

Reading Readiness Deficiency in Children: Causes and Ways of Improvement

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1. Abstract

Reading is one of the important skills of language. It is a basic tool of education whether formal or informal. Reading is a receptive skill, which involves the ability to meaningfully interpret or decode written or graphic symbols of language. Through reading, the hidden treasure of knowledge is unfolded; knowledge is gained thereby empowering individuals to share and also participate in the world's universal culture and civilization. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that every one including children imbibe reading culture so as to unlock the world, treasure of knowledge. This study is of great importance as today's children spend hours trapped under derivative distractions such as television, computers, and associated technologies targeted to children. It becomes then imperative to reawaken reading culture among the children who are faced with competing leisure time choices. One of the ways of helping children to imbibe reading culture is to get them reading ready.

This paper focused on the causes of reading readiness deficiency and ways of improving reading readiness in children. The paper identified factors such as socio-economic background, physical abnormalities, mental imbalance, lack of interest, and unfamiliarity with symbols and teachers' inability to help children as causes of reading readiness deficiency in children. The paper also suggested ways of improving reading readiness and recommended that parents should provide books and stimulating reading environments for their children and helps them cultivate the habit of using their leisure to read for pleasure. It was also recommended among others that teachers must acknowledge the indispensability of reading skills and as such plan an effective programme of reading instruction which should focus on promoting reading culture among children in their schools.

Keywords: Reading, Reading culture, Reading skills, Reading deficiency, Socio-emotional Factors, Physical abnormalities,

2. Introduction

Shihab (2011) argues that reading is a process of thinking actively in order to unlock or understand the idea an author portrays. It involves connecting an author's idea to what one already knows and appropriately coordinating all the ideas for usage. Interpreting, connecting and organizing both the author and reader's ideas requires skills and ability on the part of the reader. Reading therefore, could be defined as a receptive skill, which involves the ability to interpret or decode, printed symbols. This may be what McGrath (1995) highlights in subscribing to reading as the active thinking process of understanding an author's ideas, connecting those ideas to what you already know, and organizing all the ideas so you can remember and use them. The learning of reading starts from the mastery of the alphabet of the language (Okwilagwe, 1988) as well as the mastery of the skills required for learning reading. The skills should be effectively taught, as it is a valuable asset to anyone who desires to explore the universe for gainful living. Mastery of the letters of the alphabet of a language and mastery of reading skills is an indication of a child's reading readiness.

Reading readiness according to UNICEF (2012) is a process of preparing a child for reading; encouraging the child to read and engaging that child in reading. However, reading readiness entails the maturation of all the mental, physical and socio-emotional factors involved in the reading process. In other words, it is a state of development, which prepares the child mentally, physically, and social-emotionally for reading experiences. Notwithstanding the chronological age of the child, the point at which the child's growth and development have brought about proper maturation of these factors should be the point at which the reading process begins. Schifferdecker (2007) explains that reading readiness actually commences from that particular time when a child transforms from being a non-reader to a reader. According to him, this can be a tough transition but is very rewarding. Not only are children very proud of themselves as they learn to read, but children who learn to read well are better learners throughout their school years. Collaborating Schifferdecker's view, Wikipedia (2013) stresses that reading readiness is that point at which a person is ready to learn to read and the time during which a person transitions from being a non-reader into a reader.

Children begin to learn pre-reading skills at birth while they listen to the speech around them. In order to learn to read, a child must first have knowledge of the oral language. However, according to the Ontario Government (2003), the acquisition of language is natural, but the process of learning to read is not; hence reading must be taught. The Ontario Government also believes that reading is the foundation for success, and

that those children who struggle with reading in children are at a disadvantage in terms of academic success, compared to those children who are not struggling.

