



ACQUISITION OF READING ABILITY BY PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS IN NIGERIA: STAKEHOLDERS' ROLE

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Abstract

Reading is essential for success in the complex knowledge-based world of today. The ability to read is highly valued and important for personal and social wellbeing of an individual as well as that of the economy of a nation. There can be no learning without reading ability. Therefore, it is important for school children to acquire the essentials of reading. However, the ability to read is not acquired in one day. Each new skill builds on the mastery of previously learned skills for reading ability to take place. This process makes it very difficult for children to acquire the skill of reading without appropriate and adequate guidance. Thus, despite the importance of reading ability to pupils, it is evident that most school children cannot read, or read well. Therefore, there is a dire need for serious guidance of children from home and school, if they must acquire this very important skill, which depends also on how aware stakeholders are of their roles in this endeavor. Thus, this paper sought to show the importance of reading; x-rays the current situation as far as the level of primary school pupils' reading ability is concerned, and highlights the roles of the home, school and government as stakeholders in the quest for improvement on elementary school pupils' acquisition of reading ability. It is believed that if every stakeholder is aware and plays the role required, then, the low level of reading ability among primary school pupils would have been curbed to the barest minimum.

Key Words: Acquisition, Reading, ability, primary school, pupils, stakeholders, roles.

Introduction

The ability to read is very important. This is so because reading is essential for success in the complex knowledge-based world of today and is highly valued for an individual's social and economic well-being. There can be no serious academic progress without the ability to read. Today, especially in the developing world, reading is considered a fundamental skill required for success in almost every endeavor. To Tafida, Shehu and Udu (2024), reading is one of the most important language skills which allows an interaction between the writer and the reader. Okebukola (2004) affirms that through reading, humans have the tools to transmit knowledge to each succeeding generation and allows one to listen to the wisdom and people of the ages. Ukume, Agbum and Udu (2018) argue that a nation that wants its citizens to advance in life must encourage students to attain reading proficiency.

As observed by Igbokwe and Obidike (2012), reading is an essential tool for lifelong learning. It is therefore, important for everyone to acquire the essentials of reading and the culture of reading for successful living. Actually, reading ability is a skill that adds quality to life by liberating and empowering people as well as giving them access to their culture and cultural heritage. Students and employees in every field must read to keep abreast with what is happening in their fields and so, become more efficient by the day. Also, Okeke (2000) pointed out that the art of reading is a priceless instrument for everyone and that reading is an activity of life through which people have a feel into the life and experiences of others and widen the scope of their knowledge, experiences and leisure. Of all the skills children learn, reading is perhaps one of the most important. This is because reading is also a means of gaining knowledge about many different subjects in school and of understanding the world.

People read for different reasons. These include self-improvement, pleasure, relaxation and a feeling of pride and prestige. Reading is also done to get important information that will help them develop self-confidence (Tafida, Shehu & Udu, 2024). A study by Olabisi, Ahmad and Daud (2024) examining parents' perceptions of

social skills in children with learning disabilities, highlighted that children with learning disabilities may have moderate social skills which could influence their interactions and potentially, their susceptibility to delinquent behaviour. The research suggested that interventions should focus on enhancing social skills to prevent social exclusion and associate risks. A study by Oluwaseun (2020) highlights that children with learning difficulties and disabilities are more prone to delinquent behaviours. It emphasizes the importance of literacy activities as intervention mechanisms during incarceration, suggesting that low literacy skills are linked to higher involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Poor reading skills can make a child develop a poor attitude towards school and can create self-esteem problems later in life (Fosudo, 2010). Aina, Adigun, Akesode, Ogundipe (2011) observed that children who cannot read or read well have poor grades in school, are always distracted and frustrated, normally dislike school, and find it difficult to develop to their full potential. Thus, pupils with poor reading habits may engage in anti-social behaviors such as school violence, bullying, examination malpractice and are normally not happy in class, shy, and with low self-concept.

There is no vocation across the world that does not require reading. Thus, there is no part of the world where reading can be considered an irrelevant skill. Even in contemporary times, artisans and tradesmen ought to be able to read and write so as to enable them function properly in their day-to-day activities. In all educational systems the world over, reading is considered a strong variable, as no educational endeavour could thrive without it (Hussain, 2024). In Nigeria, literacy is recognized as a basic tool for personal and national development. The Federal Government, in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013), places the inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively as one of the objectives of primary education. This goes to show the importance of the acquisition of reading ability at this level of education.

