

PHONICS AS AN INNOVATIVE TOOL TO ENHANCE THE READING ABILITY OF THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILD

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Abstract

Pupils' ability to read largely depends on their knowledge of the alphabets, verbal abilities and level of phonemic awareness. It is imperative therefore for teachers and other stakeholders in education to ensure that pupils are given adequate exposure to this phonics as integral part of their English language curriculum.

Introduction

Education is the bedrock of development. For an individual to fully develop the potentials embedded in him, that individual needs to be educated. Education can be attained through formal education or informal education. Whatever form of education acquired, it is expected that certain changes would have taken place in the individual. The National Policy on Education (2014) stated that the goals of primary education should include among others the following:

- Permanent literacy and numeracy and ability to communicate effectively.
- Lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking.
- Provide the child with basic for scientific and reflective thinking.
- Develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment
- Instill social norms and values in the child
- Provide opportunities for the child to develop life manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capability.

A close look at the first goal of primary education, states that the child should have permanent literacy and numeracy and be able to communicate effectively. This goal would only be achieved if the child is well guided in the rudiments of phonics. Over the years, it has been observed that some public primary school pupils find it difficult to read their school textbooks and other literatures outside the school setting. This is

a source of worry to parents and other stakeholders in the education industry. Pupils' poor reading ability may be attributed to the teaching of reading without the child being well guided in phonics.

Phonics is one of the primary building blocks of reading. Pupils with knowledge of graphemes, letter symbols and sounds would improve on their reading abilities at the primary school level. Educators are of the opinion that beginning readers in English need to learn that there is an existing relationship between letter patterns and sound patterns in English language. Weaver (1994) asserted that pupils need to develop the ability to relate letter patterns to sound patterns. When pupils are able to associate the letter patterns to sound patterns at an early stage, it makes the children to become better readers and achieve great spelling success. Snow, Bums and Griffin 1998 stated that phonics is a mode of instruction used to teach the connection between letters and sounds. The ability of the child to think about separate words as sequences of sounds is vital to the understanding of the principles of the alphabets. Pupils need to learn how to identify rhyming words and create their own rhymes and also those sentences are made of separate words; these words are composed of syllables which can be broken to form new words and put back to form the same words. Phonics as an innovative tool can enhance pupils' reading ability when phonics instruction is taken in sequence such as:

- Rudiments of alphabet knowledge

- Phonic awareness
- Verbal clues.

Letter knowledge and reading abilities of pupils

Letter knowledge plays a significant role in enhancing the reading abilities of the primary school child. The learning of letters helps pupils in remembering the sounds associated with the letters. A child who has learnt the letter's would be quick to remember the sound of /d/. The knowledge of the alphabet letters is a strong predictor of short-and long-term reading success (Chall, 1990). Letter knowledge plays an influential role in the development of phonological awareness, and higher levels of letter knowledge are associated with children's abilities to recognize and manipulate phonemes. For instance, the child who recognizes the letter "b" is likely to remember the sound of /b/. Consequently, letter knowledge may reflect a greater underlying knowledge and familiarity with literacy related skills such as language. Pupils are able to distinguish letters as presented in their visual form such as horizontal, vertical and diagonal segments. These visually distinct forms of letters appear in upper case, lower case. Adams (1990) suggests that teaching two forms of letters with their sounds and labels may be overwhelming to the young pupils. The teacher can use his/her discretion to decide on which of the forms to teach first as there is no hard and fast rule to suggest which specific form should be taught first.

Phonemic awareness and pupils' reading ability

Phonemes are the separate individual sounds in words. Smith, Simmons and Karneenui, (1998) opined that phonemes are systematically taught before the children are shown how to blend them for reading and segmenting them for writing. The pupils are taught those words which do not follow the phonic rules completely. Phonemic awareness activities usually involve oral tasks in the absence of print. In some programs, however, the instruction directs the children to use auditory (clapping) and visual clues (Elkonin boxes, blocks) to help them understand that the sounds in words

can be separate entities. At the more advanced levels of instruction (segmenting and blending), the relations of sounds to written letters often become part of the instructional sequence, so that the children hear and see the relations between sounds and letters.

In Nigeria, certain phonics programmers have been adopted to teach reading. These programmers include:

- i. Jolly phonics
- ii. Letter land phonics
- iii. Alpha phonics

These phonics programmers are aimed at teaching phonics using the systematic synthetic phonics approach, taught in a specific order which enables children to begin building words as early as possible. The skills taught includes learning the letter sounds, letter formation, blending, identifying sounds in words/ segmenting and learning tricky, camera or sight words.

