

EARLY READING: THE INDISPUTABLE FOUNDATION OF THE 21ST CENTURY CHILD

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to expose the inevitability of early reading using the Vygotskian theory of learning and development which states that knowledge is socially constructed. It begins by explaining the concept of language development and it briefly discusses the four basic language skills namely: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, the benefits of reading are highlighted as reading comprehension, writing, neurological, educational, psychological, social and linguistic. The paper goes further to expound the various levels at which children can be taught to learn to read early in life. Finally, it suggests the need for children to be exposed to reading early in life which cannot be over emphasized, especially in the 21st century. The paper further recommends among others, that classroom activities should include informal opportunities that would expose the child to literacy growth and to a variety of skills.

Keywords: *Early Reading, Language Skills, Language Development, Literacy, Benefits.*

INTRODUCTION

Children who are introduced to books early are more likely to develop their language skills, and are in turn usually better in reading comprehension compared to children who are non-readers or reluctant readers. The more children read, the more

children gain in language ability and reading comprehension, the more children learn (Moats 1999).

The ability to read and write is fundamental to full participation in society. Our nation is being transformed into one in which economic, civic, and social success depend on educational attainment for all, particularly in literacy. In America, people with higher literacy skills have higher salaries, higher employment rates, higher civic participation rates, lower public assistance rates, and lower crime rates than people with lower literacy skills (National Institute for Literacy 2009, Kutner, Jin, Boyle, Hsu, Dunleavy and White 2007). Literacy has emerged as key to success in the twenty-first century. Snow, Burns and Griffen (1998) posit that unless we address the literacy gap among children, the economic gap between social classes will only widen the more.

We are living in a knowledge-based, globally competitive economy. This new economy demands higher literacy skills, creates a greater portion of jobs that require advanced learning and depends on individuals to manage their daily lives using highly sophisticated systems. A study about the economics of education concluded, 'Most employers today cannot compete successfully without a workforce that has solid academic skills. Employers need workers who have mastered reading process that allow them to locate information and use higher-level thinking strategies to solve problems' (Carnevale and Desrochers 2003). This shows that no sector in life will afford to jeopardize its prospects on the ground of incompetence in reading and comprehension.

By and large, many people lose interest in reading materials not because the materials are uninteresting but due to lack of competence in reading. In a study of literacy development, Juel (1988) found that poor readers reported that they do not read

often outside school because they do not enjoy reading and would rather do other things. Furthermore, Rathbun West and Husken (2004) assert that achievement, interest and competence in reading are highly correlated. Children's competencies affect interest in material.

It is expedient that attention be given to children with poor reading skills in schools in order to help them cope with their academics. Linsey (2010) has it that with less reading practice and less interest in reading, low-performing readers fall further behind their classmates each year, leading to lower graduation and college-going rates. Early reading proficiency is determined not just by school practices, but also by what happens outside of school. High interest activities involving reading for young children after school can prevent reading loss and sometimes even result in reading gains.

In today's modern society, especially in text-rich, developed countries, the ability to read well can and does make an enormous difference to one's school performance, career potential and personal success (Kearsley 2002, Lo Bianco and Freebody 1997). Children are taught learn to read so that they can eventually read to learn. Reading is a powerful tool that enables one to acquire knowledge and understanding. A baby practices walking by walking; a swimmer practices swimming by swimming. This principle is universal. One practices something by doing that thing. This paper begins by considering the concept of language development by considering the four language skills, the benefits of early reading and levels of teaching early reading.

Theoretical Framework

Theories on early literacy abound but this paper is based on the constructivist/socio-constructivist model based on Vygotsky's theory (1978). This theory views knowledge as being socially

constructed. Because knowledge is socially constructed, children should have opportunities to engage in activities in which they can acquire knowledge and have access to the processes by which knowledge is constructed (Kucan& Beck 1997). This implies that in the social environment, children have opportunities to engage in interactive activities that would help them gain early literacy. Classroom activities (formal learning) should include informal learning opportunities and these should vary in focus, purpose and structure as they would further strengthen language development.

