation for further learning in secondary school and beyond. A learner's academic progress is profoundly shaped by his ability to understand what he reads. ELLS who cannot understand what they read are not likely to acquire the skills necessary to function efficiently in school or at work in the future.

There are three different types of comprehension skills that should be developed in learners of English language. They are literal, inferential, and critical comprehension skills.

Literal comprehension

This refers to the ability of learners to comprehend what is explicitly stated in a reading passage. To understand at this level, learners need to follow the printed ideas as presented so as to discover the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases within given contexts. The teacher does not have to explain the difficult terms ahead of time but he has to ensure that the learners follow the storyline, the structure as well as the meanings intended by the author. To do this, the teacher should ask questions such as: Who/what is the story about? What did he/she/it do or say? Why did he/she/it
do or say that?

Inferential comprehension

Anthony (2007) defines inference as, "The reasoning involved in drawing a conclusion or making a logical judgment on the basis of circumstantial evidence and prior conclusions rather than on the basis of direct observation. "By inference learners are able to discover the meaning

of unfamiliar words and phrases as they are used in a given passage by an author. Often, learners' background knowledge helps them to deduce hidden meanings in a reading passage. Learners must not only possess background knowledge, but they must also be able to apply the knowledge relevant to the text they are reading. Good readers use inferences to fill in meaning where it is missing. Readers tend to use inference only as needed to achieve coherence because inference can be such an effortful process (Perfetti, Landi & Oakhill, 2005). Readers will exert mental effort until they judge themselves to understand the text, thus achieving a standard of coherence.

Critical comprehension

Critical comprehension refers to the comprehension level where the learners understand the text and are able to relate it to their experiences and views. Questions that will help learners develop critical comprehension skills include: What do you like in the character of.. .? Why do you like... (the particular character)? Is there anything you would have done differently if you were in (a particular character's) situation? Answers to these questions would require information outside the given passage but certainly relevant to it.

TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION

According to Johnson (2002), the purpose of pre-reading activities is to motivate learners to want to read a comprehension material and to prepare them to be able to read it. Because the major emphasis in the past has been on the product rather than the process, the teacher is assuming that meaning resides in the reading itself. Hence, the usual procedure for the teaching of reading comprehension in primary schools is to ask the learners to open to a page in their textbooks, read the given passage, and then answer the questions that follow under the passage. Neufeld (2006:302) refers to this kind of strategy as "tasking reading rather than teaching reading." What activities should constitute the teaching of reading comprehension? This question will be answered in the following paragraphs.

Pre-reading Activities

It is necessary for a language teacher to engage learners in any activity that is meant to introduce or raise their interest in reading a comprehension passage. Whetting the reading appetite of learners gives them a reason to look forward to reading any material the teacher intends to present to them in the course of his lesson. Pre-reading activities help ensure that the learners are not only motivated but actively involved in the reading process. When the knowledge that learners already have in their heads about a topic or a related topic is pushed to the forefront of their minds, it is easier for them to make connections between what they are learning from the text and what they already know, make predictions about what will happen next, and organize what they read in their minds.

For an effective pre-reading session with leamers, the researchers propose Langer's (1981) pre-reading plan. This is a three-step instructional procedure which uses a discussion-based activity in the assessment stage, which allows the teacher, as well as the student, to define the amount of information needed and which vocabulary items need to be taught or reinforced in order to facilitate comprehension of the text.

The pre-reading plan begins with the teacher introducing a key word, concept or picture to stimulate a discussion. By having the learners say anything that initially comes to mind and having that information recorded on the blackboard, learners are able to see the associations. By asking the learners questions such as, "What made you think of. they become aware of their network of associations. A learner also has the opportunity to listen to other explanations and interact with other learners. This interactive process also provides learners with the opportunity to accept, reject or alter their own initial associations and to integrate them into more accurate pictures of the target concept. The third and final step is the reformulation of knowledge, which provides the opportunity for learners to verbalize any changes of modifications of their associations that may have occurred during the discussion phase. The purpose of helping the learner to

link his/her background knowledge with concepts in the text is to set up appropriate expectations about the language and content of the passage.

Activities during Reading

During the actual reading exercise, the teacher guides learners to appreciate the general details of a text and gradually narrow in on the minute details of the same text. Here the teacher could use the comprehension questions which are either at the beginning of a text or at the end to assess the learners' level of understanding of the passage.

In the during-reading stage, both teacher and pupils generally read a text with some purpose or interest in mind. One important purpose is for the teacher to model good reading strategies such as identifying main ideas, predicting information (what comes next), relating one idea with another, guessing meaning of unfamiliar words in context or deciding to skip unfamiliar words. Therefore, the stage is normally dominated with discussions and activities that match pupils' interest so as to help the teacher gear the activities toward achieving the purpose. The teacher should remember not to dominate the activities because the final goal of any reading activity is to enable pupils "read without help, unfamiliar, authentic texts, at appropriate speed, silently and with adequate understanding" (Nuttall, 1996: 31). Apparently, pupils also need some time to experience and get used to individual silent reading.

Common activities in this stage are: modeled reading, skimming-scanning, rereading, pausing and predicting, asking and answering questions, summarizing, reading aloud by the teacher (or from a tape), etc.

Post-reading Activities

When the during-reading stage is completed, the learners are expected to have obtained new information from the text. This should bring about a change of some kind such that they would know more or think or feel differently from before. Therefore, the teacher should ask, So what?, which leads to the connection between the new information the learners are now familiar with. According to Harmer (2007), when intensive work in a

during-reading stage is completed, general comprehension must be intended. At this stage, the learners should be able to evaluate the text as a whole to respond to it from a more or less personal point of view. They may be asked to agree or disagree with the author or the characters in the text; relate the content to their own experience; connect the content with other works in the same field; discuss characters, incidents, ideas, feelings; or predict what can happen afterwards. Other common post reading activities are: creating stories or end of stories, producing posters, reconstructing texts, and questioning the text or views of the writer, listing main ideas, matching events with characters, creating topic sentences for portions of the text, etc.

There are many activities that will refine, enrich, and increase interest in the assigned topic of a text. However, the primary goal of the post reading phase is to further develop and clarify interpretations of the text, and to help learners remember what they have individually created in their minds from the text. Good post-reading activities should be able to get the learners to recycle some aspects from their while reading activities; to go beyond the text; to share opinions, ideas, and feelings; and to give reasons to communicate.

CONCLUSION

The pre-primary and primary school years are critical to the development of emergent literacy skills that will help children to grow into literate adults. Early literacy skills, such as developing pre-reading and reading comprehension skills are at the core of the educational attainment of the child. Hence, teachers of pre-primary and primary school children play an important role in helping to develop these skills. Throughout the school day, language teachers should look for opportunities to incorporate activities discussed above to promote the development of reading skills among their pupils.

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