

Parental Involvement in the Development of Language Skills: Implications for Childhood Education

¹Grace O. Edu, Ph.D
drgraceedu65@gmail.com

¹Victoria Ejemot Aquah
aquahvicky@gmail.com

¹Anoh Janet Menku
anohmenku@gmail.com

¹Department of Curriculum and Teaching
Faculty of Educational Foundation Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar



Abstract

Entry into formal language is one of the most important and exciting achievements of early development of a child. Moreover, language is foundational to children's school readiness and achievement. The various components of the language art are developmental in nature and require training, which must begin from the early age of a child. Parental involvement as one of the major factors that support language skills development in early childhood, is a situation where parents are directly involved in the education of their children. They either involve themselves or are involved by the school and teachers in their children's learning process. Consequently, this paper enunciates the implications of parental involvement in children's language skills development, factors militating against effective parental involvement in language skills development in early childhood education in Nigeria and the way forward for effective parental involvement in language skills development in early childhood education.

Introduction

During the early years of life, children undergo major developmental changes across a range of domains; cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. In particular, the entry into formal language is one of the most important and exciting achievements of early development. Language enables children to share meanings with others, and to participate in cultural learning in unprecedented ways. Moreover, language is foundational to children's school readiness and achievement. For these reasons, a vast body of research has been dedicated to understanding the social contextual factors that support children's early language development and learning. These researches are anchored in the writings of scholars such as Bruner (1983) and Vygotsky (1962), who posited that learning occurs in a social-cultural context in which adults and primary caregivers support or "scaffold" young children to higher levels of thinking and acting. According to this view, children

who experience sensitive, cognitively stimulating home environments early in development are at an advantage in the language and learning process (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009).

Parental involvement, as one of the major factors that support language skills development in early childhood, is a situation where parents are directly involved in the education of their children. They involve themselves, and are involved by the school and teachers in the learning process of their children. They also fulfill their duties as parents in making sure that the learner is assisted in the process of learning as much as they possibly can. According to Clinton and Hattie (2013), parental involvement does not just refer to parents enquiring about the performances of learners in school. Rather, it also entails taking a role in communicating with their children for a healthy relationship with them. This makes the process of encouraging, mentoring, leading and inspiring them genuine.

Entry into formal language requires development in language skills. Language, according to Husain (2015), is a divine gift of God. It is language that distinguishes man from animals. Bloch and Trager in Husain (2015) defined language as a system of vocal symbols by means of which a social group operates. Language is used to give expression to thoughts and feelings of a social group. It is essentially a skill. The author maintained that language is not content based subject like science, social studies, commerce, and others, which aim to impart information and fill the human mind with knowledge. Basically, language arts is a complex skill involving four sub-skills which are as follows: listening, writing, speaking and reading. However, as defined by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (cited in Nordquist, 2019), language can sub-divide into subjects like, reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing. These skills are required to develop hand-in-hand making room for effective development of a language by children.

The various components of the language art are developmental in nature and require training, which must begin from the early age of a child. Just as a child learns how to develop physically in stages, so are all the components of the language arts developed through training and in stages. The language art components are explained here for clarity. Listening is the first of the language art components. According to Oxford Living Dictionaries, to listen is to give attention to sound or action. When listening, one is hearing what others are saying, and trying to understand what it means. The act of listening involves complex affective, cognitive, and behavioural processes. Speaking, on the other hand, is the action of conveying information or expressing one's feelings in speech, while Reading is a means for language acquisition, communication, and sharing information and ideas. It is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them. The eyes are used to receive written symbols such as letters, punctuation marks and spaces, when reading. The brain is then used to convert symbols into words, sentences and paragraphs that communicate something to the reader (Essberger, n.d). On the other hand, writing is the process of using symbols such as letters of the alphabet, punctuation and spaces, to communicate thoughts and ideas in understandable form. It is a medium

of human communication that involves the representation of a language with symbols (Estrem, 2015). On the other hand, Viewing is a process that supports orals and literacy, and is a part of an integrated language arts programme. It enhances listening skills when students attend to nonverbal communication and visual elements of performance, video, television, film, and multimedia presentations. While visually representing involves students communicating information and representing ideas for different purposes using arts, drama and graphics (Mustapha, 2014).

