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Empowering Primary School Pupils through Literacy Remediation Project in Uyo Local Government Area (*Pp. 55-70*)

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Abstract

The reading failure of most public school pupils has engaged the attention of researchers and other stakeholders in the education industry for quite some time now. Efforts being made to help children to read often involve teacher training and retraining in the hope that this will impact on the pupils' literacy development. While teacher training is commendable, the needed literacy attainment of the pupils is still not appreciable. Most of them still leave the primary school without the ability to read or write. Research has shown that teachers at that level lack knowledge of the reading process and often fail to engage the pupils in activities that promote literacy development. The result has been that these pupils leave school unable to achieve the goals

of primary education. They often become dropouts. In order to empower such children for meaningful learning, reading needs to be deliberately taught to them using various activities. This study therefore reports on the activities which pupils were engaged in during the 2008 long vacation and how these enhanced their literacy development.

Key Words: Dialogic reading, Text talk, Print referencing, kit pack, decoding skills

Introduction

There is great need for literacy remediation programmes for primary school pupils in Nigeria generally and Akwa Ibom State particularly. This is because most primary school leavers cannot read or write at their grade level or even any material in print. A few that can 'bark' at words on print cannot comprehend the written text. There is generally very low attitude towards reading and the reading culture of the public primary school leavers is zero. This scenario has adversely affected the pupils. Most of them have become drop outs from the school system because they cannot further their education. In the society, they are not able to cope because they do not possess the life-coping skills. This situation depicts what Oyetunde and Umolu (1991) observed and concluded that "the public primary school is a disservice to the average Nigerian primary school pupil because they leave school neither literate in English nor in their mother tongue." For a system that was supposed to lay a strong foundation and give the pupils a good start in life to be producing illiterates is certainly unfortunate. The high rate of illiteracy and ineffective reading among primary school pupils and adults is an indication that "our system of literacy education is without doubt faulty somewhere" (Omojuwa, 1982, p. 44).

Some scholars have pin-pointed the faults. For instance, Ubahakwe (2000) attributed the reading failures of primary school leavers to the fact that reading is not taught as a discipline in Nigerian schools. Others have blamed the problem on poor homes or language back-ground of learners, lack of reading materials, large classes, poor teaching methods, ill-prepared teachers and even the materialistic nature of the larger society (Fagbemi, 1997; Solarin, 1997 and Omojuwa 1999). The result has been that pupils are not equipped with language facilities for literacy attainment. As observed by Falayajo 1997 and Wilkinsons 1997 cited by Okebukola (2006), most public primary school pupils exhibit the following reading deficiencies:

*Poor decoding skills

- *The inability to read strategically and actively
- *Poor spelling
- *Weak vocabulary
- *Too few reading opportunities outside the school
- *Poor motivation, lacks of confidence or evidence behaviour all stemming from experiencing too much reading failure (p.134).

All these factors impinge on literacy attainment of our public school leavers making it difficult for them to lead meaningful lives.

The above scenario calls for urgent intervention to salvage these categories of pupils. The pupils need to be organized into a community and made to see the benefit of literacy in an age flooded with print materials. They need to experience life as lived by others in printed pages and relate same to their own lives. The vicarious experiences from reading can inspire children to greater heights. And this can only be possible if they are taught how to read and write. For Makenzi (2003:36) said “people who can read can learn just about anything they want to know, and the doors of the world are open to people who can read”.

Incidentally, reading is not given the attention it deserves in this part of the globe. Often, reading is equated with the English language and so its learning is the business of the English language teacher. The English language teacher in his/her bid to cover the curriculum does not teach reading beyond its assessment using the comprehension passages in the prescribed English language texts for the class. Most children do not even possess these texts nor are the texts available in the school library. It is therefore not surprising that children under this situation leave school without the ability to read or write.

Recently, the Akwa Ibom State Government declared a free and compulsory education from primary school to senior secondary school level. This good gesture of government is intended to provide access to all Akwa Ibom State children of school going age thereby empowering them for a better future. But one thing that still escapes the attention of both government and teachers is the fact that children who cannot read cannot learn. Up till this moment, there is no categorical policy to incorporate reading into the school timetable. Reading is left to chance and the assumption is that pupils will learn to read as they learn the English language. The truth is that reading is not

English. Reading cuts across the curriculum and should be the business of all. It is effective reading ability that enables the child to successfully transact any curriculum content. Thus, reading holds the key to effective learning. As Flavell 1977 cited in Babatunde (1997, p.116) observes, “the cognitive restructure caused by reading and writing develop the higher reasoning processes involved in abstract thinking”. In essence, literacy sharpens the cognitive processes of individuals involved. How can we then help our teaming school pupils to read better thereby thinking clearly?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this programme was to expose the pupils to different language activities in a print-rich environment with a view to remedying their language problems for their future literacy development.

