

Early Literacy in an Emerging Society: The Missing Gaps

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Abstract

The paper examines the place of early literacy in an emerging society and what children have to say about their experiences. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. All basic school pupils in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State formed the population. The sample consists of three hundred pupils. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the sample. The instrument used was a questionnaire which was an adopted version of Machado (1999). The reliability of the instrument was ensured by test-retest reliability method using Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient, and a coefficient of 0.86 was obtained. Descriptive statistics of percentage and frequency counts were used to answer the two research questions raised while inferential statistics of t-test was used for the one hypothesis generated. Findings showed that there are missing gaps between the literacy activities and children's literacy development. Many parents do not engage their children in sufficient speaking activities, inquiries and discussion of books. They do not read to children, discuss television programmes and initiate family reading times. Findings also revealed parents do not provide different writing tools for children, they do not point out print and hardly create time and place for writing activities. Based on these findings, recommendation was made that, for early literacy to thrive in Nigeria, the place of the home and parents' literacy activities cannot be played down. The various ingredients that make children's literacy development a success must be nurtured and harnessed by parents for our country to have a viable manpower in the nearest future.

Keywords: Literacy culture, Literate Behaviour, Language Development, Parents' Literacy Activities

Introduction

Research has established the fact that there is low level of literacy among primary school pupils in Nigeria and the consequential effects of high rate of drop-outs, cultism, insurgency, lawlessness, armed robbery, examination malpractice and kidnapping among youths stare us in the face (Enesi 2004, Kolawole and Ajayi 2004, Odumuh 2004). One of the factors responsible for all this is that many of pupils had faulty literacy foundations that disabled them from reading in school and because they could not cope with academic rigour at school, they opted for all these vices. This is probably what Stanovich (1986) calls Matthew effect: a gap between good and poor readers that widens through the school life. He adds that children who experience reading difficulties at the early childhood state often suffer 'Matthew Effect' as they grow in their academic pursuit.

Observation and experience have revealed that many parents are ignorant of this as they do not realize that learning to listen, speak, read and write start from home and very early. These literacy and language skills are long acquired and learnt before children start school. This is what is commonly referred to as early literacy. It involves all the learning activities parents engage their children in before the age of five. Although, this does not necessarily translate to the end of parents' role in literacy development of children, it is simply the starting point.

Early literacy includes providing all the fun filled atmosphere and environment that foster interactions with people, places and materials for the promotion of literacy in children. Early literacy allows children to develop literacy culture, which is a total way of life that enables children throughout their lifetime to habitually read and write without much difficulty. When literacy activities are started early in life, children develop cognitively, physically, socially, morally and linguistically (Osanyin, 2005).

The place of early literacy acquisition cannot be undermined in any society. Yet, the Nigerian society/economy seems to have neglected the place of early literacy. This is owing to the fact that the general perception of Nigerians on early literacy is restricted to early childhood schooling. Most parents see early literacy as the activities the school impacted by the pre-school teachers alone.

The onus is on parents to lay the proper foundation for literacy and effective communication in the home and the environment before children are sent to pre-school and basic schools. In Nigeria, many parents dump their children in pre-schools with the intention of getting a head start and laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning and this attitude seems to lay the foundation for inferiority complex and alienation (Obanya, 2004). A child is alienated and disconnected when the language used at home for communication is quite different from the language of the school. The mother tongue of a child is the language of his speech community which he acquires early in life and subsequently becomes his instrument of thought and communication throughout life. It is the medium of intimate instruction and communication at home (Ogunsiji, 2001). The child is also alienated and disconnected when all the literacy resources and culture the child finds in the school environment are not seen and experienced at home.

The paper looks at early reading and writing activities of young children and other activities that count in building these foundational skills for literacy development. Nigeria is an emerging economy that is beset with multiples of problems ranging from poor academic performance of learners, anti-social behaviours, drug

addiction to drop-out of learners from schools which adversely affect the economic output. Studies have supported the fact that when children are exposed to early literacy activities they are most likely to be oblivious of the above social problems. Prompted by these glaring facts, this research looks at the place of parents' literacy activities that assist children's listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and how children perceived these activities.

Therefore, this study is an attempt to find out what literacy and language development activities parents engage their children in and how this affect gender.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria is one of the emerging nations of the world which is greatly plagued with various vices that impede the growth of her citizenry. The poor performance of primary school pupils annually has become a worrisome trend in Nigeria. Various reasons have been advanced for this unfortunate occurrence. Observations have revealed that listening and speaking skills do not get due attention in homes and schools. It is generally assured that listening and speaking develop naturally. To some, the problem could be linked to the poor teaching methods employed in teaching, while others assert that the learning environment for children is quite frustrating and inconveniencing. Again, right from childhood, a female child is made to realize that there are differences between her and her male siblings in most homes. To some others, the language of instruction, gender disparity, and the home environment of children are inseparable plausible causes of all these unfortunate situations. Could these problems be solved if we drop our search light on parents' literacy activities that promote literacy and language development in children? May be if children are no longer regarded as objects to be seen and not heard, the phenomenon will change.

