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Teaching of Reading in Primary Schools: A Way Forward for the Nigerian Primary School Teacher

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Keywords: *teaching, reading, primary, school, teacher.*

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Teaching of Reading in Primary Schools: A Way Forward for the Nigerian Primary School Teacher

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Keywords: teaching, reading, primary, school, teacher.

I. Introduction

Every recognized language is made up of four skills. They are the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These four skills are broken into two (the receptive and the productive schemes). The receptive scheme is made up of listening and reading, while the productive scheme is made up of speaking and writing. For one to be called a literate of any language such a person must learn to read the language. Thus, it is easy for a child to acquire the skills of listening and speaking, whereas, the skills of reading and writing are learnt. In other words, a child can easily listen and then thereafter speak a language without the assistance of a literate person (parents or teacher) whereas, the skills of reading and writing cannot be acquired, but it must be learnt through the help of an educated parents or better still a teacher formally in a school setting. Beginning reading is a solid foundation in which almost all subsequent learning is built upon. Thus, the children need a solid foundation. The solid foundation of the educational system is primary education. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013), "Primary education is the education given in institutions for children ages 6 to 11 plus. Since the rest of the education system is built on it, the primary school level is the key to success or failure of the whole system." Therefore, teachers at this level have a very important role to play in the lives of the learners. In English language, the skill of reading is very fundamental in the educational system, thus, the teacher must see him/herself as an architect whose design will determine the outcome a building (life) .

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II. Objectives of the Study

The skill of reading is an important aspect of English language and every other subject in the educational system. Therefore, a high premium is placed on effective implementation of reading skills in school generally. The effective implementation of the English language curriculum lies with the teacher who is described as then hub of the educational system (Bell-Gram, 2004). Thus, the main objectives of this study is the effective teaching of reading skills at the primary school level. Specifically, this study is to:

1. Identify and discuss the basic skills of reading at the primary school level.
2. Identify and discuss reading readiness amongst pupils that will enhance the teaching of reading at the primary school level.
3. Discuss the various methods (approach suitable for teaching/learning reading at the primary school level).

III. The Concept and Nature of Reading

Reading can be described as the process of making meaning out of the 26 letters of the English alphabet. Simply put, it is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and attaining meaning from them. Harris and Sipay (1984) defined reading as the meaningful interpretation of printed or written verbal symbols. In other words, reading is the outcome of interaction between the perception of graphic symbols that represent language and the reader's language skills and knowledge of the world. Reading is not only a matter of getting meaning from printed verbal symbols

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but also the interaction between the graphic symbols and the reader's schema in understanding the text which is comprehension (Solikhah, 2018). Reading is mainly a means of communicating information between the writer and the reader. When a reader reads a material, it is expected that such a reader makes a meaning from what has been read. It is only when a meaning is made from the reading material that one can say reading has taken place. According to Vacca, Vacca and Gove (1991) the reader tries to understand ideas that the writer has put in print. Reading actually involves decoding and comprehension. Decoding process is the process of saying printed words into a representation similar to oral English either silently or aloud. In a nutshell, reading is a process of understanding written language. Reading as a decoding process is translating grapheme strings into spoken words that occurs ongoing in the beginning of learning to read: The stage (that is pre and primary level) is on perceptual process, which is to familiarize the correspondence of letter strings to the language sound (Adams and Collins, 1985 in Solinkah, 2018). Reading at the primary level of education (that is the early stage) can be seen as the bottom- up process, which involves the identification of features of letters, recognition of letters, combination of letters to form words and reading of simple sentences, paragraphs and text.

The teacher has to put in a lot of effort to be able to achieve the bottom-up process. A critical look at this process indicates that reading is a complex process. The process involves the domains of learning which are: cognitive, affective and psychomotor domain. The ability to combine these domains of learning is very crucial, therefore, the teacher is required to play a very vital role to effectively cultivate in the children the ability to move smoothly from the bottom to the top process of reading. Adima (2013) asserted that effective reading instruction requires the teacher to be able to manipulate the cognitive, affective, psychomotor and social domains in order to develop appropriate reading experiences.

