

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND PARENT IN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: A FOCUS ON INFANT SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

One of the miracles of development in education is how children learn, acquire and develop language. The school, apart from imparting knowledge and skills, has to provide for language development in learners. The paper examines the role of the teacher in language development. Different theories in development which include maturationist theory, the environmentalist theory, constructivist theory and interactionist theory are also examined. The study makes use of the mixed methodology and the case study design. The study focused on one primary school in Chegutu, Zimbabwe. The school was purposively selected. The six classes observed included two ECD classes, two grade one classes and two grade two classes. The six teachers in the selected classes automatically became respondents in the study. The study observed that while the teachers had the relevant qualifications, it was necessary for grade one and two teachers to have an understanding of ECD-A and ECD-B expectations. The study observed that teachers used a variety of approaches to promote language development in learners. The different approaches were characterised by the environmentalist theory which argues that the environment shapes learning. The study also noted that while parents played an important role in language development, the extent of their involvement in school work was influenced by their level of education and economic status. The study concluded that lack of resources, limited time, and the heterogeneous nature of languages within communities; create challenges on language development at school level. The study recommends a collective effort by schools, parents and communities for resource mobilisation and provision in order to support the teaching and learning of languages in schools.

Key words: Language Development; Parents; Development theories; Early Childhood Development; Infant school.

Background to the study

Language is closely related to cognitive development. As people understand or acquire more concepts, their vocabulary correspondingly tends to grow. The vocabulary acquired is then used to communicate. Infants and toddlers communicate, even though they speak their own language before acquiring vocabulary. Infant and toddler speech goes through several stages that are about the same for all of them, though the rate is very different. This paper describes how infants and toddlers go through the different stages of language development, in relation to how teachers and caregivers can encourage language development in infants and toddlers.

To explain the role of the teacher and caregiver in language development the paper refers to different theories of language development. Some of the theories that will be referred to are the constructivist theory, the maturationist theory, environmentalist theory, and the interactionist theory. The paper further gives examples of strategies on how a teacher and caregiver can encourage language development through the four major skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Berk (2006) defines language development as the process by which children come to understand and communicate language during early childhood, as children begin to learn language as it is spoken and by mimicry. Tompkins and Hoskisson (1995) define language development as a process in human life, when a person begins to acquire language by learning it as it is spoken and mimicry. There are at least three elements that stand out in the two definitions above. These are the point that language development is a process, and as such it goes through stages. The other aspect is that it begins early in life. Finally, the other key aspect of the definitions is in how language development takes place, thus the role of the spoken word and mimicry.

Infant and toddler are at times used synonymously, though they do not mean the same thing. Salkind (2006) defines the term infant as the very young offspring of humans who are between the ages of 0 to 12 months. Gestwicki (1995) on the other hand refers to toddler as a child between the ages of one and three years. The differences in the two terms are found mostly in the different age ranges. For the purpose of this essay the term infant is used to refer to children who are between the ages of zero months to twelve months, and toddler is used to refer to children in the age range between one year and three years.

The major differences between infant and toddler lie in the age ranges. As noted above the age range for an infant is between 0 to 12 months. On the other hand, toddler age range is between one year and three years. These age ranges cover part of the Early Childhood Development (ECD), since the ECD level is from the age of zero up to eight years. The age ranges demonstrate that the child is at one stage of its development at home with parents, or at kindergarten or at a formal school. Regardless of the age of the child, language development is an on-going process. The aim is therefore to develop different language skills. These include auditory discrimination, auditory memory, visual memory, vocabulary development, book skills, pre-writing and writing skills. The major challenge is the extent to which the school can promote the acquisition of these skills through different activities.

Statement of the problem

Language acquisition and development play a crucial role in all facets of human development. Social development, cognitive development, emotional development and moral development are all interrelated. Schools therefore have a pivotal in the development of language. The main question is: How have infant schools contributed to the language development of children in their early years of schooling?