Research Questions

The following questions were framed to guide the study.

- What were the mean performances of the pupils in the pre and post tests during the Vacation reading Programme?
- How did gender influence pupils’ performance during the programme?

Research Hypotheses:

1. There was no significant mean difference in the performance of pupils’ pre and post test scores during the Vacation Reading Programme.
2. There is no significant mean difference in the performance of males and females during the Vacation Reading Programme.

Methodology

The pretest-post test experimental design was used. A purposive sampling technique was used to select all the 72 pupils who participated in the Vacation Reading Programme during the 2008 holiday. 39 of them were males while 33 were females.

The instrument consisted of a two-page test used to determine pupils’ reading ability. The first page of the test consisted of pictures (to which pupils were to write the beginning letter sounds and choose the correct word from a word list). The second part of the test was a cloze test with blanks for pupils to fill in using the exact words that were suitable. All the children took the test

which lasted for 30 minutes. This test served as the pre and post tests. This test was only for the purpose of monitoring progress and not for intimidating pupils with passing reading test and assignments.

The data were analysed using means, and t-test Analysis.

The Programme

In order to remedy pupils' language problems and empower them with literacy skills for effective learning, the researchers used the vacation reading programme as an experiment. The programme brought pupils from different schools, backgrounds and age grades together during the 2008 long vacation period. We kind of create a 'community' (Albright and Ariail, 2005) where literacy thrived and children could learn from people of other lands and far away places without having to travel there physically. We reasoned that if children that the society labels 'non-reading' are exposed to a print-rich environment and taught how to read and engage in various literacy activities, that it would have a rub-off effect on their literacy development. About 72 pupils spread across primaries 1 to 6 and ages 3 to 11 years enrolled in the programme.

A cloze procedure was used to determine pupils' entry level as well as to assign them to three groups labeled A, B and C. This categorization was adopted to enable us meet the individual reading needs of each group since they came from different schools and backgrounds. Group A was made of pupils who can only read a few simple words and match pictures with words; B can read simple words and sentences; group C can read simple stories on their own. The groupings had nothing to do with their ages or school but on their reading

levels as determined by the cloze test. Based on this, different activities were designed for each group. Generally, all the groups had a lot of language disabilities that must be remedied for them to progress well academically.

Activities for Each Group

Group A (this was made up of 3 – 7 years old) The children here could only identify letters of the alphabets and read simple words. Activities designed for them were such that help to lay the foundation for literacy latter and so oral activities predominated their class. There were ample songs, dramatization of simple stories, writing words, grouping items, listening to stories, spelling lessons, drawing pictures, using counting words (ten, nine,

eight ...; first, second, third ...), direction words (up, down, north, south), opposites, cross-word puzzles, dictation, rhyming words in poems and songs, shared reading and reading aloud sessions.

In this part of the world, it is common for most children to begin school without any appreciable experience with books due to their poor background which limits their access to books and also lack of quality time with parents at home. Even as they go to school, most teachers find reading to children and telling stories to them a waste of time that could have been used to cover the prescribed curriculum. Some teachers tend not to understand that these activities could facilitate pupils literacy development. Thus, this category of children do not even go near Adams (1990) description that children may begin school with as little as 25 hours or as much as 1,500 hours of read aloud experiences. The children in this study are not that favoured.

So it is not surprising that a child can spend 6 years in the primary school without acquiring the oracy skills that would predispose him/her to literacy development later in life. During the programme, the pupils were so excited listening to the teachers read books and stories to them, sing and dance together with them, engage them in vocabulary development activities as well as exposure to library use etc. As observed by Santoro, Chard, Howard & Baker (2008), pupils who are struggling with decoding skills or who are just learning to read fluently, could be taught comprehension strategies through oral language opportunities. That was our attitude and this influenced our interactions with the pupils during the programme.

Poetry Reading

Poetry reading is an exciting exercise when properly handled. During the programme simple poems with lines ranging from 3 to 5 were selected and read aloud to pupils. Apart from the enjoyment accruing from the poem, we used poems to teach rhyming patterns as well as vocabulary development and speaking skills. For instance, ten naughty monkeys by Grant et al (1997). This poem has ten stanzas with 3 lines each. It has a rhyming pattern on the second and third lines while the first line serves as introductory line for all the stanzas. The second stanza introduces a word that the pupils must supply a rhyming pattern for on the third line (see figure I).