Reading is developmental in nature. Thus, reading skills cannot be acquired as a one niche

activity. Learning to read is sequential and each new skill builds on the mastery of previously learned skills. It takes quite a process and effort to succeed in acquiring this skill. Therefore, learning to read should start from the home into the elementary school, which are care givers during the developmental stages of the child. For an adult, reading seems like a simple, natural and habitual skill but the process relies on cognitive, language, and social skills developed in early years even before reading ability develops. Learning to read is not natural for children. It has to be explicitly taught (Dike & Amucheazi, 2021). Thus, the need for reading skills to be nurtured from earliest years and through the primary school years is paramount for the child. Failure on the part of stakeholders to play their ideal roles in this regard, may be responsible for the low level of the acquisition of reading ability by pupils in Nigeria.

Early interactions with families and communities provide the foundation for developing knowledge that children use for learning to read. During childhood, children learn to understand and use spoken language and learn much about their immediate environment through interactions with significant persons around them. Reading ability is best formed at a young impressionable age in school, and once formed, it can last one's life time. However, most times, the challenges faced by children who cannot read overwhelm their need to read, and if they are not properly directed and given enabling environment early enough, they will never overcome those challenges.

Reading ability is required to effectively fit into the technological advancement in our society. Therefore, if the reading needs of pupils are not met, they will be hindered in their opportunities for further education and vocational options. Antilla (2013) observes that with tremendous technological advances in recent years, the printed word surrounds people everywhere, and that we all need strong literacy skills to access the social media and texting as well as technologies that are infused into the Workplace. Thus, the author concluded that the student that struggles throughout school in developing literacy skills will continue to struggle in his/her adult life, with

obvious consequences for career preferences.

The primary level of education is the foundation for all academic work (FGN, 2013). At this level, one of the most fundamental skills that children need to acquire is reading. Thus, every effort needs be directed towards teaching the children how to read. This will empower them to function appropriately in their educational endeavours at this level, and for further studies. Stakeholders, in this quest, can only achieve their purpose if they have good grabs of their roles and skills toward this endeavour.

There is so much, each significant person in the life of a child could do to enhance his/her reading ability. However, the question still remains: how many of these people are aware of their responsibilities and are actually acting accordingly. The school, teachers and parents should work together to ensure improvement in reading performance. Helping pupils acquire reading ability is therefore, a joint venture that requires the involvement of all significant persons in the life of the child. Thus, this paper sought to examine parents', teachers' and government roles in the development of reading ability among primary school pupils Nigeria. We believe that this paper would create the awareness needed among stakeholders in the education sector towards their roles for effective acquisition of reading ability by primary school pupils.

Reading Ability Of Pupils: The Nigerian Situation

Despite the importance of reading to both the individual and the society at large, it is evident that most school children cannot read or read well in Nigeria. In the State of the World Children Report by UNICEF in 1990, it was stated that nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or write their names. Accordingly, too many children fail to achieve proficient reading skills and the rate is particularly troubling, close to 60%, for children living in poverty and who belong to underrepresented minorities. Aina, Ogungbeni, and Ogundipe (2011) observed poor reading the acquisition of reading skills has a beneficial effect on all school subjects.

Also, Buyaso (2011) observed that the non-

progressive nature of literacy in almost all African countries is more prevalent and that the issue has been put forward to go beyond schools. This is because parents who cannot read themselves are unable to help their children to read and the cycle continues. The Executive Director of Boarding Impact Consultancy, in Onwume (2013), also affirmed that 80% of Nigerian students cannot read properly. According to Onochie (2012) one of the greatest problems of education in Nigeria is that of poor reading culture among students and pupils. Sobah (2024), in a study on the effect of reading habit on academic performance among primary school pupils in North-Central Nigeria, revealed that factors such as peer influence, availability of reading materials and school environment significantly affect reading habits and, consequently, academic success. UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (2021) provides estimates of learning poverty, highlighting that a significant percentage of 10-year old children in Nigeria are unable to read and understand simple texts.

The poor reading culture in Nigerian schools may be attributed to pupils' inability to read effectively and fluently. It was recently discovered that one of the impediments to preparing students to read and pass their examination is not their poor reading habits but the fact that they do not know how to read (Onuwume, 2013). Onuwume further reported on the findings of the team leader of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Haladu Mohammed, from various researches that most students are not able to combine and understand the words and sentences in a text within a specified time in Nigeria. Thus, in order to address the issue, USAID organized a town hall meeting with the theme, "Building the Foundation for reading in Nigerian Schools in Abuja."