Burns and Roe (2005) gave factors that a teacher of reading must be aware of, concerning the nature and development of the reading skill. The knowledge of these ideas will go a long way to guide the teacher to effectively teach reading. The factors include:

1. Reading and readiness must be considered at all levels of instruction;
2. Reading is a complex act with many factors that must be considered e.g. sensing aspects, perceptual aspects and sequential aspects. Other important factors are the relationship between reading and thinking, the relationship of reading to learning, reading as an associational process and the effective aspects of the reading process.
3. There is no particular way of teaching reading.
4. Learning to read is a continuous process.
5. The teacher should diagnose each student's reading problems and use the diagnosis as a basis for planning instruction.
6. Readiness for reading should be considered at all level of instructions;
7. Pupils should be taught word recognition skills that will help them get the pronunciations and meanings of unfamiliar words on their own.
8. Teaching should be done in such a way that every child experiences success.
9. Enjoyment of reading should be considered very important.
10. Reading is the interpretation of the meaning of printed symbols (words).

Going by the nature of learning, it is pertinent at this juncture to mention the basic skills of reading as this will enhance the teachers' effectiveness. The skills include vocabulary acquisition, pre reading strategies, textual comprehension, organizational skills and response techniques. These skills will help the teacher's preparedness and at the same time help/assist the learners increase their reading speed, comprehension and overall vocabulary. In fact, reading skills are critical to educational and professional success. These reading skills actually include several sub-skills that contribute to effective and efficient reading. For the purpose of this paper, the fundamental/basic reading skills are:

1. *Print awareness and phonics:* this skill is usually developed even before the child starts primary school. Usually, babies start to develop pre-reading at home with the help of the parents and child care providers. At this stage, children understand print by looking at the books and playing with them. A child acquires the phonics skill by learning to recognize word parts, syllables and sounds. These skills (print awareness and phonics) are some of the most foundational abilities in an effective reader.
2. *Vocabulary skills:* This skill is acquired or formed at the early age of a learner. Infants and preschoolers often develop vocabulary rapidly. Research has shown that the more vocabulary/language experiences a child is exposed to as adults speak, the more advanced their reading abilities become. Primary school teachers can enhance pupils reading abilities by exposing children to new words.
3. *Reading comprehension:* This skill is actually needed at the secondary level of education, however, it is important that a child cultivates good reading comprehension skills at the primary school. This skill actually helps a reader not just to be able to interpret the meaning of words and sentences but to be able to interpret the meaning of passages and stories (Andrew, 2014; Noun, 2012).

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IV. Method of Teaching Reading at the Primary School Level

For teaching reading to be very effective, the teacher must ensure reading readiness amongst the pupils. Reading readiness can be described as a state of development which prepares the child mentally, and emotionally for reading experiences. Without the readiness of the pupils every instructional strategy employed by a teacher will end up in futility. According to Craw et al (1969) in NOUN (2012) reading readiness helps the child to be ready, willing and capable of reading. In line with Crawl et al. Okorie, Onwuka and Ukoh-Bethels (2015), the state of the readiness of a child is crucial in the attainment of any task. According to these scholars, who described reading as a complex task, reading readiness must be attained before success can be assessed. In fact UNICEF (2012) recognizes this fact hence it described reading readiness as a process of preparing a child for reading; encouraging the child to read and engaging the child in reading. It is pertinent to mention at this stage that reading readiness does not only prepare the child physically and emotionally, but socially. Thus, one can say that reading readiness is a state of development which prepares the child mentally, physically and socio-emotionally for reading experiences. In fact, the state of the reading readiness of a child will actually help to achieve the three domains of learning which are cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains.