In the first stanza, the word line' rhymes with nine'; so also are "gate and eight" on the second line etc. The poem becomes very interesting as pupils supplied the correct words which also tested their ability to count in descending order from ten to one.

Expanded vocabulary development was followed up using the poem. The teacher comes to the class next time and shows the pupils a word card with the word 'line'. The pupils read. The teacher writes it on the board and asks the pupils to mention five other words that rhyme with 'line'. She did so with 'gate', 'tricks' 'drive' and 'tree'. With the words on the board, pupils could read, learn their spellings and their meanings. This way, pupils' vocabulary was developed for effective language use.

In order to make meaning from this poem, pupils had to be engaged in immediate and non-immediate talk, (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001) about the poem. According to the authors, immediate talk engages pupils in answering literal questions and labelling pictures. Non-immediate talk involves discussion of word meanings, making predictions and inferences, and relating the text-to-personal experiences. This was done using the last stanza. Pupils were asked to predict how the remaining one monkey felt. Pupils' predictions were between sad and angry. A follow-up question to relate it to their own situation was asked. "How would you feel if you came to school and find no one in the classroom except your teacher?" This gave every pupil ample opportunity to engage in nonimmediate talk (Lane and Wright, 2007) with a view to valuing team spirit.

Consonant clusters and words that normally present problems to our second language learners were treated using the read aloud texts. For example, after sharing *Leo in the library* as a read aloud text, pupils were asked to identify as many words as possible that start with the following phonic blends: /sh, ch, bl, br/ Such exercises were many and from varied texts and songs and helped address mother tongue interferences and enabled pupils to pronounce those words correctly. All this lays the foundation for literacy development. The pupils also enjoyed library periods where they had the opportunity to choose books of their interest and look at pictures and or read through with the help of the teacher Librarian provided for the programme.

Groups B and C:

Although this group comprised children from ages 7 to 11 years, their level of literacy development was quite limited and they were plagued with the problems identified by (Okebukola, 2006). To really remedy their problems and empower them for effective literacy development, they were engaged in the following activities:

Listening to stories, retelling stories, picture reading, songs, writing stories, reading in mathematics (directions, angles, degrees), reading in science,

dictations, spelling quiz, use of catalogue cards in the library, following directions, cloze exercises, shared-reading, writing journals, silent reading in the library, etc.

As a departure from the traditional classroom where pupils remain passive in the learning situation, we adopted “research-based read-aloud methods” (Lane and Wright, 2007) in the activities outlined above. Three methods mentioned by the authors are:

1. dialogic reading (Whitehurst, Arnold Epstein, and Angell, 1994);
2. text talk (Beck and Mckeown, 2001), and
3. print referencing (Justice and Ezell, 2000).

In the words of Lane and Wright (2007, p. 670) these methods incorporate critical elements of language development, vocabulary growth, and knowledge about books in ways that promote learning without detracting from children’s enjoyment.” Being a remediation programme, we were conscious to make the activities fun as well as promote literacy.

Dialogic Reading is hinged on three principles of (1) encouraging children to be active learners during the book reading (2) providing feedback that models more sophisticated language, and (3) challenging children’s knowledge and skills by raising the complexity of the conversation just above their current level (Lane and Wright 2007).

The emphasis of this technique is asking questions that utilizes various prompts such as completion, recall, open-ended, wh-, and distancing prompts. This type of dialog sustains pupils’ meaningful storybook interactions (Lane and Wright, 2007).

Text Talk on the other hand focuses on vocabulary development through rich and meaningful discussions with children about books read or stories told. In order to achieve this objective, the teacher selects appropriate words for the discussion; creates child-friendly definitions, that is, uses everyday language to explain the meaning of the target word, and finally encourages pupils to use the target words in other contexts.

Print Referencing involves both verbal and non-verbal cues used to draw pupils’ attention to important features of the text. It can be pointing to print or questioning or commenting about

print. Print referencing aims at increasing pupils' metalinguistic awareness which in turn promotes print interest. According to Justice and Ezell (2004, p.186), increased print interest makes it possible for children to come to 'view written language as an object distinctly worthy of attention'. We applied these techniques with the children.