Jolly phonics

Jolly Phonics is a full, stand-alone synthetic phonics teaching programmer. It is designed for the first year of teaching reading, which is pre-nursery ages 5-7 but it could begin very early. Teaching starts with learning the letter sounds, and how to merge and separate sound to make pupils fluent readers. The letter sounds are taught 4-5 times a week and how to blend them in a left to right order and how to read unknown words. The pupils would learn to form the letters correctly, as well as identify the sounds in words. This enables the children to write regular words that use the letter sounds that have been taught. Regular words are provided for decoding and dictation. The complex words are introduced much later. The pupils can blend words and correctly pronounce them. Pupils are exposed to writing and spelling of sounds in English as the children would be able to write or read books independently. In Jolly Phonics, these orders of sounds are taught at a time

1. s, a, t, i, p, n
2. c, k, e, h, r, m, d
3. g, o, u, l, f, b

4. ai, j, oa, ie, ee, or
5. z, w, ng, v, oo, oo
6. y, x, ch, sh, th, th
7. qu, ou, oi, u, er, ar

The 42 main sounds of English are taught not just the alphabet. The sounds are in seven groups and each sound has an action and a story which helps the pupils remember the letter(s) they represent. As a pupil becomes more confident, the actions and stories are no longer necessary to use. The sounds and actions are as follows:

S Weave hands in an “s” shape like a snake and say ssssss

A Wiggle fingers above elbow as if ants are crawling on you and say A, a, a.

T Turn head from side to side as if watching tennis and say t, t, t.

I Pretend to be a mouse by wriggling fingers at end of nose and squeak i, i, i. etc. Blending of letter sounds in a left to right order is also taught pupils so as to read unknown words. For example, take /s/, /a/, /t/, /p/, /i/, /n/ which are taught then blended, starting /a/ and /t/ to make /at/: /a/t/ - at /s//a//t/ -sat /p//a//t/ /t/ - pat. Continue blends for other initial consonants such as /b//a//t/ - bat, /c//a//t/ - cat, /h//a//t/ - hat, e t c, pointing out the number of phonemes in each word. For digraphs, pupils are to sound out the digraphs so a word like rain should be sounded as r -ai -n, feet as f- ee-t, fish as f- i- sh, e t c. Sounds in words are also identified such as add a p to ink to make pink, s-top, p-ant, b-end, e t c

Letter land phonics:

In letter and phonics, the following order of letter sounds are taught

a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i
j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r
s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z
A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I
J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R
S, T, U, V, W, X, '1, Z

The vowel is

a, e, i, o, u

Other spelling patterns

ck, ng, sh, ch, th, wh,
ph, a-e, ai, ay, e-e, ee, ea
y, i-e, ie, igh, oo, oa, o-e, ow
ue, u-e, ew, wr, ar, or,
er, ir, ur, u, oo, oy, oi,
aw, au, ow, ou

Each letter sound is introduced through a story, a song, an action and a letter name (a - Anne Apple, b - Bouncy Ben, c - Clever Cat, etc.). Pupils are taught to blend and later, digraphs are then introduced which encourages the pupils to decode words first taught. Examples

b- a-t - bat, c-a-t - cat,
f- a- t - fat, h-a-t - hat,
m-a- t - mat, p- a- t - pat, e t c.

Blending

bl - Bouncy Ben & Lucy Lamp Light - black, blaze, blow, e t c.

sm - Sammy Snake & Munching Mike - small, smell, smoke etc.

ch - Clever Cat & Harry Hat Man - chain, chest, chess, chips, e t c.

sh - Sammy Snake & Harry Hat Man - shop, ship, shock, shark, etc.

Alpha phonics

This phonics programmer teaches pupils the short vowels, which is the most regular in spelling, in conjunction with the consonants. It places emphasis on consonant blends .final blends first, then the initial blends. Furthermore, the long vowels in their great variety of spelling form. Thus, it proceeds from the simple to the complex in easy stages, giving the pupils plenty of practice and drill along the way. By teaching the letter sounds in their spelling families, the pupils learn to read and spell in an orderly, systematic, logical way, as well as to pronounce the word with greater accuracy.

The Alpha phonics teaches synthetic phonics in this order:

A B C D E F G H I
a b c d e f g h i
J K L M N O P Q R
j k l m n o p q r
S T U V W X Y Z
s t u v w x y z

In this phonics programme, letter names and sounds are taught simultaneously. As the pupils gain mastery of the sounds and letter names, blending is then introduced. The first group of letter sounds and vowels (a, e, i, o, u) are taught after which blending is taught. Examples

Short vowel "a"

ab ad al am an ap ar at
cab cad cal dam ban cap car bat
dab dad gal ham can gap far cat
fab fad Hal jam dan lap jar fat, e t c.