The state of readiness is crucial in the attainment of any task. In a complex task such as reading, readiness must be attained before success can be assured. The state of readiness in reading can be likened to the process of childbirth. No matter how desirous or anxious the mother to be is, she must go through the process of labour to have her baby! It is, therefore, necessary to ensure that children are mentally, physically and psychologically prepared to face the task of reading before engaging them in reading. By so doing, they will be ready, willing and capable of reading. Reading readiness is so vital in learning that no teacher should be anxious to teach the child how to read, if he/she is not mentally, physically and psychologically ready for it. Reading is to be taught only when the child has attained a mental maturity, adequate oral language (listening & speaking) capability, interest and desire to read.

Reading readiness is influenced by a group of interrelated factors, which are broadly classified as physical, mental, social-emotional readiness. According to the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN, 2013), physical readiness entails that the child possesses functional speech organs; is able to hear and see and that such child demonstrates evidence of word recognition and perception. Mental readiness has to do with the child's intellectual ability for word recognition, pronunciation of sounds and accurate pronunciation of words. It also connotes the child's ability to demonstrate oral capabilities (listening and speaking), auditory and visual discrimination, speaking in complete sentences, recitation of rhymes and short poems, listening to and telling short stories as well as using a variety of vocabulary items in oral communication and engaging in simple dialogues/conversation amongst others. Socio-emotional readiness requires that the child be emotionally stable and psychologically balanced to accommodate tasks of reading. Apart from showing good emotional adjustment, there must be traces of the child demonstrating keen interest and desire to read as well as satisfactory demonstration of socialization traits. These factors can only be feasible with a child whose mind is healthy and sound for learning. This is because a healthy mind will be well disposed to learning than a sick one.

3.1 CAUSES OF READING READINESS DEFICIENCY

Some of the major causes of reading deficiency in children include child's socio-economic background, physical abnormalities, mental and psychological imbalance, interest of the child, familiarity with symbols and teacher's ability to help children to learn. The child's social-economic background is a very important factor to be reckoned with in the learning process. Hence, it is a factor to be considered in getting children reading ready, which is not just a matter of sounds, but rather a matter of rapidly and accurately getting meaning of a printed word on pages. One of the factors embedded in social-economic background of the child is unhappy home condition. This is a leading cause of reading readiness deficiency among children. Unhappy home conditions include loss of one or both parents, maladjustment, or conflict in the home. These of course have a serious adverse effect on child's reading. For children to have progress in reading therefore, they require an atmosphere of affection and security. However, in such a situation, teachers have to do something to help such children in the class. It could be in the form of advice, talking to the parents, referring the child to the school counselor and also giving the child extra attention. In a situation where the background of the children is an impediment to reading ability, teachers especially language teachers should employ various techniques such as pictures, charts, field trips and other audio-visual aids to help the learners out of their difficulties.

Language development at home is also another factor related to social-economic background of a child. If the home and its environment did not provide the child with the opportunity to use materials that are familiar with whatever language they are learning, the learner's reading ability will be retarded. Hence, children from middle and upper class home who are encouraged practically and materially to speak a target language at home do not exhibit much reading difficulties at school. While those from lower class who have little or no contact with the target language at home have reading difficulties at school.

Mental and psychological imbalance is another notable cause of reading readiness deficiency. Children who are mentally and psychologically unstable have been found to be deficient in getting ready to read. In a study carried out by Putri (2013), results showed that children with mental imbalance had difficulty in pronouncing letters, words, and sentences with a paragraph and as such, they find it difficult to understand the content of reading and to retell the content of reading. Also they demonstrated confusion at the beginning of their reading unlike other children who were mentally balanced. Apart from mental imbalance, it is obvious that fatigue, discomfort and pains will constitute distractions and discouragement to a child who is learning how to read; thus resulting in reading readiness deficiency. On the other hand, a child who is mentally sick due to family problems such as broken home, poverty among others does not learn well and cannot make satisfactory progress in reading.

