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# **Teaching Reading in the Nigerian Primary School**

**Ezekiel A. Abe**

Nigeria is a multilingual society with about 250 different languages accompanied by many dialects. Such a situation makes for a comfortable adoption of the English language as the official language of government and as the language of instruction in schools. Internal politics apart, the English language affords Nigerians easy communication among the many linguistic groups in the country and with other English speaking peoples all over the world. The position the English language holds in Nigeria, therefore, calls for the need to look more closely into the teaching of the arts of the language in order to enhance adequate mastery of it.

Nigerian children are faced with the task of studying at least two languages in school. When they get to school, usually at the age of six, they are already capable of communicating orally in their mother tongue. They are faced with the complex task of learning to read in their language and then in the second language which is invariably English. In some schools, reading instruction in both languages is carried on simultaneously.

It is essential to search for an effective instructional approach which will help children become proficient readers

and users of both the mother tongue and the second language. It is a well known fact that the mother tongue exerts a noticeable influence on progress in learning a second language. First, there is the interference of habits learned in the articulation of the sounds of the mother language as children make efforts to produce related but different sounds in the second language. Second, Nigerian children learn to read in the mother tongue shortly before, or at the same time, as they learn to read in English. Since the sound values of letters differ in the two languages, the confusion and frustration of the Nigerian learners of the English language is increased. Third, the linguistic structures of the mother tongue tend to be transferred to the writing of the second language. As a result, progress in learning to read is severely limited; the average Nigerian primary school children are about three years behind their American or British counterparts in reading age.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to discuss the different approaches to reading as used in the early years of Nigerian children, to point out the merits and demerits of the approaches, and to alert readers to the urgent need to open up studies on what would be the best approach in the peculiar situation Nigerian children learning to read find themselves. For the sake of clarity, the writer will use just one of the many Nigerian languages as a means of comparison and illustration throughout the paper – in this case the Yoruba language, one of Nigeria's major languages. Among others are Hausa, Ibo, Fulani, Nupe and Efik.

## **Readiness**

In order to be able to read in any language, children must be mature enough to be able to make the necessary visual and auditory perceptual discriminations, as well as to listen attentively and produce the sounds as required. They

must be sufficiently intelligent and able to concentrate their attention on the learning task. They must be relatively free from speech, sight and hearing defects. It is assumed that Nigerian children have attained all these criteria before entering the primary school.

In those situations where Nigerian children learn to read in the mother tongue before learning to read English, basic training in general readiness such as making visual discriminations, handling books, and making left to right movement of the eyes in reading may be unnecessary. Usually, children have learned those skills in learning to read in the first language. However, these children do need to establish an oral base prior to learning the literacy skills of the English language. Assuming then that children have been given adequate readiness training and are free from all physical defects that may hinder normal reading, the next consideration is one arising from the initial presentation of the English reading material itself. One of the important questions to ask is: should the initial presentation of reading be letters, words or sentences?

### **Reading approaches**

Historically, there has been controversy surrounding the most appropriate way of teaching children to read. Despite the search for one "best method" it is evident that there is no consensus of opinion. The argument centers around how to begin, when to begin, what instructional materials to use and how to organize classes for reading instruction. Many experiments have been conducted, materials developed and approaches tried by linguists, teachers and researchers concerned with problems of teaching, particularly to the linguistically diverse (Smith and Johnson, 1980). It is not the intention of this paper to delve into the depth of the debate; rather it will analyze the relevance of

the approaches to the Nigerian situation and the reasons why none of the approaches may be wholly appropriate.

In the whole-word approach, children are taught to read the names of common content and function words, while the phonic approach attempts to teach children the sound values of letters and letter clusters. Where does Nigeria stand in the two approaches? The situation in Nigeria is rather interesting. When reading in English is going to be taught, materials tend to be based on the whole-word method. When reading in the native languages is going to be taught, the phonic approach is used. The situation is worse for children who are taught reading in the two languages simultaneously, for they have to use phonics for one language and the next hour start with look and say for reading in the other language.

The rationale for this approach is based on the premise that the English language has had a written form for a long time and that oral forms of language tend to change more rapidly than written forms. Consequently, over time, there develops a widening gap between speech and writing. This gap partially accounts for some words with irregular spellings in written English — such words as *knight*, *caught*, *plough*, *yacht*, *depot*, and *aisle*. Moyle and Donald (1974) point out, "There is some evidence that one of the stumbling blocks to reading progress is the irregularity of the sound/symbol relationships of the English language," though some may argue that there is enough phonic regularity in English to warrant phonic instruction. On the other hand, many Nigerian languages have had written forms for only a comparatively short period of time. When written forms were developed, great care must have been taken to produce an orthography or spelling that closely reflects pronunciation. For example, in the Yoruba

language, the vowels /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, and /u/ usually or regularly represent the same sounds in every context. This might have led the educators and publishers to choose phonics as the prime means of initial instruction in Yoruba reading. But it should be noted that while the regularity of association between letters and sounds certainly enhances phonic instruction, it does very little to solve the much more fundamental problem of the child's understanding of the reading process.

Phonic instruction, in wide use in Nigeria, is both abstract and removed from the natural learning strategies employed by young children. The introduction of reading via synthetic phonics makes it unnecessarily difficult for many children to learn to read, particularly when learning to read in the first and second languages is done simultaneously. This may very well contribute to significant numbers of Nigerian children becoming backward or reluctant readers.

