Balanced Literacy Instruction:

Promoting the Five Foundational Literacy Skills in Early Childhood Education

Katrina A. Korb and Grace Selzing-Musa

Faculty of Education, University of Jos

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Abstract

Creating proficient readers requires high quality instruction in literacy skills. The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five skills that are foundational for proficient readers: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. A balanced literacy curriculum integrates each of these skills for effective reading instruction. The purpose of this paper was to explain each of these five skills as well as instructional strategies for promoting these skills in early childhood education. It is recommended that empirical research be conducted on the instruction of these skills in the Nigerian context. Furthermore, curriculum changes should be implemented in literacy instruction in early childhood education, and training be conducted with both pre-service and in-service teachers to enable them to effectively teach each of the five literacy skills.

Introduction

The most important element of a quality education is literacy (Greaney, 1996). A strong foundation in literacy for young children is critical for future success in school (Strickland, 2010). Strong literacy skills are also important to improve the national economy, civic participation, and national development (Wagner, 2000). As such, a major developmental goal for countries across Africa is to increase literacy rates (Richmond, Robinson, & Sachs-Israel, 2008).

Creating proficient readers requires high quality instruction in literacy skills. The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five skills that are foundational for proficient readers: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. A balanced literacy curriculum integrates each of these skills for effective reading instruction. When one skill is overemphasized or underemphasized, the development of the other skills suffers, resulting in poor readers (Tompkins, 2011).

It appears that many teachers in Nigeria believe that literacy is a unidimensional skill, consisting only in the ability to read words on the paper (Korb, 2010). This belief held by Nigerian teachers contradicts current international educational research in literacy development. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explain each of the five skills that are necessary to develop proficient readers. Furthermore, instructional strategies for teaching each of these skills will be explained with a focus on early childhood education, ranging from nursery school through primary three.

Foundational Literacy Skills

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that speech is a composition of individual units of sounds. Phonemic awareness provide a basis for phonics and spelling (Morrow, 2005; Pang, Muaka, Berhendt, & Kamil, 2003; Tompkins, 2010). It is important to teach

children phonetic awareness because it helps them to recognize that it possible to segment speech into smaller units. This knowledge prepares children to learn the sound-symbol correspondence that is necessary for reading and spelling patterns (Morrow, 2005). When educators discuss the ingredients of effectively teaching children to read, phonetic awareness receives much attention (National Reading Panel, 2000).

When teachers manipulate spoken language in various ways, children develop their phonemic awareness skills. This is typically done in group discussions together with the children. For example, during a class discussion, the teacher can have the pupils do the following.

- Identifying sounds in words. Pupils can identify a specific sound at a certain place in the word, including the beginning, the ending, or the middle of the word. For example, when the teacher says the word *bell*, pupils can identify that the word ends with the /l/ sound.
- Blending of sounds to form words. Children blend different numbers of individual sounds to form words. For example, when the teacher separately says the /p//i//t/ sounds, the children repeat the sounds, then they blend the sounds together to create the word *pit*.
- Segmenting words into sounds. Children learn to separate words into initial, middle and final sounds. For example, a word like *bin* can be segmented in the /b/ /i/ /n/ sounds.
- Categorizing sounds in a word. Children can learn to recognize the odd word in a set of three or more words. For example, when given words like *ride*, *run*, *round* and *sit*, pupils can tell or recognize that *sit* does not belong because it does not begin with the /r/ sound.

- Substitution of sounds to make new words. Children learn to take away a sound from one word and replace it with another sound at the beginning, middle or end of the word. For example changing *cap* to *tap, sap* to *sip,* or *late* to *lame*.

The above strategies, especially segmenting and blending, are used by children to spell and decode words. For example, when learning to spell words, children say words slowly to themselves. As the children are slowly saying the words, this is segmenting sounds.

Children's phonemic awareness is nurtured when a language-rich environment is created in the classroom. As children sing songs, read word-play books aloud, play games, and chant rhymes, they orally match, isolate, blend, and substitute sounds and segment words into sounds. In this way, phonetic awareness is naturally incorporated into oral language and literacy activities (Tompkins, 2010).