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to examine the approaches used in the teaching of language at infant school.

Research questions

The paper was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the qualifications of teachers at infant school?
- How do teachers contribute to development?
- What are the approaches used in the teaching of language at infant school?
- What are the challenges related to language development at infant school?

Significance of the study

The study is important to parents, teachers, school heads and other stakeholders in education as it acts as a reminder in terms of what is on the ground in relation to the language development policies in education. It helps teachers to improve their language teaching approaches. At the same time the study informs policy makers on how best schools can be used to develop language in learners. In that regard the study can help improve language policies in schools.

Theoretical Perspectives

Language development is guided by different language development theories. If teachers and caregivers are to positively contribute to the development of language in infants and toddlers they have to be aware of these theories and how they can be applied. One of the major theories that is relevant in language development is the behaviourist theory. This is linked to theorists like Skinner who believed that language is developed through social interaction as a result of operant conditioning, thus reinforcement and imitation (Santrock, 2008). This is very important to the teacher and caregiver as the behaviourist theory reminds us of the factors that influence language development. These are imitation, feedback and reinforcement among other factors. As noted by Weiten (2004) citing Skinner, children learn language through imitation, reinforcement, and other established principles of conditioning and as such vocalizations that are not reinforced gradually decline in frequency. This therefore emphasizes the role of reinforcement in language development. In addition to that Weiten (2004) observes that infants and toddlers learn to construct sentences by imitating the sentences of adults and older children.

Other theories that are important in language development are the maturationist theory, the environmentalist theory, the constructivist theory and interactionist theory. The different views held by these theories are important in the development of language in infants and toddlers. What is important to note about the maturationist theory is the assumption that development is a biological process, that occurs automatically in predictable, sequential stages overtime and that children will acquire language naturally as they grow (Janus and Offord, 2000). The environmentalist theory is guided by the belief that the child's environment shapes learning, human behaviour and development and children develop language by responding to their environment (Janus and Offord, 2000). There are points that have to be taken into consideration about these two theories when it comes to language development. These are that teachers and caregivers have to take note of the role of nature in development and that children go through stages that have to be respected and that the

environment, for example the home, the teachers, caregivers and those that interact with the child have an important role in the development of the child's language. The way the child interacts with the environment shapes his/her language development.

It is important to observe the child's development stages at infant and toddler levels. Activities that guide the development of language have to be age and stage related. As from birth to three months, Tompkins and Hoskisson (1995) observed that infants are aware of the sounds in the environment and they learn to turn to caregivers when they speak, and when they hear their voices. The way the caregiver speaks has to contribute to the development of receptive language. At this stage infants can make a distinction between familiar voices and unfamiliar voices. At this stage as noted by Berk (2006) the infant has to be exposed to developmental aspects that are related to speech. These include the development of gestures, adequate eye contact, and sound reported between the infant and caregiver and crying. Tompkins and Hoskisson (1995) refer to this stage as the babbling stage which is characterised by making vowel sounds.

From the age of four months to seven months, the infants follow the sources of sound. Mawere and Musiyiwa (2011) observe that at this stage the infants can be fascinated by toys that make sounds, enjoy music and rhythm. The caregiver has to talk to the infant and sing as well. As from the stage of seven months to twelve months are able to perform a number of activities that contribute to language development. Such activities include the following: they listen when spoken to; recognise words for common objects, respond to simple requests; repeat sounds; and engage in much vocal play (Berk,2006). The caregiver at this stage has to play an active role in creating the correct environment. This includes talking to the infant and singing to the child. The caregiver has to positively respond to the child so as to encourage the baby to talk or repeat words. Santrock (2008) notes that the caregiver has to facilitate the child's development by being an active conversational partner, talking as if the infant understands what you are saying and using a language style with which you feel comfortable. Such activities have to contribute to the development of both receptive language and expressive language. Receptive language develops by providing the infant a platform to listen while the caregiver is talking to the baby. At the same time the baby has to be listened to as it learns to speak.

