RESEARCH ARTICLE

A REVIEW ARTICLE ON ENGLISH READING DIFFICULTIES AMONG GRADE SIX STUDENTS IN ETHIOPIA

*Amarech Alaye Admasu

Wolaita Sodo University

ABSTRACT

Reading is not only a cognitive, psycholinguistic activity, but also a social activity. Reading is a complex cognitive process requiring visual, auditory and motor skills to enable a child to recognize words and symbols, to associate them with the appropriate sounds and to invest them with meaning derived from previous experience. Reading achievement is related to the skill of the teacher, and that the child taught by untrained, inexperienced and unskilled teachers tend to be especially backward in reading (Reid and Donaldson, 1977).Lovett, Steinbach and Frijters (2000) state that a reading difficulty is an individual's failure to acquire rapid, context-free word identification skills, whilst for Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004) it is characterized as an unexpected obstacle in reading for children who possess the intelligence, motivation and education necessary for developing accurate and fluent reading. The term 'reading difficulties' is, in most instances, equated or used synonymously with 'reading problems', and in the context of this review the former refers to problems associated with reading, whether it be the mechanical skill of the reading process or the comprehension of what is being read. There are many different and usually very complex factors affecting learners' different reading levels, some of which are beyond the school influence (Geske and Ozola, 2008). Socio-economic factors exacerbating reading difficulties in Ethiopian schools are: family conditions, poverty, instability, resources, teacher competence and attitude towards education (MoE, 1994). Hence, this review helps to fill the gap by reviewing the student's status of reading proficiency or difficulty in English language among grade six students, which is the transition to the grade level where the medium of instruction is English. Moreover, the possible measures for student reading difficulty problems were explored.

INTRODUCTION

For most people living in today's modern world, reading is an everyday ordinary task to which little thought is given, yet it is one of the most important skills that learners acquire at school as it forms the foundation for all further learning. Unlike the ability to speak, the one to read is not inborn, and a learner does not acquire it simply by watching and listening to others reading. Many of our day-to-day tasks require reading, and a person who can read well can function more effectively in everyday activities, yet for an illiterate person, many of life's seemingly mundane and ordinary tasks which many literate people take for granted can become insurmountable hurdles (Darrel, 2005). Reading is not only a cognitive, psycholinguistic activity, but also a social activity. Reading is a complex cognitive process requiring visual, auditory and motor skills to enable a child to recognize words and symbols,

to associate them with the appropriate sounds and to invest them with meaning derived from previous experience. As it has been cited in Hartney (2011), Reid and Donaldson (1977) state that reading achievement is related to the skill of the teacher, and that the child taught by untrained, inexperienced and unskilled teachers tend to be especially backward in reading (Reid and Donaldson, 1977). Reading is about understanding written texts. It is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Reading consists of two related processes: word recognition and comprehension. Word recognition refers to the process of perceiving how written symbols correspond to one's spoken language. Comprehension is the process of making sense of words, sentences and connected text. Readers typically make use of background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, experience with text and other strategies to help them understand written text. A child's ability to read is a skill that stays with him/her through life. However, this skill grows and develops with the child and is not a competence that we can give to the child as a full-blown ability.

*Corresponding author: **Amarech Alaye Admasu,**
Wolaita Sodo University.

Reading difficulties

Lovett, Steinbach and Frijters (2000) state that a reading difficulty is an individual's failure to acquire rapid, context-free word identification skills, whilst for Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004) it is characterized as an unexpected obstacle in reading for children who possess the intelligence, motivation and education necessary for developing accurate and fluent reading. The term 'reading difficulties' is, in most instances, equated or used synonymously with 'reading problems', and in the context of this study the former refers to problems associated with reading, whether it be the mechanical skill of the reading process or the comprehension of what is being read. According to Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2002), a learner may have difficulty in perceiving visual differences between similar letter shapes, for example b/d or their specific order, for example seeing "girl" and not "girl". He/she may have difficulty in perceiving auditory differences in the sounds that these letters represent, for example that b= "b" and not "d", or their specific sound order. There might be a difficulty in finding the right sound(s) to relate to the letter(s), or in blending different sounds together into whole words (th +i + nk+ s = thinks). All the skills mentioned require adequate visual and auditory perception, as well as memory.