Interventions for pupils' reading ability must be fully supported by educational leaders with essential training for teachers on best practice and implementation into the curriculum, supported by a nurturing and supportive relationship between the school and home, to best provide for the literacy needs of all students (Antilla, 2013). McKenna (2001) affirmed that parents, teachers

and communities play a significant role in the mentoring and modeling of the culture of reading, as each group serves as a vital part in the multilateral nature of influence on a child.

Though early childhood education programs in Nigeria have tremendously impacted children's early learning towards formal education, majority of Nigeria children do not have the opportunity to be exposed to this form of education. Thus, most of these children lack literacy skill as they begin elementary education. It is the responsibility of stakeholders to take up the challenge to ensure that primary school pupils, notwithstanding the environmental background, acquire reading ability for academic prowess.

Stakeholders' Role in Acquisition of Reading Ability Among Primary School Pupils in Nigeria

A. Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in the acquisition of reading ability by primary school pupils can have great results at schools. This is because the family and the school represent the primary environments in which young children grow and develop (Kasakula, 2022). Thus, literacy development begins from home. As young as a baby is, he/she hears and begins to interpret meaning from spoken words. As the child grows in age, his/her interactions with the environment and parents become the most important elements in their acquisition of reading ability before the commencement of formal education. Thus, the acquisition of this skill among children growing up in a literate society begins before they enter formal schooling environment. This means that at home, the literacy environment parents provide makes possible a child's effective acquisition of reading skills (Edu, Aquo & Manku, 2022).

The provision of the right environment is based on parental socio-economic status, their capability at literacy and care about the child's academic success. If parents possess appropriate attributes for installing reading ability in the home, the child's success at acquisition of reading ability would occur with minimal difficulty. The ages between birth and when a child enters school, are his/her developmental and formative stages in life. Thus, reading development, being a

developmental process, would best be acquired during these years. The part played by parents to form these parent/pupils literacy interactions would enrich learning at home and ultimately affect their acquisition of early reading skills (Adigwe & Walt, 2020).

Many observations have been made about the involvement of parents in their children's acquisition of reading ability. Parents serve as encouragement and motivation to work harder. It prepares them for the benefits of formal reading instruction, helps in language comprehension and expressive language skills as well as a positive attitude towards reading (Desforges, 2003).

According to Arnold and Colburn (2006) "the single most significant factor influencing a child's early educational success is an introduction to books and being read to at home prior to beginning school (p31)." In some homes, literacy activities are found, which could take forms such as: providing experiences and surroundings that directly or indirectly expose children to print; modeling literacy by reading to the child and writing often; copying letters or practicing letter sound; providing them with direct literacy instruction, and exposing children to television programmes that bother on literacy acquisition.

It is evident that parents play a vital role in enhancing reading acquisition by their children. Specific activities that parents can get involved in to enhance pupils' early acquisition of reading ability include: cultivating a home literacy environment; labeling pictures; encourage the child's participation during reading by asking questions; pointing out words/letters and sounding letters; and introducing new words to enhance vocabulary development (Masudi & Silaji, 2024).

Specifically, parents can do the following to get involved in developing reading ability in elementary school pupils: Setting up of family libraries, making specific time available to read to the children every day, scheduling time family reading, encouraging a wide variety of reading activities, developing library habits in children, seeking to know about children's progress; dictating children with reading problems; getting help promptly for reading problems; using a

variety of aids to help children; and showing enthusiasm for children's reading.

B. Teachers' Role

Teachers are considered the central character as far as formal education is concerned. That is why the Nigerian National Policy on education (FRN, 2013) declares that no national can grow beyond the quality of its teachers. Thus, the place of the teacher in pupils' acquisition of reading ability cannot be overemphasized. Teachers can make the acquisition of reading ability by pupils a reality in Nigeria. However, it takes a knowledgeable teacher to actually portray his/herself as being capable of filling the space calved for him/her in the scheme of education.