Instruction on phonemic awareness should meet the following criteria.

- Phonemic awareness instruction is primarily for children between 4 – 6 years old, and by extension 0 – 3 years old inclusive, since they are all active learners in the early childhood programme. As a foundational literacy skill, once children are proficient at identifying sounds in words, phonemic awareness instructional activities become less important.
- The activities to be chosen should be nursery rhymes, riddles and words plays because these allow children to engage in playful experimentation with the oral language.
- Instruction should be planned and purposeful and not incidental. Instructional materials should be chosen by the teacher and activities should focus on the sound structure of children's oral language.
- Activities in phonemic awareness should be integrated with other components of a balanced literal program, so that children can perceive the connection between oral and written language.

One of the best ways for children to learn phonemic awareness is by exposing them to rhyming activities, because rhyming activities are considered the easier task. It involves simple chanting of nursery rhymes and reading of stories that rhyme by the teacher (Morrow, 2005). Rhyming helps children identify patterns in the sounds, which fosters phonemic awareness.

Sounds can be segmented by children when they are asked to listen for, clap, and count syllables in words like their name. This can be playfully done as the teacher recites both rhyming and non-rhyming words from books and asks the children to differentiate between the various sounds.

Phonics

The correspondence between the sounds in speech (phonology) and the spelling pattern of written language (orthography) is phonics (Tompkins, 2010). Phonics is the connection of sounds and symbols (Morrow, 2005), such as the connection of the /k/ sound to the letter *c*. Effective use of phonics requires children to learn letter sounds and combination of letter sounds (phonemes) in association with their corresponding letter symbols (graphemes). When children learn to associate letters with their corresponding sounds, then they can blend or combine the sounds to decode words. For example, when children can identify the /k/ /a/ /n/ sounds based on the letters *c*, *a*, and *n*, then they can combine those sounds to decode the word *can*. Phonics helps improve children's ability to decode regularly spelled words and pseudo-words and it helps growth in children's reading comprehension ability.

Phonics is best taught through a combination of instruction and application activities (Tompkins, 2010). The most effective phonics programs are systematic where the phonics skills are taught in a specific sequence (National Reading Panel, 2000). Effective teaching of phonics must follow a developmental continuum for systematic phonics instruction which

starts with consonants and ends with *r*-controlled vowels, as described below (Tompkins, 2011). Phonics instruction should begin in the final year of nursery school or in primary one for the biggest impact on reading development (National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonics instruction should be finished by primary three. Instruction in phonics should not be done in isolation; the purpose of learning letter-sound correspondence is to enable children to apply this skill in authentic reading and writing experiences. Therefore, children need ample opportunities to practice putting their phonics understanding into practice.

The developmental sequence of teaching phonics is as follows.

- Consonants should be taught first, followed by short vowels. Consonants are taught first because they generally are easier than vowels because most consonants represent a single sound consistently (Tompkins, 2011). All vowels, on the other hand, can be pronounced at least two different ways, with a long or short sound. After the consonants and short vowels have been learnt, younger children can read consonant-vowel-consonant words like *cap* and *bag*.
- Next, instructions should focus on consonant blends, when two or three consonants appear together so their sounds blend such as the word *great*; digraphs, when a single sound is represented by two consonants such as the /th/ sound in the word *throw,* and long vowels. This enables pupils to read consonant-vowel-consonant-*e* pattern, such as the word *bike,* as well as the consonant-vowel-vowel-consonant pattern words like *sweep* and *plain*.
- Finally, children should be taught the less common vowel diagraphs that include words like *claw* and *taught,* as well as the *r*-controlled vowels such as in words like *hair*, *heart*, *warm,* and *learn*.

Children must also learn the phonics rules that guide the link between sounds and letters because the correspondence between sounds and letters is not perfect in the English language (Tompkins, 2011). For example, one phonics rule is that the letter *c* followed by an *e, i,* or *y* usually has the sound of an *s*, such as in the word *city*.