The propelling factor in whatever one does is interest. Having a keen interest and desire to read propels a child and prepares him to be social-emotionally ready for learning. Individual interest is also very important in reading abilities. The reading of a child, therefore, will be sustained and progressively improved if the material is

of interest to him/her. Hence, reading materials must make meaning and be useful to the reader. They must also help the reader to solve problems, find answers to disturbing question and contain facts related to an existing interest as well as to what has been learned previously. It is, therefore, the duty of language teachers to find out the reading interests of the majority of the class. This will guide and enable the teachers to select reading passages and materials that would become servants rather than masters to the learners.

Since reading means giving accurate meanings to words and adequate speed and accuracy, success in reading demands that the reader should be able to recognize the words or symbol. Indeed, unfamiliar symbols retard reading and make comprehension very difficult; this is a factor where the home plays a very important role in developing reading skills. This it does by providing the social, economic and psychological materials the child needs at home to naturally develop close and constant association between object or symbol and their meanings. The development enhances his vocabulary.

The concept of pre-reading activities is borne out of the belief that children need to go through some learning experiences before they begin to read. Pre-reading activities are therefore, the experiences, which prepare children for the actual reading tasks. These activities are mainly speech based. The role of the teacher is to provide the learners, especially during initial reading instruction, with the experiences and activities that will make them demonstrate the abilities stated above. Most often parents are seen beating to the point of wounding their child probably because the child failed to read a particular passage or a given text to the satisfaction of such a parent which should not be so. In the first place, such a parent resorts to such act of hooliganism because he or she did not master the factors relating to reading readiness. Resorting to beating in this case will cause more harm than good. It is therefore, the duty of the language instructor, guardian and counselor among others to master or at least note certain factors that must be considered in getting children reading ready. Such factors as identified by Wikipedia (2013) include age appropriate to oral language development and vocabulary, appreciation of stories and books, phonemic awareness, understanding of basic print concepts, understanding of the alphabetic principle, ability to distinguish shapes and ability to identify at least some letters of the alphabet.

3.2 IMPROVING READING READINESS IN CHILDREN

There are several ways of improving reading readiness in children. One of such ways is making reading fun for children. This can be obtainable by singing and talking about reading and also reading to the child and allowing the child to read to you. Try and encourage the child no matter how silly the child reading sounds. Play game of pronunciation of words with the child. Such games, according to Stow (2011) will improve memory skills and help the child to distinguish between different sounds. Other ways of improving reading readiness as identified by Design Instruction (DI, 2013) are as follows:

I. Frequently Reading to the Child

Reading with expression helps promote fluency and comprehension. Even if the child is not ready or able to sit still for more than a moment or two, read as long as he can stand it and as often as he can stand it. Read a variety of books, songs, and rhymes.

II. Pointing out letters and word

It is not appropriate to point out every letter or make the child recite them to you. Wikipedia (2013), however, submits that pointing out letters and words enables the child to understand that sentences consist of separate words. Noticing the letters will help him become familiar with their shapes. Knowing the letters of the alphabet is an important element in getting children reading ready. It is, therefore, important to talk about what is similar and what is different about the shape of the letters. Help him learn the letters in his name.

III. Playing word games with the child:

It has become increasingly difficult to ignore the role, which the use of games plays in language teaching and learning especially in teaching children. Emphasizing on the viability of games in instructional delivery, Coleman in Bing (2013) describes gaming as an agent of experiential learning, attention grabber and that which aids the teacher's role as a helper and coach. So in trying to make a child reading ready, games especially word games must be incorporated into the child's play. One of the ways of playing word games as suggested by DI (2013) is using rhyming words to teach reading. The teacher should write out rhyming words in a familiar chant and have the child fill in the missing words. He should take turns changing the rhyming words and asking him to tell which word rhymes or does not rhyme in a list of words provided. Emphasis should not be placed on being right. Being able to recognize and make up rhyming words is essential to child literacy and child language development.