Thus, the place of the teacher in enhancing pupils' reading ability may include the following roles:

- teaching reading using the best reading methods.
- individualizing reading instruction and adapting them to the needs of individual children.
- Making the classroom environment stimulating for reading instruction
- Making assessment of reading achievement formative and giving the pupils immediate feedback
- Making effective use of available instructional resources
- Improvising unavailable resources where necessary

Also, the International Reading Association (2000) observed that:

Excellent reading teachers.... have strong content and pedagogical knowledge, manage classrooms so that there is a high rate of engagement, use strong motivation strategies that encourage independent learning, have high expectations for children's achievement, and help children who are having difficulty (1).

Owing to the importance of a teacher in the process of pupils' acquisition of reading ability, it is important for every primary school teacher to understand the intricacies and skills involved in the reading process. This would enhance their capability in helping their pupils acquire reading

ability. Thus, it is necessary for them to provide knowledge and skills; plan and organize instructions; motivate the children; observe and assess their performances; and promote team work since literacy development is actually not a one slot activity but involves many people along the process.

Our classrooms are heterogeneous in nature. That is, we have individual differences among pupils in every classroom. Just as we have children with literacy friendly homes, so we have children without literacy presence in their homes. There is, therefore, need for literacy instructions to be inclusive. Thus, direct and explicit instruction need be given to students with basic reading skill deficiencies. Instruction must be targeted at students' individual needs.

A key component of effective intervention is the provision of frequent opportunity for the pupils to practice. The more often they get involved in reading activities, the closer they are to achieving reading ability. This kind of practice involves formative assessment, where pupils are assessed, given feedback and made to find a way for improvements where there are deficiencies (Edu, Oko & Nkpubre, 2017). This way, the pupils are highly active in their own learning and even take responsibility for their learning. The school can also mount reading promotion activities that will encourage and challenge pupils to want to read. The time-table for each class can incorporate reading as a content that needs special attention just like other subjects.

C. Government's Role

Normally, the government takes responsibility for the education of her citizenry. In Nigeria, public primary schools are built, run and maintained by the government. These schools are mostly attended by those within the low social strata (Darma, 2015). The government owes the citizenry the responsibility to provide ready facilities for educational interventions (Edu, Uwe & Unah, 2023). This calls for involvement and intervention strategies on the part of government to enhance the acquisition of reading ability among this class of children. Ideally, the roles of government in this include:

- The provision of libraries in public schools

and furnishing of same. The library contributes to education by encouraging reading, expanding learning resources, developing learning skills critical thought, developing values, attitudes and assisting with developmental tasks among others.

- Provision of other resources and facilities needed for effective teaching of reading.
- Creation of programmes for the training and retraining of teachers on specific skills for teaching reading
- Involvement of experts for the writing of reading books for pupils
- Giving necessary motivation to primary school teachers.
- Engaging in various forms of collaboration with diverse agencies
- Providing adequate funding for primary schools

However, in the Nigerian situation, one could be forced to ask, whether the government is actually, paying attention to these necessary roles as expected.

Recommendations:

- It was recommended that government should try and breach parental literacy gap by providing literacy centres across the country for inducting parents into the literacy world at little or no cost implications on the parents.
- Government should, also, through the orientation agency, sensitize the public on the importance of reading ability to children, families and the nation at large. This could be done through the mass media, traditional media as well as Parents' Teachers' Associations.
- We also see the installation of a special training programme for elementary school teachers on teaching reading, as a viable option for enhancing the acquisition of reading skills of school children.
- It is also necessary for the screening of all elementary school children in Nigeria, through experts, to identify those with difficulties in reading so that remediation could be provided as a matter of urgency.
- Primary school teachers should make themselves available for training and be willing to implement as much new trends as

- are available in the area of teaching reading.
- The government can also collaborate with international agencies that are willing to partner with third world countries on issues of literacy.
- Reading acquisition requires lots of resources. It is the place of government to make these resources available to schools. This would enhance and complement teachers' efforts in teaching reading.
- Also, effective and great teachers can be committed to instilling reading skills in their pupils. Thus, it is expected of teachers to cultivate the act of improvisation. When the real materials for teaching reading are not readily available, they could use local materials that are found in the environment to improvise them. The improvised materials might not be the best, but they could help to enhance reading ability to some extent.
- Government could take over the writing of primary school reading books. With this, it would be possible for them to use experts for the writing of these books and not just anybody in the streets. In effect, elementary school books for reading should be strictly done by experts in child education.
- Government should establish literacy centres especially at the rural areas where rural parents can be sensitized on the importance of reading. This would give parents the opportunity to acquire literacy and the ability to assist their children in developing reading ability.

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