Language Development

Language development involves four basic and interactive abilities: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The skills are related to each other by two parameters of the mood of communication (oral or written) and the direction of communication (receiving or producing message). Based on these parameters, listening and speaking are referred to as oral skills while reading and writing are referred to as literacy skills. Speaking and writing are productive while listening and reading are receptive. It should be noted that the effective acquisition of one skill leads to an effective development of another and that the skills work together to ensure that individual's level of language use of communication are achieved. On this note, the four language skills will be briefly explained:

Listening

Listening is the receptive skill in the oral mode. It involves hearing or understanding what we learn. We are often faced with two listening situations- interactive and non-interactive. Interactive listening situation includes face to face conversation and telephone conversation in which we are alternately listening and speaking, while non-interactive situations are listening to the radio, lectures or seminars or watching television and films, where

opportunities to ask for clarifications or request for slower speech or repetition is not provided. Babies learn this skill by listening to people who already know how to speak the language. To become a fluent speaker one needs to develop strong listening skills. Listening not only helps you understand what people are saying to you it also helps you to speak clearly to other people. This is why listening is intricately connected to speaking (Adeosun 2011).

Speaking

Speaking is a productive skill in the oral mode; the delivery of language through the mouth. Sub-skills of speaking include the ability to pronounce words distinctly, use of stress and intonation patterns, among others. While speaking comes naturally in first language, the sub-skills should be emphasized and specifically taught in learning second or other language(s).

Reading

Reading is the receptive skill in the written mode. Though it can develop independently of listening and speaking skills, but often develops along with them, especially on societies with a highly developed literacy traditions. Reading can help build vocabulary that helps listening comprehension at the late stage particularly. Since reading is the focus of this discourse, it shall be further discussed in subsequent sections.

Writing

Writing is the process of using symbols to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form. It is the productive skills in a written mode. It involves both a graphic representation of speech and the development and presentation of thought in a structured way. Effective writings command the following abilities as sub-skills: correct use of orthography, use of correct forms of words and in correct order, appropriate choice of vocabulary, and appropriate

use of style to suit audience, coherent and logical presentation of ideas, among others.

Levels of Teaching Early Reading

The same article from www.teachreadingearly.com/benefits-of-early-reading.php gives us some hints on teaching children at different levels. They are as follows:

A Baby from Age 1-2

As the child becomes a toddler, he/she will enter a new world of speech, and imagination. In most cases he/she will start speaking first words and learn several new words every week. The more language the baby hears, the more words it will have available to name objects or express feelings. By 18 months, the baby may start joining these simple words into sentences. A parent may find that his/her child is able to follow the logic of a particular reading programme, or may realize that the baby does not respond. Whichever way it goes, do not express disappointment. Perhaps the child will be ready later or the exercise could be tried again in a few weeks or months. Thus, the child is being provided with greater exposure to letters, sounds, and words, which foster language development.

At this age, reading to the child should be a regular part of a parent's daily routine. Story-time encourages language development and communication, in a loving, playful context. Toddlers often want to assert their independence so you should let the child choose the book to read, as well as the reading location. As the words are being read to the child, he/she may speak, point, laugh or thump the page. This is perfectly normal and the child is beginning his interaction with books.

A Toddler from Age 2-3

Between the ages of 2 and 3, reading becomes a crucial part of the child's healthy development. The baby communicates a little more each day. During this period the child will experience a dramatic increase in language abilities. Many children can comprehend up to 400 words by their 3rd birthday. They can also speak in simple sentences and begin using correct grammar. For this reason, children love having the same books to read to them at this age. They thrive in repetition, and use the experience to memorize their favourite phrases and expressions from the book. Supporting the child's expanding language skills through reading becomes even more important.

From 24-36 months, the child needs to consolidate the basic learning that began in the previous year. He/she may be able to recite the alphabet, count to 10 and identify colours, shapes, animals and parts of the body. This could be done through alphabet song, flashcard shown, or letters written in sand, finger paint, or crayon. As the child gets older, start connecting the alphabet to the letter sounds (d as in duh) and to words (d for dog). This can be by naming objects around the house and stress the beginning letters. Some specific learning kits and instructional materials designed to teach the child to read through a step-by-step process could be purchased to enhance initiation into reading.

A Child of Age 3-5

A three-year-old preschooler could be taught to read. The child being taught to read through a method based on phonics should be able to learn to spell and write at the same time. This is often a highly rewarding period for parents. By the time the child is four, he/she will have an extensive vocabulary and be able to speak in sentences of about 5-8 words. He/she will have become a

communicative being. The child will be able to read independently from simple phonetic readers.