A study by Weldehanna and Gebremedihin (2016) found a statistically significant relationship between reading outcomes and caregiver's education, urban or rural site, and region, type of school and wealth. The proportion of children who could not read anything was highest for children whose caregivers had no education. Students from rural area, government school and bottom wealth found having low reading proficiency. There is a gap in comprehensive studies that encompass the major areas of reading difficulty of English language proficiency in Wolaita Zone at primary education level. Studies on reading achievement of students in English language focus on specific aspect of skills. The target of most studies previously was first cycle (grade 1- 4) particularly grade four students. But there are evidences showing that significant number of student in second cycle and secondary schools are in deficient English proficiency levels which in turn negatively influence the teachinglearning process where medium of instruction is English (Weldehanna and Gebremedihin 2016).

Information on the grammatical structure of the language needs to be understood, particularly the flow of written language and its grammar, if learners are to progress beyond reading isolated sounds or bits of words without connection to each other. Lastly, information from the meaning of the material helps the learner to recognise individual words, to put phrases and sentences together holistically and to comprehend all of what he/she is reading (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2002).

Factors affecting reading

Socio-Economic factors: Studies have shown that there are many different and usually very complex factors affecting learners' different reading levels, some of which are beyond the school influence (Geske and Ozola, 2008). Socio-economic factors exacerbating reading difficulties in Ethiopian schools are: family conditions, poverty, instability, resources, teacher competence and attitude towards education (MoE, 1994).

Poverty: Family poverty can potentially impact negatively on students' academic performance. Students whose families live in poverty often come to school without their basic needs being met. The limitations poverty places on families are likely to negatively affect students' performance in school, for example with learners from poverty stricken families not being exposed to extra leisure reading as parents might not afford to buy books. Although the students' level of poverty does not automatically determine success or failure at school, a disproportionate number from low income families are less successfulin school and eventually drop out (MoE, 2008). Sadker and Sadker (2005), state that a learner who is hungry and tired will not learn as effectively as a well-nourished or rested one.

Family instability: Many families experience changes, whether due to divorce, family mobility, lack of a permanent home, drug abuse, health, violence, parents who are at work most of the time, and/or parent illiteracy, but some changes in these families can be hazardous to students' emotional and physical wellbeing and to their progress in school (Vaughn, Bos and Schumm,2003;MoE,2008). Learners from these environmental backgrounds who do not get enough support and guidance from parents, who are not exposed to books and are not motivated to read, are likely to develop a positive attitude towards reading. Collaboration between parents and children in reading story books and visiting a library together at a pre-school age already positively influences their reading levels (Geske and Ozola, 2008).

Resources

Most schools in Ethiopia are not well resourced with libraries and when they do exist most are without books. Learners therefore have little opportunity to read and spend most of their time in a print-poor environment. Learners from these environments are unable to acquire reading levels similar to or on par with their peers and often feel inferior or do not perform to the expected level(Makoe, 2007).

Language factors: In Ethiopian schools, mother-tongue language instruction is encouraged in the first four grades of formal schooling (MoE, 1994), however, this is not always achieved as Ethiopia is a multilingual country and as a result learners are taught in a language which is either a second or third language. In such instances learners are unable to use the richness anddepth of their mother-tongue knowledge to enhance the reading experience and this affects reading efficiency. Learners' level of language development is an important factor in their ability to read. Language skills are directly related to achievement at school and are divided into the following categories: vocabulary, language comprehension, correct language usage, correct sentence construction, reading and spelling. The new education and training policy of Ethiopia stipulates that learners should start learning at school in their mother-tongue language until grade four. In most schools, the language of instruction changes from the nation and nationalities languages to English, which means that most of Ethiopians learn in a language different from their home language (ETP, 1994). Hinkel (2005) states that for second language reading to take place the reader must have developed proficiency in that language.

Educational Factors: Parents level of education influence learners reading level. For example, a learner whose parents are educated is exposed to more books at home sees parents themselves reading and also becomes motivated to read. He or she also receives guidance and support from them, unlike learners whose parents are not well educated and have little or no interest in books (Geske and Ozola, 2008). Educational factors, such as exposure to print, opportunities to engage in literacy activities, quality of early reading instruction and opportunities for appropriate instruction, are identified as some of the factors that influence reading (Vaughn, Bos and Schumm, 2003).

School related factors: Ethiopian schools are not well resourced with libraries and most are without books. Ministry of Education (2007) claims that some of the schools have libraries and the Ministry has noted that some learners are enrolled in schools that are ill equipped, overcrowded, and in desperate need of renovation. Crowded and dilapidated classrooms hinder the implementation of the individual attention to learners experiencing reading problems. High learner-teacher ratios with poor physical conditions and inadequate facilities for teaching and learning, schools with neither library nor print-rich environments will make reading a difficult task for learners (MoE, 2008).