There are so many other developments that take place between one year and three years. At between twelve months and fifteen months according to Mawere and Musiyiwa (2011) a toddler can do a number of activities. They note that at this stage children recognise names, laugh appropriately, use gestures and partial words. They further note that at the fifteen to eighteen months stage, toddlers can follow simple instructions, use complete words to form sentences, chatter and imitate. Furthermore, they note that at the eighteen to twenty four months children are able to follow two-step directions, point to parts of the body, hum and sing and speak three-word questions. At two to three years there is an increase in vocabulary, there is use of pronouns, can name body parts, colour, toys and objects. They are also able to repeat rhymes, songs and stories. Such knowledge is important to the teacher and caregiver. The teacher and caregiver have to continue to provide conversational partner, use language style with which you are comfortable, but consider ways of expanding the child's language abilities and horizons and adjust to the child's idiosyncrasies instead of working against them (Santrock, 2008). This can be done through reading stories to the children, repeating rhymes, storytelling and encouraging the children to tell their own stories. Other activities that

contribute to language development at this stage include playing games, playing with toys, singing, drama and picture reading.

Research Methodology

In order to examine the methods used in the teaching and development of language at infant school, the study used the mixed methodology and the case study design. The study involved the researcher visiting the selected school, observing language lessons and conducting interviews with teachers. The sample was conveniently selected. The researcher collected data over a period of two weeks. Data was collected through the use of structured questions, face-to-face interviews and observations. The main data collection methods were face-to-face interviews and observations. The observation method involved the researcher observing language lessons in the selected classes.

The sample

The school as a research site was purposively selected. The respondents were randomly selected. The sample comprised six infant school classes. These were one ECD-A class, one ECD-B class, two grade one classes, and two grade classes. The class teachers of the selected automatically became respondents in the study. The total number of teachers who participated in the study was six. For the two ECD classes, the total number of children was sixty and the total number of pupils was one hundred and sixty pupils. The learners did not actively take part in the study, but the researcher observed teachers teaching these classes.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed based on the descriptive statistics that were generated from the responses to the structured questionnaires. Data was also qualitatively analysed based on the themes that emerged from face-to-face interviews and observations.

Findings

The study was concerned with the extent to which approaches used in the teaching of language at infant school contributed to language development. It examined the activities that learners were exposed in order to promote language development in infant school. The findings that underpin the role of the teacher in language development at infant school are presented under the following themes:

- Qualifications and experience of the infant school teachers;
- Teachers and parents' contributions towards language development at infant school level; and
- Challenges in language development.

In Zimbabwe, the new curriculum has been designed in such a way that every primary school now has two departments which are the infant school and the junior school. The infant school is from ECD-A to Grade 2, thus catering for children who are between 3 years of age and 8 years of age. The junior school is from Grade 3 to Grade 7, thus catering for children from 9 years of age to 13 years of age.

Qualifications and Experience of infant school teachers

All the teachers in the sample had relevant teaching qualifications. Two (33%) of the teachers at ECD had Diplomas in Education with specialisation in Early Childhood Development from teachers' colleges. As for the grade 1 and 2 teachers, one (17%) of the teachers had a Diploma in Education specialising in infant education and three (50%) indicated that they had Diplomas in Education (Primary-General). When it came to teaching experience, ECD teachers' experience ranged from 1 year to 5 years. As for grades 1 and grade 2 teachers, their teaching experience ranged from 15 years to 25 years. Educational requirements for primary school teachers differ from country to country. In some countries like the United Kingdom, primary school teachers are required to have a Bachelor of Education degree in elementary education. In most developing countries such as Zimbabwe, the minimum entry requirement for a teacher at primary school is a Diploma in Education. In Zimbabwe, teachers colleges that train primary school teachers offer two types of diplomas. There is the Diploma in Education specialising in ECD, and the Diploma in Education General. These diplomas are three year programmes. The responses by the teachers show that the teachers had the requisite qualifications to handle infant school classes. However, grade one and two teachers had not specialised in ECD education. The challenge being that grade one and two were still being treated as separate from ECD. Qualifications and experience are very important in teaching. As noted by Ladd (2014) experienced teachers matter in that they are more effective than inexperienced teachers when it comes to improving learners' performance. At the same time teachers' performance and proficiency improve as they gain experience. Such proficiency helps the teachers to develop learners in other areas beyond examination related performance.