Reading Fluency

Reading fluency is the ability to read a text accurately, quickly, and with expression (National Reading Panel, 2000). In other words, a reader can recognize familiar words automatically and without conscious thought, and can quickly identify unfamiliar words (Tompkins, 2011). Reading fluency is important because quickly and accurately reading words allows the reader to spend more attention on understanding what is being read instead of decoding words (Pang et al., 2003). A reader is identified as fluent if he or she can read at least 100 words per minute (Tompkins, 2011).

Reading fluency is improved when learners practice reading texts (National Reading Panel, 2000). Simply, the more a learner reads, the more fluent they become in reading. Therefore, teachers and parents should give students ample opportunities to read in order to improve their fluency skills.

The most basic way to improve reading fluency is to have learners read the same text multiple times (National Reading Panel, 2000). When a text is read out loud by the students, the teacher can give the student feedback about the quality of their reading, correcting mispronounced words. Another strategy to promote reading fluency is to pair learners up with a partner. The partners can either read the text aloud in unison, or take turns reading alternate pages. To ensure that learners are motivated to read a text multiple times, it is important that the texts are interesting and meaningful to the reader (Pang et al., 2003).

Furthermore, teachers can provide direct instruction in high frequency words. (Note that high frequency words are sometimes called sight words.) These are the most common

words that are found in texts, such as the words *a*, *am*, *do*, *in*, and *we* (Tompkins, 2011). A list of 300 words has been identified by Eldredge (2005, as cited in Tompkins, 2011), and it is estimated that these 300 words make up approximately 72% of the words that beginning readers will encounter when reading texts. Thus, by providing pupils practice in identifying these high frequency words, students will be able to improve their reading speed and accuracy.

To directly teach high frequency words, teachers should introduce three to five words each week to the learners, beginning in primary one. Throughout the week, the teacher should involve the pupils in a variety of activities where they practice reading and writing the high frequency words. For example, teachers can write the words on cards and post them in a specific place in the classroom, called a word wall (Tompkins, 2011). At various times throughout the school day, the teacher can refer back to the word wall and ask students to read and spell various words on the wall, and use the words in a sentence.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a term used to describe the store of words that a child knows (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009). It has two large types: expressive vocabulary which are words which children can express themselves with, and receptive vocabulary which are words that can be understood when heard in context. The average preschooler knows an average of 5,000 words. Children are exposed to many different new words, at different times, and in different ways when they find themselves in a language-rich environment. According to Strickland (2010), vocabulary is important in early childhood because having well developed vocabulary gives a child the opportunity to learn more words with ease than peers who have limited word knowledge. Furthermore, once children learn how to decode words, a broad vocabulary is vital for children to understand the words that they are reading in a text.

The National Reading Panel (2000) found that vocabulary can be learnt incidentally, or without explicit instruction, through the contexts of storybook reading or listening to the reading of others. However, repeated exposure to a new vocabulary word is important. Therefore, teachers should provide pupils with the opportunity to use a new vocabulary word in multiple different ways, such as reading a text, writing sentences, and in a discussion. Vocabulary words can effectively be taught by directly teaching new vocabulary words that children will encounter in a specific text that is about to be read. A single method of teaching vocabulary is ineffective. Therefore, teachers should plan a variety of activities to help their pupils expand their vocabulary.

In teaching children vocabulary, Morrow (2005) suggests the use of semantic maps which help children see how words relate to one another to enrich vocabulary development. A semantic map is developed by the following steps:

- Choose a word related or students' interest or a theme under study.
- Write the word on the board.
- Brainstorm other words that are related to the key word.
- Create categories for the new words that emerge and classify the words into those categories.
- Use the words to create a story.

Other ways that vocabulary can be developed can include structural question and answer discussions where the teacher poses an open ended question to the children that will encourage talks, like "what would you do if …?, tell us how…?" These open-ended discussions allow pupils to explore the use of new vocabulary words in an informal setting.