It is important to note that reading readiness varies from one learner to the other. The reason is that not all learners are from the same background. Some children are from educated homes where they must have been exposed to reading before coming/ entering school, such children are at an advantaged position. However so many have never been exposed to any form of reading before coming/entering school thereby needing special assistance/individual attention. Therefore, teachers must ensure that both groups of children are carried along. According to Okorie et al, reading readiness is an act that manifests in a child's early development. This development according to them should be properly enhanced by parents, guardians and language instructors as well so that the best can be achieved of the child.

With the foundation of reading readiness put in place, whatever instructional method applied in teaching will be judged to be effective. Effective teaching of reading has been seen as a complex task, particularly at the primary school level therefore, it has remained an area of concern for stakeholders (NOUN, 2012). It is however, pertinent to state that there is no single method or combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Therefore teachers must have a good knowledge of several methods for teaching reading. In addition, teachers must have a good knowledge of pupils' mental, physical and socio-emotional abilities and their background so as to identify a suitable method that will suit the children's needs. Method is defined as the way to deliver the materials from the teacher to the pupils. (Ariandika and Kartikawati 2018). According to Edward and Approach, (1963) in Ariandika and Kartikawati (2018), Method is an overall plan which has systematic steps to deliver the material which consists of certain procedures of teaching. In this paper the following methods which are appropriate for teaching reading in the primary school will be discussed. The methods which are based on two major approaches – discrete and whole language approaches are: Phonics method, structural analysis method, look and say method, language experience method, basal reading method and literature based method. The first three methods fall under the discrete approach while the last three methods fall under the whole language method.

a) Phonic method

Phonics is often defined as dealing with units of pronunciation (individual letters, digraphs, consonant clusters and syllables). This method of teaching reading involves the teacher teaching the letters of the alphabet and their sounds first. Thereafter, the pupils are taught to blend the sounds phonetically to form words. In other words, it is a method based on the alphabetical principles of letter-sound association and spelling-sound association. Thus, pupils are to learn to read words according to the way they are pronounced orally. According to Reyhner, (2008) in NOUN (2012). The advocates of phonics method emphasized the importance of learners having a phonemic awareness, that is, the understanding of alphabetic principles that the spellings of words relate to how they sound when spoken. The strategy employed in this method is to encourage pupils to read words the way they are spelt.

The English alphabet consists of 26 letters and about 44 sounds called phonemes. The phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in English. The duty of the teacher is therefore, to teach the pupil the ability to recognize the distinct sounds (phonemes) in the word before reading commences. The knowledge of phonics enables learners to interpret the meaning of text/passages (NOUN, 2012). It is pertinent to mention that there is inconsistency in the sounds of the letters of the English language. For instance, there are some letters that have different sounds in different words. Example a word like 'Catch' the 'c' sounds like 'k' but a word like 'City', the c sound like 's' (NOUN, 2012). This inconsistency tends to give students problems using this method smoothly.

According to (NOUN 2012) there are some important tips the teacher must bear in mind in using the phonics method and they are:

i. The teacher must ensure that the pupils are able to recognize and read the letters of the alphabet.

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ii. Expose pupils to a wide range of vocabulary and phrases through oral activities.
iii. The teacher should use graded reading materials with pictures, and vocabulary at the learner's level. Teaching should be such that it moves from simple to complex.
iv. Teachers can start teaching any form of the letters of the alphabet (capital or lowercase). However, since lower case is often used in writing words, the teacher can start with lowercase.
v. Teachers should try to teach pupils to break the word up sounding each of the sounds the letter makes within a word. For example, teach the learners to sound each letter, c-a-t and then say the word, cat.
vi. Children love fun. Therefore, the teacher should turn learning into a game and make it fun. Children hardly forget learning of this nature.
vii. To teach effectively the teacher must move from the known to the unknown. Therefore use words and names of objects and places that children are familiar with.
viii. Teaching reading requires a lot of patience on the part of the teacher, thus, the teacher must be very patient when teaching reading
ix. Have children learn in this progression when teaching phonics:

1. Alliteration, Rhymes, Onsets, Rims.
2. Single consonant sounds.
3. Consonant clusters (bl, gr and sp)
4. Consonant digraphs (sh, ch and th)
5. Short vowels.
6. Long vowels.
7. Vowel or vowel-consonant pairs (oo, ew, oi, and oy)

