DEVELOPING LITERACY SKILLS TO ENHANCE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF LEARNERS IN UYO EDUCATION ZONE

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed at investigating how literacy skills development in reading relates with the academic performance of secondary school learners at Essien Udim Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. To achieve this, 446 Senior Secondary Three (SS3) learners were purposively selected from the 15 public schools in the local government out of a population of 1,317. The study raised 3 hypotheses and adopted a structured questionnaire for data collection. The resulting data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Statistics. The findings showed that there was a significant relationship between the availability of reading materials, conducive learning environment and teachers' utilization of literacy materials in the development of literacy skills in reading to enhance academic performance of the learners in the study. It is recommended that teachers should attend workshops and seminars to help upgrade their teaching skills in reading.

Keywords: Literacy skills, academic performance, reading

INTRODUCTION

The simplest meaning of literacy is the ability to read and understand. Okonkwo (2004) asserts that literacy has thirteen (13) synonyms including: reading ability, reading proficiency, learning, book learning, education, learnedness, enlightenment, articulateness and articulacy. This expression points to the reading and writing skills. One is said to be enlightened, when one can read and write or when one is proficient in reading and has learnt to write. This implies that the person is literate or educated and functional in his culture.

Literacy further involves the ability to read the written language at a reasonable rate with good comprehension. One may engage in reading to gain information on existing knowledge, or to critique a writer's ideas or writing style. It is a receptive process for the writer to encode thought as language, while the reader decodes language as thought (Eze, 2007). Reading is an interactive process in which the reader brings meaning to the text based on his experiential background, and interpreting the text based on his prior knowledge. Reading is the interaction between the text and the reader. The ability to read has, however, become an important fact for successful living in a rapidly developing world like Nigeria. Onukaogu (2002) states that:

Reading is more than just seeing words clearly, calling or pronouncing printed words correctly or even recognizing the meaning of isolated words. The essential skills in reading are getting meaning from printed, written or signed message. A mature reading implies or means evaluating the ideas for truth, validity or importance (p.24).

One of the things that hinder the attainment of effective and efficient reading skills by the Nigerian school child is that the child is never really taught how to read. Onukaogu (2002)

went on to add that it is common for teachers in our schools to assume that if they assign learners tasks to perform, the learners would automatically acquire the skill of performing such tasks. The position of such teachers Onukaogu concludeds is reinforced by the action of textbook writers irrespective of whether they write to enhance reading in English or the mother tongue. For instance, until recently, the reading or reading comprehension component in our language textbooks in Nigeria usually starts with the command "read the passage below and answer the questions that follow". It is very unprofessional and academically unsound to ask children to perform tasks when the skills that they need to perform such tasks have not been formally taught them.

In reality, reading skills dictate performances in other subjects. One's ability to read well determines one's performance and achievement in any academic endeavour. A good reader will automatically become a good writer because of the vast experiences he can gain on formation of words, phrases, sentences and even expression of ideas (Ekpo, Udosen, Afangideh, Ekukinam & Ikorok, 2007). In addition, it is obvious that the literacy level of our secondary school learners is extremely low. A lot has been said about the falling standard of education, particularly in English Language reading among the Nigerian students. Many factors such as unavailability of literacy materials, poor learning environment, poor utilization or accessibility of literacy materials negatively hinder the development of reading skills among learners. This must have prompted Ikonta (2002) to state that a good mastery of reading skills in the English Language contributes to the high level of students' academic performance in all subjects and fosters fruitful and harmonious interaction among students. Ikonta went on to say that good performance in test, examinations, evaluations etc in different subject areas depend mostly on the possession of good reading skills.

Literacy materials are the resources or instructional materials applied in reading. These resources may be textual, pictorial, graphics, charts or dictionaries, songs, flash cards, overhead projectors, authentic materials, such as newspaper cuttings, video and television, computers, internet and multimedia projector. All these are good materials for implementing literacy programmes at different levels of learning (Eze, 2007). It has also been noted that most of these materials are not available in schools (Offorma, 2001; Okonkwo, 2004). Most available texts in the school libraries (where they exist) are obsolete. Provision of the learning resources is insufficient due to large classes experienced in the schools. At the primary schools, the World Bank has provided some literacy materials but some head teachers prefer to tuck them away in cartons for fear of losing them, or damaging them (Offorma, 2007). This attitude defeats the aim of their supply to schools. So even when they are available, they are not accessible to the learners.