Using a Read Story Kit Pack

This pack contains four stories for read aloud sessions. Each story has its own poster while the story is printed in the Teachers Guide with some teaching notes and suggestions for activities based on the stories. One of the stories was 'The bright red Bucket by Lynn Haken (1995). This story is about a shiny red bucket that performs many functions but on getting old and tired and no more able to do its job, the owner takes it to the rubbish heap. Just then the woman of the house collects it and finds it a new job. With this story we were able to engage the pupils in a number of activities before, during and after the story all aimed at developing language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing; vocabulary, observational skills, story elements as well as life-skills.

Using the Poster before Reading

We prepared word cards for the following key words to help explain some of the pictures as the teacher reads the story (new, old, jobs, clothes, dripped, drops, dented and rusty).

Then with the poster fixed to the board, pupils were invited to dialog with the pictures guided by the teacher's questions. The questions directed the pupils' attention to the pictures for them to predict what the story is all about. Other questions directed their attention to the materials used in producing buckets as well as functions which buckets can perform as shown in the poster and also in their various homes. This type of interactions set the scene for the story and enhanced pupils' understanding of the story as the teacher reads.

During the reading, the teacher reads in a lively, engaging way with appropriate gestures, pacing, voices and rhythm to convey meaning. She also stops at critical points to let in pupils as well as let them share their views. For example, at the point that the man finds the bucket useless and the woman collects it and says "I have just the right job for it now that it is old," the teacher asks: "What job do you think the bucket can still do? What do you use old buckets for in your homes?" Questions like these got children thinking, talking and relating text talk to their personal life experiences.

After reading Activities:

These were many. Pupils' reaction to the story as to whether they enjoyed the story as well as the lesson drawn from the story were checked. Completion exercises, arranging sentences in the correct sequence according to the story line, drawing of illustrations for sentences of their choice were done. Finally, pupils were asked to write things that can be recycled from old things. What they produced here were impressive.

Picture Story with Group C

This is a set of eight pictures which when arranged from 1 to 8 together tell a story. It is a READ material which illustrates the point that pictures can be read. With it, pupils were made to learn elements of story-theme, setting, character, plot etc and were able to retell stories with these target elements. According to Santoro et al (2008), if the target elements are routinely used to identify critical features of a story, pupils have repeated opportunities to discuss them and make text-to-text connections (p. 397). This is exactly what we were doing with "on the way to school" and "a surprising fish hunt".

Apart from this, the picture story afforded the pupils opportunity to talk, brainstorm, predict what will happen next and create their own characters. The pictures have no text, pupils try to tell the story using the pictures. After the teacher's prompts and questions, pupils were able to get the idea of the story and could tell the story.

From the pictures pupils could tell and retell the story. The story could be told chronologically or from the perspective of any character in the story. Pupils did wonderfully well here orally. As a follow up activity, the whole class was then divided into groups of five. Each group had to write a big book. A big book is a story book with either pictures on top and a sentence(s) below to describe the picture or vice versa. This was real literacy in action. The pupils worked and within two days produced big books. They shared their stories with members of the class.

The Library Periods were particularly exciting to all the pupils in the programme possibly because there are no functional libraries in their schools. Pupils from this group were encouraged to retell stories they read in the library. Orally they were guided to make effort but when asked to make a written retell, you could really observe their language disabilities. Some pupils tended to copy the text and the writing flooded with problems that need special attention. It was very revealing as well as challenging.

Journal Writing

This is a very strange activity in our school system. Pupils are not encouraged to keep journals so we had to explain what a journal is and how to keep journals. Each child in Group C had an exercise book designated for journal. Since they are not used to journal keeping, individual journals were not considered suitable here. A dialogue journal where school related activities were recorded and teacher regular response needed to help improve their spellings and other language difficiencies were considered appropriate. They were happy.

All these activities lasted four weeks. It was therefore necessary to post test the pupils to find out whether these activities had any impact on their literacy development.

Results

The answer to the research questions and test of the null hypotheses were presented using tables. The two research questions were answered using Table 1 while tables 2 and 3 provided answers to null hypotheses 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1 presents the general performance of the pupils during the Vacation Reading Programme in the pre and post tests. The results revealed that there were improvements by all participants.

From Table 2 the calculated t-test values were for groups A, 3.32, B, 4.76 and C, 5.7. In all the groups, the calculated t-test values were greater than the critical t-test values. Hence the Null hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, the mean performance of the pupils on the Post test was significantly different.