Suffice it to say that this method has its advantages and disadvantages. However, the advantages seem to outweigh the disadvantages if it is well utilized.

b) Structural Analysis Method

Structural analysis is the process of breaking words down into their basic parts to determine their meaning. It can also be described as the use of word parts to help determine the meaning and pronunciation of words. The primary aim of structural analysis is to give students insight into both the pronunciation and the meaning of the unknown word. It is a powerful vocabulary tool since knowledge of a few word parts can give a learner clues to the meaning of a large number of words. Words are usually broken into three parts, the prefix, root and the suffix. The structural analysis method is used to facilitate decoding as students become more proficient readers. The advanced decoding strategies help students learn parts of words so that they can more easily decode unknown multi-syllabic words. In a nutshell, the structural method is based on the structure or form of a word, made of one, or several syllables. By recognizing the syllables in a word, the child is able to read easily. For this method to be effective, the teacher must teach the pupils/ students oral communication activities to recognize words of one or more syllables. Making pupils recognize that words are pronounced by syllables when they are learning to speak and listen, will facilitate teaching this principle when they begin to read (NOUN, 2012).

The best way to teach beginning readers how to use structural analysis is to explain what prefixes, suffixes and root words are and then build on the words they already know so that they can break down unknown words into smaller, more familiar parts. Nagy, Osborn, Winfor and O'Flahavan (1992) recommended five guiding principles for the effective utilization of the structural method. They include.

i. Teacher should provide explicit explanation on the particular activity they are presenting to the students in the form of reading experiences,
ii. The teacher should help the students to recognize the diversity of English word structure,
iii. The teacher must make the limitations of structural analysis clear, reminding them that structural analysis may sometimes give incomplete or misleading information, and explain how to recognize such cases and what to do when they arise,
iv. Teachers must use extended text in opportunities for application,
v. Teachers must rely on examples more than abstract rules, principles or definitions.

Just like the phonic method, the structural analysis method has its advantages and disadvantages.

c) Look and Say Method

This method is often used to teach vocabulary. So when students learn to say a new word, they learn to read it. According to NOUN (2012), the method is based on the belief that the child will read with ease if such a child is able to identify a word through its features by looking at the written form. With the look and say method, students learn to recognize whole words or sentences rather than individual sounds. In this method, the students look at the word which the teacher says and in turn, repeat the word. Flashcards with individual words written on them are used for the method often accompanied with a related picture. Ideally, it is better to use a whole short sentence representing the picture displayed. Sentence strips or word cards can be very effective in using this method. The look and say method is very effective for teaching and reading sight words, that is , words which pupils have orally learnt, and are familiar with through listening and speaking activities (NOUN, 2012). Just like the other methods – the phonics and structural analysis method, this method

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has its own advantages and disadvantages, however, the method can be very effective when combined with the phonics method.

d) Language Experience Method

Some scholars call it an approach, others call it method. Both method and approach are used interchangeably by some scholars. How it is called or what it is called is not important, what is important to this research is its importance in teaching reading effectively. The Language Experience Approach (LEA), was developed by Russel Stauffer in 1980. It is a method that focuses on meaning construction in reading Holdaway (1979) in Ward (2005). According to Ward (2005), even though the prior knowledge of the study tended to be limited, it was acquired through their experiences and represented what mattered to them, relative to the curriculum. According to Ward, it also emphasizes literacy development through building language experiences. The language experience approach/method is a method of teaching a learner to read his/her own spoken words. The philosophy behind this approach/method is expressed in the following statement.

What a person thinks can be spoken. What is spoken can be written. What is written can be read (NALA).