Teachers' contributions and teaching approaches on language development

To observe how teachers contributed to language development during language lessons, the researcher observed two ECD classes, two grade one classes and two grade two classes. The study noted that in the ECD classes visited the medium of instruction was the indigenous language, Shona. Language is one of the key learning areas at ECD, which has a total of seven learning areas. The study sought to establish the extent to which the selected teachers used different approaches to develop language in learners. The selected approaches were based on the concepts and skills that had to be developed in learners to improve their language. These activities had to promote auditory discrimination, auditory memory, verbal and non-verbal language and vocabulary development, visual and tactile discrimination, visual memory and book skills (Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, 2011). If learners are to develop language skills it is important that within one lesson all the concepts and skills are fairly catered for. All the lessons observed were 15 minutes and 30 minutes in duration for the ECD, and grades one and two classes respectively. In order to take care of the different skills necessary for language development, the teacher has to be highly efficient in the management of time. Failure to manage time may negatively impact on the development of other skills and concepts.

The research was interested in finding out how often the different activities that promote language development were used at ECD level and in grades one and two. At ECD level the following approaches were found common: Music and Dance; storybooks; Reciting rhymes; Story telling; games; matching pictures; and drama. To support these activities the ECD classes had different learning areas. The identified learning areas included the following: Technology Play Areas; Manipulative and Block Play Area; Toys and Musical instruments; Drama Play Areas; Science and Discovery Play; and Language and Book Play Area. The ECD classes visited had these different areas. The major difference was in the learning

materials found in these areas. The materials found in the Language areas demonstrated an integrated teaching and learning approach across different learning areas.

For the grades one and two, the researcher managed to observe Shona language lessons and English language lessons. As for language development in grades one and two, the approaches were similar to those used at ECD level. The major difference was on areas of emphasis. At grade one and grade two teachers tended to focus on developing writing and reading skills. Teachers still created environments that allowed learners to interact through various activities. Language development aims at developing learners' communication skills. In grades one and two, focus has to be on both oral communication and written communication. Learners have to continue learning how to express their ideas in different forms. The Department of Education for Newfoundland and Labrador (2013) notes that the teacher has a crucial role to play through creating experiences that make children learn through a functional approach using a variety of language forms. These forms can be oral, written, and visual. For grades one and two, activities focused on oral language. To promote the development of oral language the commonly used strategies were storytelling, shared reading, and choral speaking. The different activities placed emphasis on feedback, reinforcement and imitation which are key components of the behaviourist theory. Choral speaking involved learners repeating words or sentences in groups. The development of oral language also involved reciting of poems and songs. The written form involved learning to write letters of the alphabet and sentences. The visual form involved role play and drama. However, it was noted that role play and drama were the least used methods for teaching language in grades one and two. It was also noted that emphasis on learning areas that were prevalent at ECD level were not common in grades one and two classes. At the same time teachers at grade one and two level tended to place emphasis on writing and reading. It was observed that was not much difference in approach in the teaching of Shona and English in the observed classes. Language development activities have to follow a time-table that provides continuity in terms of language skills development. These include naming objects and people, describing, and any other activities that develop critical thinking.