IV. Taking words apart and putting them back together

Learning to manipulate sounds in spoken language is an important element in child reading readiness. Separate words into phonemes, or sounds. Help him listen for beginning, ending and later, middle sound. Change one sound for another for instance "What is cat without the /c/ but with a /h/ sound instead?" or make him plan a lunch menu where all the items eaten start or end with the same sound for instance "Let's have sandwiches, salad, and soda today." Always ensure that these activities are incorporated into her playtime.

V. Introducing new words to the child

Increased vocabulary is a child's reading benefit. So introduce new simple words to the child. First tell the child the meaning of the word and use the new word often, at first, to get her used to hearing how it is used in speech. If the word is very difficult to pronounce, sound it out very carefully when you say it, then say it normally, for the first few times. Remind him of the meaning of the word as often as necessary. Encourage the child to use the word when appropriate.

4. Socio-Economic Factors affecting Reading

Hartas (2011) observed that socio-economic factors were found to have stronger effect on children's language/literacy than on emotional competence. The author observes further that socio-economic advantage, lack of material educational qualification in particular, remained powerful in influencing competencies in children especially in the primary school level. Lynch (2007) argues that parents have a great role to play in their child's development. Parents arguably accordingly are the major socializing force in most young children's lives. Children's reading might as well as reflect the poor reading background as their parents if such parents are illiterate, or have low-level exposure to education or reading culture. Unemployment is higher among people with low literacy level (Askov, 2004). People with low literacy exposure are highly disadvantaged to competitive dispensations both in schools as well as in workforce.

5. Physical abnormalities in reading

Physical abnormalities equally affect reading and literacy in many persons with physical challenges and varying disabilities. Shaywitz et. al. (1998) observes that abstract learning to require awareness that spoken words can be decomposed into phonologic constituents that alphabetic characters represents. The evidence suggests that inadequate facility in word, identification due, in most cases, to more basic deficits I alphabetic coding is the basic cause of difficulties in learning how to read (Velluntino et. al., 1998).

6. Mental Imbalance

Mental imbalance is a behavioral pattern, causes either suffering or poor ability to function in ordinary life. It is characterized by mental instability, confusion, unhappiness, mental disturbance, frustration, worry, panic maladjustment, depression, mental hang-ups,, obsessive behavior, neurotic tendencies, abnormal feelings and behaviors (Miller, 2009). The author further observes that certain things can lead one into mental imbalance that include fear, anxiety, hostility, anger, lack of confidence, self-doubt, worry, anxiety, hostility, frustration, unrealistic personal goals, objectives and expectations. Combinations of the above negative things as Miller pointed out can work together to create vicious circle that pulls one down ever deeper and deeper into mental abyss. Frustration, fear, anger and panic can create a great mental stress that can cause instability. By doing so, persons with mental imbalance become so preoccupied with their problems that they lose perspective and balance such that they become like fly trying to get free of a spider's web. This, however, leads to their becoming caught in negative thought and feeling patterns that pull them down resulting to their seeing themselves and mentally confused.

7. Teachers' Inability to help children

Children may struggle with reading for variety of reasons such as: limited experience with books, speech and hearing problems, and phonemic awareness among others. For one to be a good reader especially in children, one has to be phonemically aware, understand the alphabetic principle, applying such skills in a rapid and a fluent manner, possess strong vocabularies, and syntactically and grammatical skills and relate reading to one's experiences (Reid-Lyon, 2015). Teachers' inability to help children learn these reading factors so as to prevent difficulties in reading automatically will mar their readiness for reading. Difficulties in any of these areas mentioned earlier can impede reading development especially in children.

Although learning to read begins far before children enter formal schooling. Children who are exposed to stimulating literacy experiences from birth onwards as observed by Reid-Lyon (2015) have an edge in vocabulary development, understanding the goals of reading and developing an awareness of print and literacy concepts. On the other hand, the children who are most at risk for reading failure enter kindergarten and elementary schools without these early experiences. It is, therefore, the duty of their teachers to acquaint them with those reading qualities so as to increase their readiness to reading.