In other words, whatever a person thinks in his/her mind can be voiced out in speech (spoken) and whatever is voiced out/spoken can be written down and whatever is written can be read. This philosophy is a pointer to the fact that the skills of language (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are interrelated and interwoven. This being the case, the language experience method of teaching uses teaching, learning activities and material based on the learners' experiences. Research has shown that early language learners benefit from rich tasks that provide them with adequate opportunities to hear, see, use and manipulate language in contextualized, purposeful ways. In this method/approach at the lower primary school level, teachers use a shared experience – often involving photographic images of that experience – as a prompt to collectively write a text with the learners. The text becomes a text that the group reads, re-reads, revises and extends. In this process teachers can draw learners' attention to phonetic and semantic patterns in the co-constructed text. The teacher can also use the pupils' unedited utterances/speeches. As they tell stories based on their personal experiences, the teacher writes the stories on charts or boards (chalkboards or whiteboards). With the aid of the teacher, the pupils' reads the stories repeatedly until they can associate the written utterances with the spoken (NOUN, 2012). For this approach to be effective, the teacher must be actively involved in the sense that individual attention is required by the students. The learners benefit immensely from this method because they are reading what they have talked about. This assertion was made in the findings of Ward (2005), when she declared that language experiences help students develop the understanding of reading and writing and should therefore, be a bigger part of early literacy programs.

e) The Basal Reader Method

The word basal means 'basic' or 'fundamental'. This method teaches students to read through a series of texts that teach students to read by focusing on basic linguistic concepts, reading skills, and vocabulary. The texts which are used for the basal reading are created with the purpose of teaching children how to read. Usually, the basal reading programme is structured to introduce the basics of reading, like letters of the alphabet, parts of speech and suffixes, before moving into more complex things such as sentence and paragraph structure. Simply put, this method teaches reading using graded basal readers series. These are text/materials specifically designed to teach reading. The basal series usually have work books and manuals. The workbook helps to reinforce skills taught in the class while the manual guide guides the teacher in the teaching and learning process. It is pertinent to mention that basal series incorporate all aspects of the reading programme such as word recognition, oral reading, silent reading, comprehension, reading for pleasure or for information.(Noun, 2012; Adam, 2017)

f) The Literature Based method

This method or approach is defined as "teaching children to read using pieces of literature, both fiction and non-fiction, which were written for purposes other than to be used as text for reading instruction (Allison, 2016). The beauty of this approach according to Johnson (2005) is that the teacher can use any book that is interesting to children and at the same time learn skills that cut across how to answer comprehension questions, ability to express opinion and even to evaluate texts. The books which are usually selected by the teacher are graded to meet different levels of difficulty. According to NOUN (2012) children are free to choose from picture telling text and the more difficult ones.

In this method/approach the teacher's role include:

i. Giving individual attention to pupils in order to listen to their individual readings so as to identify areas of difficulty,
ii. Teachers encourages sustained reading by ensuring availability of text and monitoring learners' progress,
iii. The teacher ensures guided reading by giving comprehension questions on some literary texts etc.
iv. From the foregoing, this approach places certain demands on the teachers for their preparation and execution. Just like all other methods/approach

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discussed in this paper, the approach has its advantages and disadvantages.

V. Conclusion

This paper, which focused on the teaching of reading in primary schools, has discussed the nature of reading, the basic skills of reading, reading readiness amongst pupils and most importantly, the various methods of teaching reading at the primary level of the educational hierarchy. It has been observed that as good as each of the methods sounded, no one approach or method can claim to have answers to all language teaching problems. As observed from the reviewed literature, reading readiness is very fundamental to effective teaching of reading. Secondly, no method or approach is completely bad; much depends on the teacher who adopts it and the situation that warranted the adoption. However, no teacher should adopt one particular method for the effective teaching of reading. For best results, two or more methods can be combined. Therefore, a knowledge of all methods/approach will enhance the teaching of reading at the primary school level.

VI. Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

1. School proprietors should ensure that only trained and qualified teachers are employed to teach English language in primary school.
2. Government should as a matter of policy employ specialist teachers to handle English language as a subject at the primary school level.
3. Government should encourage the training and re-training of English language teachers from time to time in order to be conversant with new trends of teaching English language at the primary school level.

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