Also, conservations can be used in improving vocabulary development in young children. These conversations are most effective in small groups that include three to six children and can either be with or without the teacher. The conversations need to have

established guidelines like children should listen to others during conversations, children need to take turns talking, children need to raise their hands to get turns without interrupting each other, and keeping talk relevant to the topic of conversation. When the teacher is involved in the conversation, redirection of the conversation to stated purpose may be necessary, and the teacher as a fellow participant should follow same rules and talk less to allow children to be more fully engaged in vocabulary development.

Finally, pupils should be taught strategies to help them when they encounter an unknown vocabulary word while reading a text. One such strategy is using context clues, where the reader uses clues from surrounding text as a way of finding out word meaning. For example, leaving blanks spaces in sentences for pupils to determine the appropriate word will help them find word meanings (Morrow, 2005).

Comprehension

Reading comprehension is defined as extracting and constructing meaning through interaction with a written text (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Simply, reading comprehension means deriving meaning from a text (Pang et al., 2003). Reading comprehension is the essence of reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). Indeed, just correctly pronouncing words does not mean that a reader understands the meaning that is being communicated by those words. Reading comprehension is not passive, but is an active process that requires the reader to use their knowledge of vocabulary words and think and reason about the message that the text is communicating (Pang et al., 2003).

To engage in effective reading comprehension, the learner must first have an understanding of the vocabulary in the text, be able to read the text fluently, and have relevant background knowledge about the text (Tompkins, 2011). Relevant background knowledge is important to understanding a text because if the text is describing a topic that is unfamiliar to the learner, then the learner cannot understand the text. For example, a student

who has been raised in the village will have difficulty understanding a text that is describing the noisy traffic of Lagos. Therefore, it is important that the teachers select texts that are relevant to the learner's context.

Comprehension strategies are thoughtful behaviors that readers use to improve their understanding of a text (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008). There are many comprehension strategies such as activating prior knowledge about the text, monitoring the reading process to determine whether the reader understands what has been read so far, predicting what will happen next, summarizing the text, connecting the text to the reader's life, visualizing what has been read, and asking questions of the text. There are two primary ways that reading comprehension can be taught: the first is through class discussions of a text that is read by the class, and the second is through direct instruction of specific comprehension strategies.

Class discussions of the text are useful because teachers can model comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading the text (Pang et al., 2003). Before reading a text together with pupils, the teacher can first look at the title of the text and have a discussion about what the text appears to be about. This will help learners activate their prior knowledge. While reading the text, the teacher can periodically pause to tell the pupils to close their eyes and imagine what is happening in the text, helping the pupils learn the comprehension strategy of visualizing. The teacher can also ask the students questions about what is being read, and ask the readers to predict what will happen next. After reading the text, the teacher can ask questions to help the learners summarize the key elements in the text and connect what has been read to their lives.

Recommendations

Because of the importance of these five literacy skills in developing proficient readers, further educational research needs to be conducted on these literacy skills in the Nigerian context. First, researchers should assess the ability of Nigerian pupils in these five

reading skills to determine which skills need additional focus in early childhood education. Research should also be conducted on the extent to which each of these five literacy skills are currently being taught in Nigerian classrooms, as well as teachers' knowledge of these skills and their ability to provide appropriate instruction in each of the skills.

Professional development must be created to help early childhood educators effectively teach each of the five literacy skills. RAND Reading Study Group (2002) states that effective professional development should provide teachers with theoretical understanding of the subject matter, in this case the five literacy skills. Second, effective professional development covers longer periods of time. Therefore, this professional development should not be just a one-time training, but should provide continual interaction with teachers as they implement what they have learnt from the training in their classroom instruction.

The early childhood curriculum should be modified to reflect the five fundamental literacy skills. Activities should be developed and compiled into a manual for teachers to effectively provide instruction in each of the literacy skills.

Conclusion

Developing proficient readers requires good instruction (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Effective literacy instruction helps pupils develop each of the five fundamental literacy skills as described in this paper. Since early literacy skills impact learning at subsequent levels and in other classes, increasing the quality of literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms will improve on educational achievement at all levels.

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