8. Implication of Unfamiliarity with Symbols and Lack of Interest in Learning

Symbol is a letter, number or sign that represents a sound, an amount; it could be a picture or shape that has a particular meaning (Pearson Education, 2003). Symbols are important constituents of everyday language designed by man for communication. Therefore, language is man-made and a consciously-organized vehicle of

communication. The essence of communication is to transmit or exchange ideas and information from one person to the other by the use of symbols or conventions from which those using them derive meaning. Adeyegbe (1998) opines that the meanings of symbols are in the people who use them not in the symbols themselves'. It implies that a symbol can have different meanings for different people and in a subject of common interest to those who use it. In other word, different subjects have their peculiar language. Among chemists for instance, the chemical symbol "K" stands for Potassium. Chemists use a special language peculiar to chemistry to describe their observation and phenomena as precisely as possible in sentences that have one and only one meaning. For examples, in chemistry when a substance is said to be deliquescent it means that the substance absorbs so much from the atmosphere that the hydrate dissolves to form a saturated solution.

Since 'meanings of symbols are in the people who use them and not in the symbols themselves' as Adeyegbe (1998) has observed, familiarity with symbols has important implication to those involved in a teaching-learning process. Therefore, for effective communication in a teaching-learning process of any subject, especially science subjects, both the teacher and the student must have a good command of the language in use. Otherwise, both the learner and the teacher will misunderstand each other, and consequently lose interest in the subject or lesson. The Oxford Dictionary defines interest as the feeling of wanting to give your attention to something or of wanting to be involved with and to discover more about something. Pearson Education (2003) explains that if an individual has interest in something, that individual wants to know or learn more about them. Thorndike and Hagen (1969) defined interest as the tendency to seek or avoid particular activities. Agbi (2006) asserted that interest determines the vigour, which a learner invests in learning and other activities. Okorie (2014) explains that interest is emotional expression of like or dislike towards an object or activity. It is a trait, which could be aroused in someone. For instance, interest in a subject or the use of a particular tool could be aroused by sheer use of appropriate language in communicating to someone the usefulness of the subject or tool towards achieving a particular objective.

Teachers' inability to help children as one of reading readiness deficiency has some implications. It impedes reading development in children, as well as increases the risk of reading failure in children. Deficits in the development of phoneme awareness skills have a negative effect on reading acquisition. Since school system puts a great emphasis on ability, intelligence, IQ among others, society tend to value people according to their intelligence. People with mental imbalance has deficits that tend to impede their reading readiness that should be taken into account while addressing such deficits.

9. Conclusion/Recommendations

Reading readiness is an act that manifests in a child's early development. This development should be properly enhanced by parents, guardians and language instructors as well so that the best should be achieved of the child. Reading is indispensable and a valuable asset to any child who desires to explore the universe and to be knowledgeable. With the appropriate reading materials, environment, and teachers who are willing to help children imbibe reading culture, good reading skills can be inculcated into children. To encourage reading readiness in children, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Teachers must acknowledge the indispensability of reading skills and as such plan an effective programme of reading instruction, which should focus on promoting reading culture among children in their schools.
2. Parents should provide books and stimulating reading environments for their children and wards. This can be done by encouraging their children to read at home.
3. Children should be helped to cultivate the habit of using their leisure to read for pleasure and equally encourage their children to watch children's educational television. This will go a long way in improving their phonetic and vocabulary development.
4. Government at the federal, state and local levels should provide appropriate materials for teaching reading skills.
5. Libraries should be provided for our primary schools since the absence of libraries constitutes a deficiency in reading skills.

10. Future Research Directions

It would be significant to study the impact of television and computer games on reading readiness in children as well as a study on the socio-cultural underpinnings of reading readiness within a cultural sub set.

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