The role of parents in language development

Parents play a crucial role in the education of their children. They remain role models even as the children grow since they are their children's first teachers. They are naturally their children's role models for learning. Within the context of language development, parents remain models in that children learn and acquire language from them in addition to the social and physical environment. Activities in which parents can be involved in language development include reading together, supervision of homework, talking with children, and storytelling. Activities such as reading at home contribute significantly to language development in the child. Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich and Welsh (2004) note that when parents are involved in reading activities at home this had a positive impact on children's reading achievements, language comprehension, expressive language skills and their attitudes towards language and reading in particular. In that regard activities at home have to equally promote parent-child interaction.

Teachers were asked to indicate how they involved parents in language development activities. Teachers noted that they involved parents in their teacher-parent conferences and homework. They noted that they had teacher-parent conferences during consultation days which were help once per term or once per year as indicated by others. It was noted that such conferences were not specifically for one subject area, but the general performance of the learner in all areas. As such the possibility of them focusing on other learning areas at the

expense of Language Arts was very high. However, some teachers noted that the level of parental involvement in activities that contributed to language development was very much influenced by the parents' level of education and their economic status. Some parents lacked the requisite skills to read to their children and others spent much of their time at work and as such did not have time to fully attend to their children's school work.

Challenges of Language Development

There are a number of challenges associated with language development at school and home. Challenges depend on whether the language being developed is a first language or a second language or a foreign language. According to the NEA Education Policy and Practice Department there are a number of challenges facing teachers and English Language Learners (ELL). The Department noted that the challenges included lack of research based information, resources and relevant strategies on the part of the teacher and learners are given reading tests in English and yet they lack the language proficiency. Other challenges noted included poor communication between the school and the community and lack of professional development on the teaching of English. Within this context the role of parents in the classes observed was not supported by school policy, and as such much depended on the preference of the class teacher.

Even stages where the use of mother tongue or local language is supported by policy, there are challenges related to the heterogeneous nature of languages spoken within a community and country. What then becomes the local language of instruction in a school context becomes debatable. At ECD the emphasis on activities that promote oral language development was well pronounced in the classes observed, but in grades one and two activities tended to be skewed in favour of learning to read and write. As noted by Dunlap (2010) language development has to focus on specific areas such as: receptive language skills; expressive language skills; articulation skills; and oral-motor skills. Teachers have to provide for activities that promote the development of skills in the noted areas. The major challenge observed was shortage of resources and facilities and these limited the learners' activities. Another limitation was related to the class sizes, and this tended to limit the teachers' individual attention to learners, considering that the lessons observed were fifteen and thirty minutes long and there were other subject areas to be covered apart from language.

The other challenges noted related to resources and facilities to support the teaching and learning of language at school. All the schools visited lacked in reading materials such as picture books, story books and computer packages that promote language development. Other challenges noted were lack of facilities such classrooms, shared classrooms that impacted negatively on learning time and large class sizes that impeded on individualised and personalised learning.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The paper came up with the following conclusions:

- Teachers at ECD level and grades one and two had teaching qualifications for the grades that they were teaching. However, there is need for staff developing grade one and two teachers so that they can handle ECD-A and ECD-B classes as well.
- Teachers played important roles that promoted language development in learners. These roles were characterised by the methods that they used to promote language

development. These included discovery activities, music and dance, word games, story-telling, poems and rhymes, picture books, and language book play areas. Teachers also gave learners homework that would promote language development. The role played by teachers was guided by the environmentalist theory, which postulates that a child's learning is shaped by the environment.

- Parents played a crucial role in promoting language development in children. They contributed through homework and teacher-parent conferences which were in the form of consultation days. However, parental involvement was very much influenced by parents' educational level and the nature of activities learners were given to do at home. There is need for schools to come up with policies on parental involvement in children's learning and training for parents on how best they can assist children in language development.
- The teachers' efforts in promoting language development at school were being hampered by a number of challenges which included the heterogeneous nature of the languages spoken within communities making it difficult to adopt one as the mother tongue at ECD level; there was limited time to try different language development approaches within a lesson, and the shortage of resources and facilities impacted negatively on teaching and learning of language. There is need for more parental and community involvement in resource mobilisation and provision.



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