Benefits of Early Reading

Vocabulary

The academic world is filled with words. This body of words that the students must know in order to get access to increasingly demanding text through the years is what is referred to as vocabulary. Vocabulary is shown to be strongly linked to academic success, (Anderson and Freebody 1981, Baumann and Kameenui 1991, Chall, Jacobs and Baldwin 1990) hence, the greater one's range of vocabulary, the greater one's access to the world of words. In other words, the ability of a child to understand any given passage is the function of the words he has been exposed to previously.

A person acquires his/her vocabulary not through memorization, but by accruing fragment of word knowledge for each of the thousands of words that he or she encounters every day (Hirsch 2003, West, Stanovich and Mitchell 1993). The word becomes learnt even without any explicit teaching (Mckeown, Beck, Omason and Pople 1985, Stahl 1991). This can only be achieved through reading. Studies have demonstrated that through reading interesting texts, students learn new vocabulary and review old one (Coady 1997, Hirsch 2003).

Children continue to build upon prior knowledge to develop academic skills and new knowledge. Vocabulary learning is a gradual process of encountering new words that add to and reinforce the small amounts of information gained from previous meetings. If the amount of words experienced were not reinforced soon after by another encounter, the learning will be lost (Nation 1997). Increasing contact with the word through reading leads to familiarity, which in turn leads to automaticity. It

then becomes a sight word. The development of a large sight vocabulary is usefully interpreted as the over-learning of words to the point that they are automatically recognized in print. It is a gradual and long process which cannot be acquired in a day or two but needs time and practice. Therefore, the child needs space to explore the world of words around him, which will eventually become internalized and be retrieved with ease.

Reading Comprehension

According to Francis (2010), reading improvement changes most dramatically in the early stage and slower in later years. In other words, there is greater potential for learning reading skills in the early years. With a vast vocabulary, reading comprehension is thus facilitated. Experts agree that adequate reading comprehension depends on a person. Reading is an effective means of promoting literacy development with English as Second Language (ESL) students as well.

Writing

For one to be able to write, one must first be able to read and comprehend one's reading material. Reading helps by introducing and giving exposure to writing conventions and genres. As one assimilates the patterns and the nuances of the writing styles of books, one is able to repeat them in one's own writing. Eckhoff (1983) reports on how reading affects children's writing, showing that children mimic the forms of writing that they are exposed to after they read. Learning to read and write opens the door to progress and prosperity across a lifetime (National Institute for Literacy 2009). Learning to read with fluency, good understanding and stamina is a crucial set of skills for school and later life success. That is why the need to devote to teaching children to read at early years of primary education using effective and proven methods to ensure that all children are reading at grade level cannot be over emphasized.

From www.teachreadingearly.com/benefits-of-early-reading.php, five benefits of reading are identified and are worth mentioning. They are as follows:

Neurological benefit

Reading helps to develop a young child's brain. In the first six years, children learn at much faster pace than at any other time in their lives. Vital connections in the brain are made very early in life. At birth, a healthy baby is born with approximately 200 billion active brain cells or neurons. Given the right kind of stimulation, each of these brain cells is capable of sprouting up to 20,000 different dendrites/branches and synapses/connections between them which store additional information. These connections, which are a direct result of stimulation the child receives through early experiences, form the basis of all future learning and intellectual ability.

As parents talk, sing and read to their children, existing links among brain cells are strengthened and new links are formed. At younger age, learning is faster than it will be as the child grows older. When a child is taught to read, the process of learning has a profound influence on the entire functioning and development of the brain. Parents can play a critical early role by inculcating not only reading skills and ability but more importantly, instilling a lifelong love of learning and reading.

Educational benefit

Reading opens the door to a child's early academic success, imparts a love of learning and leads to higher grades in every subject. Numerous studies have shown that strong oral language skills are the basis for literacy development. When children learn to read at an early age, they have greater general knowledge, expand their vocabulary and become more fluent readers. They

also have improved attention spans and better concentration. Early readers can recognize a larger number of words by sight, which enables them to learn more from and about their environment.