It is appropriate to point out certain similarities and differences that exist between the alphabet of the English language and that of the Yoruba language. While the English language has a twenty-six letter alphabet, Yoruba has twenty-five. The following English letters are not present in the Yoruba alphabet: C, Q, V, W, and Z. There are four Yoruba letters not present in the English alphabet: *e* as in *elephant*; *gb*, no similarity for this in the English sound system; *o* as in *order*; *s* as in *push*. Orientations of the common letters are the same. With regard to pronunciation, even though there are some differences in sound values of the corresponding graphic symbols in the two languages, certain similarities can be identified in both the consonant sounds and the vowel sounds; however, the Yoruba language has no diphthongs.

The importance of this somewhat skeletal analysis is to point out the closeness in the graphics of the alphabet of the two languages which the writer feels should aid Nigerian learners to read in the English language after they have mastered the basics of reading in their own language. It should be an advantage to the teacher in teaching spelling, to some extent, and in developing, to a large extent, sight recognition of words in English. More importantly, the differences in the sound values of letters of the two language systems should point to the need for teaching reading in the English language not by a whole-word approach alone, but through an eclectic approach — a combination of the phonic, word, sentence, and experience approaches.

As soon as the similarities and differences in the graphophonemes are mastered by the children, the teacher should move on to develop their reading skills through the language experience approach. The language experience approach to teaching reading builds on the oral traditions that children bring to school. Fortunately, Nigerians have a very strong tradition of oral literature. Moreover, the language experience approach circumvents the problems presented by a dearth of published materials since the method does not rely on commercially prepared books. (Such materials can readily be incorporated when available.) Furthermore, the language experience method does not merely avoid the conceptual difficulties inherent in the whole word and phonic approaches, but is designed to develop an understanding of the reading process and to strengthen the learning of the specific associations between spoken and written words. It should, however, be emphasized that this approach presupposes that an effective start in oral aspect of the language has been given to the children. Typical experience stories might look like these:

*There was a big storm yesterday  
We saw the lightning.  
We heard the thunder.  
There was a big bang.  
The big tree fell across the road.*

*Wole is a boy.  
Ayo is a girl.  
Ayo is Wole's sister.  
Wole is Ayo's brother.  
They go to the same school.*

No deliberate attempt is made to simplify the vocabulary. Sentences should be short and direct, but there is rarely any need for the teacher to exercise control in this area since the children tend to produce such sentences quite naturally. Each story should be quite short.

The language experience approach is viewed as the most practical and most sensible approach for meeting the reading needs of children of linguistically diverse environments (Smith and Johnson, 1980). One of the key advantages of the language experience approach is that the written language presented to the children uses vocabulary, sentence patterns and situations that are familiar to the children, and is based on the children's experience. Durkin (1978) points out that the experience approach, among other things, is capable of motivating children to want to learn to read, demonstrating the relationship between spoken and written forms of language, and demonstrating the values of written language in preserving information, ideas and feelings; and DeHaven (1983) asserts that "children's



experiences provide the content for listening, speaking, writing and reading activities... the teacher serves as the scribe..." Through experience, readers become capable of predicting the words they encounter. The ability to make such predictions is based on the intuitive knowledge of the way sentences are constructed. However, such predictions are only efficient if the sentences conform to natural and familiar patterns, such as the ones produced through the experience approach. Phonics teaching may be incorporated into the language experience approach through activities which call children's attention to sounds of similar letters and letter combinations.

### **Summary and recommendations**

It is an established fact that reading is a complex process and learning to read a foreign language is a more difficult task. For Nigerian children, reading is much more complex and rather more difficult. The Nigerian language and the country's political situation are such that Nigerian children are necessarily faced with the task of having to learn two languages – their native tongue and the English language. The latter is supposed to be mastered sufficiently well and within a reasonably short time because, among other reasons, it becomes the language of instruction beginning in the third year of the child in the elementary school.

At the present time it appears that teachers of young Nigerian children are choosing between whole-word and phonic approaches for the teaching of reading. They tend to use phonics for the native language and a whole-word approach for the second language. While both methods have advantages, they both suffer from the following serious faults: they present young children with severe conceptual problems, they present children with distorted

and unfamiliar language, materials in the mother tongue of many Nigerian children are not available, materials available in the English language are often removed from the children's experience and background, and the strong oral traditions of the Nigerian society are ignored. The effect of these conditions is that the children become poor and reluctant readers – never mastering reading in either their native language or in the second language.

The language experience approach, if used with caution, is seen as being capable of steering a middle course and reducing a total reliance on either the word approach or the phonic method. On the whole, it is an eclectic approach that can teach children the nature of the reading process, provide reading materials couched in their own experience and language, and permit children to read both in their mother tongue and the second language, capitalizing on the strong story-telling tradition of Nigeria.

In order to accomplish anything worthwhile in reading in the Nigerian schools the following recommendations are worth considering: 1) Nursery schools should be provided and made compulsory for all children. The nursery school will, to a large extent, provide the general readiness program most children are not likely to have at home (Most of the parents are illiterate and most children have no opportunity even to handle books until they get to school. For such children, nursery school will be an advantage.) 2) Reading should be made a main subject at all levels of the primary school. At present, reading is taught as part of language lesson. This does not allow adequate focus on the reading problems children face in schools. 3) Teachers should be given regular in-service training in the teaching of reading. 4) Teaching of reading must be introduced and be

made a compulsory course at all levels of the teacher training programs.

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For further information, contact conference organizers, Dr. Mary Ann Davies or Dr. Stefinee Pinnegar, Department of Education and Professional Development, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo Michigan 49008.