In pursuance of this, the present study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What activities do parents engage their children in that promote literacy development?
2. Which language and literacy skill is given priority by parents' literacy efforts?

Hypothesis

H0i: There is no significant difference between parents' literacy activities and gender of young learners.

Review of Related Literature

Research has shown that a child is nested in different levels of social structures in the environment. These structures influence how the child develops. The structures are but not limited to the school, home, peers and community in which the child lives (Kgosidialwa, 2011).

Early literacy has been discovered to be a strong indicator of children's academic success. Researches have also indicated that early literacy is fraught with some environmental and psychosocial variables. For instance, Kolawole and Ajayi (2004) discovered that the home environment of children in Nigeria is not friendly at all, and a high percentage of children belong to the semi-literate and artisan class who cannot afford educative materials. Corroborating this, Obanya (2002) submits that there are intensive efforts by parents to fit into the competitive world of earning a living, learning new skills to be able to cope with the continuously changing demands of the labour market. These findings are the realities of many parents today. The resultant effect is that many parents do not have the time to engage their children in literacy and language activities.

Many parents wake up as early as four o'clock in the morning without any opportunity to interact with their children let alone take them to places where they can acquire literacy skills. Yet, observation has also revealed that educated and painstaking parents do many things to help their children. These activities include: talking to them during mealtimes, watching and listening to television programmes, reading to them, provide writing tools and discuss storage of books at the slightest opportunities and before children go to bed. These parents act as models of literate behaviour to their children by doing all these things. Machado (1999) adds that adults and older children in a family who model reading and writing can instill attitudes that these are worthwhile. Family interactions during activities greatly affect children's literacy development. One of the reasons for the poor literacy levels of learners as observed in the reading and writing of children is the low attention paid to oral language skills and the apparent dominance of the teacher during classroom interaction and transaction (Egbe, 2009). Little wonder Cooper and Kiger (2006) assert that children and young adults develop literacy by participating in a variety of real literacy experiences. They further added that the process of acquiring language is continuous; through interaction and experiences the elements of literacy-speaking, listening, reading writing and thinking develop together. Oral language development serves as the foundation for learning to read and write. Reading and writing are complex skills that grow out of the oral skills and form the pillars on which literacy skills rest.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. All basic school pupils in Ado-Ekiti formed the population. The

sample consists of three hundred pupils. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the subject. The instrument used was an adopted version of Machado's (1999) questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two sections A and B. Section A consists of personal data of the respondents while section B caters for the questions which are based on parents' literacy activities and their children. The reliability of the instrument was ensured by test-retest reliability method using Pearson's Product Moment correlation coefficient, a coefficient of 0.86 was obtained. The questionnaire was personally administered during the school hours with prior permission from the school principal of each school. The questionnaire was filled independently by the respondents. Descriptive statistics of percentage was used to answer the two research questions while inferential statistics of t-test for the hypotheses.

Results

Research Question 1

What activities do parents engage their children in that promote literacy?

Table1: Descriptive analysis showing activities of Parents and Children's Literacy Development.

S/N	Items	Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Do your parents do the following?									
1	Initiate family discussions at meal time	43	14	145	48	59	20	53	18
2	Give full attention to your comments	160	53	108	36	23	8	9	3
3.	Add descriptive or new words in conversation	91	30	129	43	56	19	24	9
4.	Take time at post office to discuss letter and postage	29	10	36	12	66	22	169	56
5	Discuss your book	123	41	114	38	36	12	27	9
6	Talk on your chosen subject	108	36	115	38	59	20	18	6
7	Ask questions that promote your description or predictions	113	38	120	40	49	16	18	6
8	Discuss TV programmes	62	21	111	37	83	28	44	15
9	Invite interesting people to home and promote interactions with you	49	16	114	38	93	31	44	15
10	Correct your speech casually with little attention to errors	97	32	147	49	38	13	18	6
11	Discuss care and storage of books	89	30	100	33	77	26	34	11
12	Take you to library	27	9	88	29	44	15	144	47
13	Read to you daily	57	19	109	36	92	31	42	14
14	Point out print around the house	53	18	74	25	84	28	89	30
15	Accept your opinion	56	19	192	46	26	9	26	9
16	Use dictionary with you	38	12	119	40	107	36	36	12
17	Listen patiently to you	177	59	50	25	25	10	18	6
18	Talk about how print is used in daily life	35	12	91	30	106	35	68	23
19	Create writing or art centre in the home	46	15	81	27	120	40	53	18
20	Provide different writing tools and scrap paper	96	32	90	30	59	20	55	18

Table 1 reveals that apart from items 2 and 17 where the respondents indicated above average that parents often give full attention to their comments and listen patiently to them, every other response was below average. Again, it reveals that no single item had an average percentage of 50%. See table 1 for details. However, item 4 shows parents never engage children in such activity.