Their proficiency in reading enables them to comprehend more of what they are reading. They also become competent researchers, who are able to study effectively and extract relevant and necessary information from books, magazines, websites or other sources of information.

Only by mastering effective reading strategies can the child pick up the necessary knowledge and information, which will enable him or her to excel scholastically in the future. It is interesting to note that early readers not only become lifelong readers, but also lifelong learners. Longitudinal studies have shown that early readers continue to get higher grades than their peers through grade school.

Psychological benefit

A child who learns to read joyfully at home, at an early age, with a loving parent or caregiver, grows in self-confidence and independence. Reading promotes greater maturity, increases discipline and lays the basis for moral literacy. It sparks curiosity about people, places and things and also satisfies the child's curiosity by providing explanations of how things work. It exposes the child to a range of problem-solving techniques. In addition, early reading ignites the child's creativity and imagination.

What is more, a young child who is a reader is able to channel physical energy, when he or she chooses to sit down to read a book. This quiet time improves the relationship between parent and child or teacher and child, from an early stage. Such a child is also at a distinct advantage over his or her peers. When a child

starts learning to read as a baby or at the age of 2 or 3, there is no psychological pressure and the formal school system has yet to kick in. So, you can teach your child to read a little each day, in a leisurely manner. You can stop before he or she gets tired. You can foster a love of the game of reading in the child from the start. You and your child can take the time to treat reading as an exciting adventure, rather than a bothersome chore.

Compare this to the child who must try to learn in a crowded classroom, competing with his or her classmates for the personal attention of the teacher or teacher's assistance. Imagine the effect on the child's ego, on seeing others picking up this skill, while he or she lags behind. Which child is going to have a stronger self-image? Which child is going to be more self-confident? Which child is going to be a leader versus a follower in the classroom? Clearly, the one whose parents taught him or her to read early, at a young age at home has more advantage.

Social

Even at a young age, children have social awareness. They know who is more popular. They can tell who can do what. If there are a few children in kindergarten who know how to read, they will receive award and certificate, be called upon to choose books or encouraged to write, illustrate, and read aloud their own stories. In some schools, they may even be asked to help other children who may still be struggling with basic letter recognition. Early readers have the opportunity to relate to their peers on a more confident, more competent level as they are already being recognized for their superior accomplishment. Such experiences increase the child's social status among peers as well as his or her self-image and self-confidence.

Linguistic

Children who can read independently and early have more opportunities to encounter the written word. The sooner children learn how to read, the more books, knowledge and ideas they will be exposed to. The result? This category of children will have improved linguistic skills in form of a richer vocabulary, correct grammar, improved writing, better spelling and more articulate oral communication. Such children have the opportunity to develop a wider vocabulary to describe their knowledge, observations and experiences. It has been shown that children with the richer vocabulary do far better in scholastic areas, especially in the early years. Their stronger reading skills also enable them to communicate more effectively orally as well as in writing. Furthermore, early readers can recognize a larger number of words by sight, which enables them to learn more from and about their environment.

CONCLUSION

It is suicidal for parents to deny their children a privilege to literacy. It is as though burying the child before his/her death. When a child lacks the stamina to compete favourably with his peers, such a child is considered as a misfit. Considering the speed at which the society is operating and its complex nature, literacy will be a vital key to be used to unlock mysteries of time and events. Therefore it is not burdensome to emphasize the need for parents and teachers to consciously introduce children to early reading.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Given the centrality of excellent instruction to the prevention of reading difficulties, we strongly recommend attention both at home and in every primary-grade classroom to the full array of early reading accomplishments.

2. Comprehension difficulties should be prevented by building comprehension skills as well as linguistic and conceptual knowledge beginning in the earliest grades. Comprehension should be enhanced through instruction focused on concept and vocabulary growth and background knowledge, instruction about the syntax and rhetorical structures of written language and direct instruction about comprehension strategies such as summarizing, predicting, and monitoring.
3. Children should have access to early childhood environments that promote language and literacy growth and that address a variety of skills that have been identified as predictors of later reading achievement.
4. Efforts should be made to provide all teachers with adequate knowledge about reading and the knowledge and skill to teach reading or its developmental precursors. It is important that teachers at all grade levels understand the course of literacy development and the role of instruction in optimizing literacy development.

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