Short vowel "i"

ib ick ig il im in ip
bib dick big bill dim bin dip
fib kick dig fill hill gin hip, e t c.

Sue and Sara (2008) articulated that blending is the process of saying the individual sound in a word and then running them together to make a word. For instance, sound out d-o-g thereby making dog. It is a technique every child will need to learn and improve on with practice. They explained that blending involves sequential steps. Firstly, blending skill begins with words that have single letter sounds through which simple two/three letter words that use these letter sounds can be blended, such as: sat, at, tip, net, cat and so on. Secondly, when blending words that have two letters with the same sound, such as duck, mill, rabbit, fell, miss; it is necessary to say the sound once. Similarly, words with consonant blend at the beginning tend to be more difficult for children to hear after the word has been spoken (that is, they hear only single sound in consonant blend). The teacher should note that when teaching blending in the classroom, initially, the children would blend words by calling out the sounds aloud, but gradually, they should be encouraged to blend silently in their head. This will promote fluency for reading in pupils' at this level. Hiskes (2008) said that blending exercise establishes smooth, strong left- to-right eye tracking skills and help prevent correct reversals. Hence, hands-on- manipulative game really makes a big difference in developing blending skills. Children develop at different rates, and

some children will develop reading skills quicker than other children; however, what's important according to the American National Reading Panel (2000), is "teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words under a variety of teaching conditions with different learners across a range of age levels as their reading significantly improves more than class instruction that pays less attention to Phonemic awareness. "Children who are taught with phonics and phonemic awareness instructions are consistently able to decode, read, and spell, and even demonstrate significant improvement in their ability to comprehend text. Even older children who receive these similar teachings improved their ability to decode and spell.

Phonics is a necessary part of any good method of teaching children to read. Teaching Children phonics and helping them develop phonemic awareness is the key to mastering words, which is the first key step toward successful reading. Children need to develop knowledge of the letters, the sounds represented by the letters, and the connection between sounds created by combining the letters where words are formed. This is an essential part of mastering reading, and enabling children to become independent readers.

Verbal abilities and reading abilities

There is an agreement on the kind of skills that serve as the basis for reading and writing ability (Dickinson & Neumann, 2006). To master the art of reading children need a rich language base to understand printed words. Pupils' verbal ability is the cognitive ability to use and understand language. It involves the ability to use words quickly and accurately when speaking and writing. Fluency is a speech and language term that means the smoothness or flow with which sounds, syllables, words and phrases are joined together when speaking quickly. Verbal fluency measures the rate at which a person can produce or remember words learnt or known in a category given, usually within 60 seconds duration. It measures language ability and a person's ability to recall.

Children also must develop code-related skills, an understanding that spoken words comprises of smaller elements of speech; the idea that letters represent these sounds, the relationship between sounds and spellings, and a repertoire of highly familiar words that can be easily and automatically recognized (McCredie & Chhabra, 2004; McCredie, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001). With word learning occurring fast, children begin to clearly distinguish words not only based on their meaning but also based on their sound. Children can make comparisons between similar sounding words and as such can form rhyming strings. This concept can be referred to as lexical restructuring (Goswami, 2001; Metsala, 1999). For example, a two-year old child probably knows the words “cat” from “cut; “hot” from “not.” Children can form rhyming Strings’ such as ‘bat, cat, fat, pat, shop, shirt, and sheep. Distinguishing between these similar sounding words both quickly and accurately, children begin to hear sequences of sound that constitute each known word. Children with large vocabularies become familiar with these segments and acquire new words rapidly; children with smaller vocabularies may be limited in making clear distinctions. Consequently, vocabulary size and vocabulary rate are important for lexical restructuring (Goswami, 2001), and are strongly tied to the emergence of phonological awareness.

Recent analyses (Dickinson, 2003) have made it abundantly clear; however, that oral language skills, and more specifically vocabulary development, not only play a role in phonological awareness but also are critical skills for the development of reading comprehension later on. Therefore, it is essential for quality indicators in early childhood programs to recognize that oral language and vocabulary development is the foundation for all other skills critical to successful reading.

Conclusion

Pupils’ ability to read largely depends on their knowledge of the alphabets, verbal abilities and level of phonemic awareness. It is imperative therefore for teachers and other stakeholders in education to ensure that pupils are given adequate exposure to this phonics as integral part of their English language curriculum.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. The government should provide regular training in the teaching of phonics which enables them to deliver interesting, interactive sessions that engage and motivate the pupils’ to learn.
2. The ministry of education through its officials should ensure that the phonics curriculum should be effectively implemented to achieve stated objectives.
3. The government should build and equip libraries with necessary books to stimulate pupils’ interest in reading.

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