At the secondary school, many students do not possess the required literacy materials. This is due to their exorbitant prices which are not affordable by parents. In a class of thirty students (Offorma, 2007) laments that one may find only about one or two students who own a dictionary, despite the fact that the dictionary is very significant in reading and writing. In this age of technology, computers are yet to be common instructional and learning materials despite the fact that they facilitate literacy, especially the internet, e-mail and the World Wide Web (www). In their findings therefore, Ikonta (2002) and Offorma (2007) conclude that learning resources, availability and accessibility are problematic and affect learners' performance in their development of reading skills.

Also, environment has been seen as an important force in a child's intellectual development. Oden (2004) stresses the impact of environment on intelligence and emphasizes that the child's learning environment is a key factor in his cognitive development and education. In Nigeria, learning environment is not favourable and conducive for meaningful learning to

take place. Most learners hang on windows and manage dilapidated seats in the classrooms. There is also the problem of large classes and overcrowded classrooms. Otagburuagu (2007) laments that since literacy encompasses ability to read, write, count and use numbers for problem solving, Nigerian learners who find themselves in overcrowded classroom can hardly be literate. Equally, the school libraries in our schools are ill-equipped. Current books bring the English Language closer to the readers and help develop their reading skills. Therefore, story books, adventures, travels, registers etc are lacking in the schools for learners. In support of this, Offorma (2007) posits that most available texts in the school libraries (where they exist) are obsolete. Therefore Oden (2004), Otagburagu (2007) and Offorma (2007) conclude that developing literacy skills in reading cannot take place effectively in an in conducive learning environment.

Further, utilization of literacy materials are very crucial in the promoting of learning in schools. Offorma (2007) educates that Nigeria formulated Information Communication Technology Policy since 1986; and that this policy is yet to be fully implemented in the school system. Consequently teachers are not ICT complaint and ICT materials are not available in the classrooms. Yet these materials introduce clarity in the teaching-learning sequence when applied. Baldeh (1990) in Offorma (2007) comments that visual and aural materials can help in the following ways:

- brighten up the classroom and bring variety and interest into language lessons;

- help to provide the situations (contexts) which light up the meaning of the utterances used and

- stimulate learners to speak the language as well as read and write it (p.73).

Baldeh however warns that language teaching resources are not meant to usurp the role of the teacher but to make it possible for him to teach more economically, interestingly and effectively.

Muodumogu (2003), in her research to identify teachers' perception of the utilization of instructional materials for effective teaching of vocabulary, which she believes aids successful reading concluded that using instructional materials is vital to students' comprehension. Also, flash cards are versatile literacy materials. They can be used for presenting language items, playing language games, group practice, asking questions and responding to the questions. They can additionally be used in the presentation, practice and production of the literacy skills. Ahmed (2004) confirms that the use of these versatile literacy materials enhances literacy skills in reading and aids performance of learners in both internal and external examinations effectively.

Authentic materials occupy a central position in developing literacy skills. They include novels, poems, newspapers and magazine articles, telephone directories, plane ticks, football reports, weather forecast, television and radio programmes recipes etc. This can be applied in comprehension exercises, text manipulations and translation, cloze procedures, rewriting and reordering a text (Richard, 2007).

Video and television are audio-visual materials which present language more comprehensively than any other instructional materials. They combine both picture and sound in a sequence as experienced in real life. They take the learners into the lives and experiences of others, and can be used in vocabulary development, grammar presentation or review, listening, speaking, reading and writing activities in a cross cultural setting. For adequate utilization, the teacher has to consider the objectives, sequence, interest, suitable length of time, language levels and items and the follow-up activities. The concern of this study was

therefore to examine how the development of literacy skills in reading could enhance proper academic performance of learners in the secondary schools.

Purpose of Study

The objectives of the study were set to:

1. Examine how availability of literacy materials relates to secondary school students' performance in reading.

2. Investigate how learning environment relates to students' development of literacy skills and academic performance in reading.

3. Determine how teachers' utilization of literacy materials relates to students' development of literacy skills and their academic performance in reading.

Research Hypotheses

The study raised the following null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance to guide the study:

Ho_1:   There is no significant relationship between the availability of literacy materials and the   development of literacy skills in reading and students' academic performance at the secondary   school.

Ho_2:   There is no significant relationship between a conducive learning environment and the development of literacy skills and students' academic performance in reading.

Ho_3:   There is no significant relationship between teachers' utilization of literacy materials and   students' development of literacy skills and their academic performance in reading.

METHOD

The study adopted descriptive survey design and used Essien Udim Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria as a study area. The population comprised all Senior Secondary III students in the study area. A sample of 446 students was drawn from a population of 1,317 students through a purposive random sampling technique. The instrument called Students' Questionnaire in Literacy Development in Reading (SQLDR) was developed by the researchers. It comprised 20 items and centred on unavailability of literacy materials, poor learning environment and non-utilization of literacy materials. Respondents were required to rate their responses on a-4 point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA) = 4; Agree (A) = 3; Disagree (D) = 2 and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1.