Teachers' competency related factors: Some teachers bunked classes because they did not like teaching or were not confident about teaching certain subjects. Many teachers in Ethiopia have an underdeveloped understanding of teaching reading and most do not know how to teach reading. Too often teachers know and use only one method of teaching reading, which may not suit the learning style of all learners. Reading difficulties will be experienced if diversity is not observed and learners are not supported. This also includes the negative attitude of teachers towards inclusive education, parental recognition and involvement, resistance to curriculum innovation and moral degeneration. Moreover, the diversification of the teacher's role has given greater attention to the social inclusion of all the students for whom the teacher has responsibility. Developing an understanding of children, so as to make teaching and learning developmentally appropriate, has long been part of the teacher's role. A growing awareness of the range of students' special needs, and recognition of the implications of population migration, has led to national policy initiatives driven by social justice and harmonization agenda. Teaching has become more diversified not only to address different learning needs but also different first languages among the teachers and students (MoE, 2008). This could have its impact on the learners' reading level.

Learning styles related factors: Many teachers believe that students have preferred learning styles, for example those who learn best by seeing information (visual learners), by hearing (auditory learners) and by doing (also referred to as tactile or kinaesthetic learners), and that teaching according to these preferred styles could increase educational performance, including learner's reading skills and reading performance (Sadker and Sadker, 2005).

Models for effective reading instruction: Why do we teach children to read? It is not merely to decode the words. We teach them to derive meaning from the text, to comprehend it. To not just read the lines, but to read between the lines and even read beyond the lines.

So how can you make teaching comprehension in primary schools effective and engaging? How are you ensuring that children are finding meaning in what they read and how do we support more able readers to learn more? What does a good 'reading' model look like? This review article demonstrates the effective teaching of reading through exemplar models. It discusses what makes them good models and how they can be adapted to suit different classes and different schools.

Direct teaching model: The direct teaching model emphasizes the importance of structured lessons in which presentation of new information is followed by learner practice and teacher feedback. In this model the role of the teacher is that of a strong leader, one who structures the classroom and sequences the subject matter to reflect a clear academic focus. The model is helpful during the first stages of learning new and complex information (Sadker & Sadker 2005). According to Gillette, Temple, and Crawford (2012), integrating multi-sensory experiences with direct systematic and sequential instruction model can be an effective means for learners with reading difficulties to learn fundamental language skills including reading and to improve their reading skill.

Cooperative learning: In cooperative learning, learners work on activities in small heterogeneous groups and often receive rewards or recognition based on the overall group performance. In cooperative learning, learners depend on one another and work together to reach shared goals. During the cooperative learning method a team's work is not completed until all learners in a team understand the material being studied and rewards are earned when the entire team achieves the goals set by the teacher. Learners tutor one another so that everyone can succeed (Sadker and Sadker, 2005).

Teaching is a practice of human improvement. Any practitioners depend on their clients to achieve any results. For example surgeon can fix the sickness of a patient who sleeps through the operation, and a lawyer can successfully defend a client who remains silent during the trial. But, success for a teacher depends heavily on the active cooperation of the student. The student must be willing to learn what the teacher is teaching. Otherwise, a teacher is understood as having failed. That is why you can't be a good salesperson unless someone is buying, and you cannot be a good teacher unless someone is learning. As a result teachers must devote huge amounts of skill and effort in order to make students cooperate. However, the result is far from to certain. The students still may choose to reject or ignore the teacher's effort and offer of improvement because of lack of interest and concentration. Therefore, the effectiveness of the teacher becomes more difficult to establish.

Mastery learning: Mastery learning programmes require specific and carefully sequenced learning objectives. The first step is to identify a specific skill or academic task to be mastered, after which learners are taught the skill and tested to determine if the objective has been reached. Learners who complete the task successfully go on for acceleration or enrichment while those who fail to demonstrate mastery of the subject receive corrective instruction and are re-tested (Sadker and Sadker, 2005). The model relate to outcomes based education (OBE), which is learner-based and learner-paced, and is aimed at ensuring maximum individual potential development with the employment of proper intervention strategies and reassessment to ensure quality teaching and

learning. Rowling in Lerner and Johns (2009), state that appropriate, proper and timely intervention strategies are essential for maximizing treatment of reading difficulties as reading problems of adolescents and adults, reflect reading difficulties that were not resolved during their early years.

Problem based learning: Problem-based learning focuses on authentic or real life problems. In this instructional model, a crucial aspect of the teacher's role is to identify activities that fuel students' interests. While the features of problem-based learning (PBL) have been around for a long time, in its current form it is both a comprehensive and demanding approach that develops real intellectual skills in learners. They work together to explore authentic contemporary issues, attempt to solve problems and receive impetus into the adult world before they are adults (Sadker and Sadker, 2005).

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