From table 3 the calculated t-test values of 0.92 for Group A, 1.21 for Group B and 2.31 for Group C were obtained. In Groups A. and B the calculated t-test values were less than the critical t-test value. In which case the null hypothesis was not rejected. There was no significant differences in the performance of male and female pupils in these Groups. For Group C the calculated t-test value was greater than the Critical t-test value, hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. There was a significant difference in the performance of the male and female pupils in Pretest and Post test in this group.

Discussion

Results from the data analysis show that the pupils' performances at the post test were better than that of the pretest. This was not surprising because the programme's rich and varied remediation activities were interactive thereby impacting on the pupils' literacy development. The findings of this study is in support of other studies: For example, Santoro et al (2008) reported higher levels of comprehension and vocabulary knowledge of participating students in a read-aloud curriculum; Brandenburge (2002) found out that integrating reading and writing enhanced comprehension since the two are reciprocal processes; De Temple and Snow (2003) extols read alouds on increased vocabulary. It is increased vocabulary and comprehension which actually improved pupils' performance on the cloze test. The non significant finding on gender is a further evidence that both sexes value the activities and expended themselves to learn.

Generally, the pupils were excited about the programme. For once, they had access to books and made their choices. The whole atmosphere was a warm community pervaded with learners-oriented activities. All these add positively to better performance.

Besides, the programme employed structured, interactive teacher and pupils text-based discussions which enabled pupils to reflect on the story line thereby promoting comprehension. They rarely had this type of rich and warm interactions in their schools. This study supports Papalewia (2004) who reported the use of related methods to arrive at significant changes in the reading culture of the pupils. Similarly Udosen (2007) reported enhanced interest and improved reading habit for UBE pupils who participated in a similar programme.

Conclusions

This study set out to find out how language problems which hinder pupils effective literacy achievement could be remedied using the Vacation Reading Programme. The identified problems from observation and research findings included weak vocabulary, poor decoding skills, inability to read strategically and actively, poor spelling abilities, inability to use appropriate punctuation marks, lack of access to reading materials. Children need solid foundation in these areas for them to become effective literacy achievers. From all the interactions with the pupils and activities during the period, it was obvious that these identified problems could be resolved and that the programme has

a high potential for literacy remediation for public primary school pupils. We therefore recommend its use in different parts of the state.

Recommendations

- The remediation programme should be a regular feature for these categories of pupils.
- It should be spread across the entire state if its impact must be felt by Akwa Ibom public primary school pupils.
- Teachers should be interested in the programme by participating in the capacity building workshop that prepare them for this programme.
- The Government should partner with RAN to move this programme beyond one location in the entire state so that the gains of free education would make sense to the pupils.

Table 1: Mean Performance of pupils in the Vacation Reading Programme according to the different groups and gender.

Group	Gender N	Pretest		Post-test
A	Male	15	5.20	11.81
	Female	14	10.80	12.82
	Total	29	7.95	12.21
B	Male	13	17.32	26.76
	Female	9	15.23	25.76
	Total	22	16.4	25.37
C	Male	11	26.91	33.62
	Female	10	27.45	37.62
	Total	21	27.17	36.57
Pooled	Male	39	15.82	25.70
	Female	33	18.00	27.20
	Total	72	16.81	26.27

Table 2: t –test analysis of Pupils’ post test according to Groups

df Post test t – test(cal) t- cri

Group A28	12.2	3.32*	2.08
Group B21	25.37	4.76*	2.08
Group C20	36.57	5.7*	2.09
P <05	*Significant		

Table 3: t-test analysis of Male and Female pupils' score in the programme

Group	df	t-test	t-cri
A	28	0.92**	2.08
B	21	1.21**	2.07
C	20	2.31*	2.09
P < 05 *Significant **Not Significant			

Figure 1

Ten naughty monkeys
On a washing line.
One fell off and then there were

Nine naughty monkeys
Swinging on a gate.
One ran away and then there were

Eight naughty monkeys
Tried counting to eleven.
One gave up and then there were

Seven naughty monkeys
Doing funny tricks.
One hurt his back and then there were

Six naughty monkeys
Learning how to drive!
One crashed his car and then there were

Five naughty monkeys
Knocking at the door.
One was scared and then there were

Four naughty monkeys
Climbing in a tree.
One jumped off and then there were

Three naughty monkeys
Visited the zoo.
One stayed there and then there were

Two naughty monkeys
Having lots of fun.
One got tired and then there was

One naughty monkey
All on his own.
Had no one to play with
So he went home.



Adapted from Grant et al (1997), *Junior English Project for Secondary Schools Student*, Book 1, Lagos: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd

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