Research Question 2

Which language and literacy skill is given priority by parents' literacy efforts?

Table 2: Showing language skills and Parents' efforts

Literacy skills	Items
Listening	2,4, 8,13,17
Speaking	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,,9,10,11,15,17,18
Reading	5,11,12,13,16
Writing	14,18,19,20

Table 2 shows parents literacy efforts are mostly geared towards speaking, followed by reading, listening and writing.

Test of Hypotheses

One hypothesis was tested using t-test statistics

Hypotheses 1: There is no significant difference between parents' literacy activities and gender of young learners.

Table 4:t-test showing Parents' Literacy activities of Young Learners by Gender

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	Tcal	table
Female	174	28.9	4.32	298	1.06	1.96
Male	126	29.5	5.03			

P < 0.05

Table 4 reveals that tcal (1.06) is less than t table (1.960) at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, there is no significant difference between parents' literacy activities and gender of young learners.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that the greater percentage of their parents do not engage their children in activities that promote literacy development as shown in Table 1. These revelations are quite disturbing. One wonders why parents do not engage in their children in these crucial activities and yet expect the school to perform the miracles on their children. Children spend the greater part of their days with their parents or at home and so the home should be filled with all activities that can assist children in the future such as initiate family discussions at meal times, give full attention to their comments, add descriptive or new words in conversation, discuss their books with them; talk on their chosen subjects, read to them daily and provide sufficient writing materials and spaces for them. This brings to bear the issue of family literacy. One of the reasons for the poor literacy levels of learners as observed in the reading and writing of children is the low attention paid to oral language skills and the apparent dominance of the teacher during classroom interaction and transaction (Egbe, 2009). Learners are given little or no opportunity to use language in class and at home. The consequence is that many turn to their peers who give them unwise counsels with which they paddle the canoe of their lives. The spoken word is a foundation for literacy is either ignored or not gives adequate attention. Learners who are offered multiple roads to literacy are more likely to develop useful life long literacy skills for their success in life. The family is supposed to be the first literacy class of the child where the dominance of oral language is vividly high (Ofodu, 2012). But observations have revealed that the family is worse hit by the economic recession to the extent that children hardly see their parents enough to learn any valuable thing from them. Many dump their children with care givers who can hardly them. The result is the great collapse of value system, insecurity, lack of peace and pervasive evil in every facet of the society. Observations have revealed that listening and speaking skills do not get due attention in homes and schools. It is generally assured that listening and speaking develop naturally. Ezike (1999) citing Chijioko (1997) states that in Nigeria, parents are not aware of the importance of language in education, teachers on their part assume that listening and speaking have been properly taught at home start off with reading and writing.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that parents literacy efforts are mostly geared towards the development of speaking and closely followed by reading, listening and writing skills. This finding supports the assertion of Cooper and Kiger (2006) that children and young adults develop literacy by participating in a variety of real literacy experiences. They further added that the process of acquiring language is continuous; through interaction and experiences the elements of literacy-speaking, listening, reading writing and thinking develop together. Oral language development serves as the foundation for learning to read and write. Reading and writing are complex skills that grow out of the oral skills and form the pillars on which literacy skills rest.

Finally, the findings also showed that there is no significant difference between parents' literacy activities and gender of young learners. It is quite heart-warming as the status of the girl -child is gradually assuming a new dimension. This simply translates to the fact that parents no longer place a higher premium on boys over girls which was the case in the near past. More awareness needs to be created in the public about the place of the girl-child in many societies and home. Educating the girl means educating the nation which leads to national development (Okegbile, 2008; Nwagbara, 2011).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The child is a vital part of any family, community and society, therefore any attempt to disregard or down play the place of the child should be discouraged. This study has established the fact that parents are not giving adequate attention to literacy development of children in the family as shown by the low responses on literacy activities in the home. It is encouraging to note that the girl-child is not being undermined in the literacy activities and that parents are promoting more interactive and participatory activities in the home. Based on these, it is recommended that all agencies of socialization should educate parents on their roles in making children literate and language skills development which is a vital part and foundation for education of children. In addition, it is very important to say that the place of the girl-child must be continually guided so that no parents relegate her to the background.

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