RESULTS

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between the availability of literacy materials and the development of literacy skills in reading and students' academic performance at the secondary school.

Table 1. Relationship between Availability of Literacy Materials and Literacy Skills Development in Reading

Variables	x y	x^2 y^2	xy	df	r	Decision
Availability of Literacy Materials (X)	112838	30286287				
			2775065	444	8119*	Rejected
Students' Literacy	6690	1123028				

Development in Reading
(Y)

N = 446; level of significant = 0.05, df = 444

Table 1 above shows that the calculated r-value is 0.811, while the critical r-value is 0.088. Since the calculated r-value is greater than the critical r-value, the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternate at 0.05 level of significance. This means that availability of literacy materials significantly relates to students' development of literacy skills in reading.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant relationship between a conducive learning environment and the development of literacy skills and students' academic performance in reading.

Table 2. Relationship between Conducive Learning Environment and Students' Academic Performance in Reading

Variables	x y	x^2 y^2	xy	df	r	Decision
Conducive Learning Environment (X)	112838	30286287				
			2674463	444	.7690*	Rejected
Students' Academic Performance in Reading (Y)	6552	110885				

N = 446; level of significant = 0.05, df = 444

Table 2 indicates that the calculated r-value is .7690, while the critical r-value is 0.088. Since the calculated r is greater than the critical r at df of 444 and 0.05 level of significance the null hypothesis is therefore rejected in favour of the alternate, and the study concludes that, there is a significant relationship between a conducive learning environment and students' development of literacy skills in reading.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant relationship between teachers' utilization of literacy materials and students' development of literacy skills and their academic performance in reading.

Table 3. Relationship between Utilization of Literacy Materials and Students' Development of Literacy Skills in Reading

Variables	x y	x^2 y^2	xy	df	r	Decision
Utilization of Literacy Materials (X)	112838	202286				
			2532144	444	.6722*	Rejected
Students' Literacy Skills Development in Reading (Y)	6498					

N = 446; level of significant = 0.05, df = 444

In Table 3 above, the calculated r-value is .6722, while the critical value is 0.088. Since the calculated r-value is greater than the critical r-value, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected in favour of the alternate at 0.05 level of significance. The study concludes that there is a significant relationship between teachers' utilization of literacy materials and literacy skills development of secondary school students' in reading.

DISCUSSION

Results of the data analysis in Table 1 revealed a significant relationship between availability of literacy materials and students' development of literacy skills in reading. This means that students who are exposed to available literacy materials develop literacy skills in reading and perform academically better than their counterparts who do not have access to these materials in the teaching-learning process. The result is consistent with the findings of Ikonta (2002) and Offorma (2007) that non-availability and accessibility of literacy materials hinder learners' performance in their development of reading skills.

Also, results of findings in Table 2 confirm that there is a significant relationship between a conducive learning environment, the development of literacy skills and students' academic performance in reading. The results prove that most learners hang on windows and make do with dilapidated seats in the classroom. Learners also combat overcrowded classrooms and all these hinder their ability to read, write, count and use numbers, since literacy encompasses ability to read, write, count and use numbers. These findings agree with Oden (2004), Otagburuagu (2007) and Offorma (2007) that developing literacy skills in reading cannot take place effectively in a poor learning environment.

Finally, results of findings in Table 3 show that there is a significant relationship between teachers' utilization of literacy materials and students' development of literacy skills in reading. This means that effective utilization of literacy materials by teachers introduce clarity in the teaching/learning process in the classroom. The findings of this study are in support of the findings of Ahmad (2004) who confirms that the use of these versatile literacy materials enhances literacy skills development in reading and aids performance of learners in both internal and external examinations respectively.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers concluded that for effective development of literacy skills which aid secondary school academic performance of learners in reading, variables like availability and accessibility of literacy materials, conducive learning environment and teachers' utilization of literacy materials are significantly related.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. To achieve the literacy and numeracy skills specified in the National Policy on Education and on the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria , children or learners should be exposed to literacy materials and guided on their utilization and the materials made affordable and accessible.

2. The Ministry of Education through the agency of State Secondary Education Board (SUBEB) could ensure through frequent monitoring to ensure the release of literacy

3. materials and their proper utilization in the school system in Nigeria .

4. Government should frequently organize workshops, seminars and conferences for secondary school teachers to avail themselves with recent literacy skills development to upgrade their teaching skills in reading.

5. Government should as a matter of urgency develop all schools so as to create enabling learning environment for literacy skills development in reading by secondary school learners.

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