The importance of a language to a child's entire life cannot be over emphasized. All the components of language arts are required early in a child's life for effective language development. As observed in the components of the language arts, a language enables a child to combine the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing to be able to communicate his thought with others and also delve into the thoughts of others for effective living. The early years of a child are formative in nature. Most of the things learnt at this stage, are the foundations upon which the other stages of development are built. Language development is one of such skills that are acquired early in life but used for various purposes all through one's life, beginning with communication, to schooling activities, work life, interactions and all manner of social activities.

It is known that the early years of a child are spent, most times, with parents and other significant persons at home. Experiences acquired at this stage in a child's life can either make or mar his/her future development in diverse ways. The better the language experience around the child's home, the better the acquisition of language for effective school and adult life. Therefore, it takes the active participation of these stakeholders around the home environment of the child for effective language development to occur.

The awareness of these roles is an important aspect of sensitization to parents and other significant persons. This awareness would create in the stakeholders the urge to provide the best home environment for the child's language skills development. Consequently, this paper intends to enunciate the roles of parents in the early language development of children; educational implications of parents' involvement in early development of language skills; factors militating against effective parental involvement in early language skills development in children; and the way forward for effective parental involvement in early language skills development of children.

Parental involvement in early language skills development

Parental involvement in early childhood development is vital because parents are a child's first teacher and the bridge between the home and external environment (Lion, 2010). For example, school age children are likely to spend at least, 70% of their waking hours (including weekends and holidays) outside school. The earlier in a child's educational process, parental involvement begins, the more powerful the effects. And the most effective forms of involvement are those which involve parents working directly with their children in learning activities at home (Michigan Department of Education, 2005). Kathomi (2015) affirmed that the success of school literacy programme depends on how

parent or family members extend it at home. The author maintained that the more parents are involved, the more children gain academic related attainment such as language arts and science. For instance, a study of 3-5years old who had been read to, at least three times per week, found the children two times more likely to understand words in context (Early Literacy, 1999). Therefore, parents can play a crucial role in fostering young children's emerging language skills. Parents can do this when they are aware and value their role as the first teacher in their children's literacy and language development.

Parents can successfully involve in language skills development of early children's education using different aspects. Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein and Baumwell (2001) highlighted three aspects of parental involvement in language skills development as central to early childhood education. They are:

1. The frequency of children's participation in routine learning activities (e.g. Shared book reading, storytelling).
2. The quality of caregiver-child engagements (e.g parents' cognitive stimulation and sensitivity/responsiveness).
3. The provision of age-appropriate learning materials (e.g books and toys).

Early and consistent participation in routine learning activities such as shared book reading, storytelling and teaching about the letters of the alphabet, provides children with a critical foundation for early learning, language growth and emergent literacy. When parents provide young children with routine activities, children gain familiar structure for interpreting others' behaviours and language, anticipating the temporal sequencing of events, and drawing inferences from new experiences. Moreover, parental engagement of children in learning activities expands their vocabularies and conceptual knowledge. In particular, shared book reading as well as the sharing of oral stories with children, facilitates young children's vocabulary growth, phonemic skills, print concept knowledge (the awareness of how print works) and positive attitudes toward literacy. Lion (2010) also noted that parents can create, provide and share reading materials for the benefit of all the children in the class. They can also tell enjoyable stories in the course of undertaking learning any learning activity. Parent can read books with their children each night. After reading stories, parents practice with their children to retell the story using their own words. This will help children develop language arts skills faster.

The quality of parent-caregiver interactions also plays a formative role in children's early language development and learning. In fact, the amount and style of language that parents use when conversing with their children is one of the strongest predictors of children's early language. Children benefit from exposure to adult speech that is varied and rich in information about objects and events in the environment. Additionally, parents who continuously respond to their young children's verbal and exploratory initiatives (through verbal descriptions and questions) tend to have children with more advanced receptive and productive language and story comprehension skills. For example, children who have their grandparents as their caregivers in their early childhood, develop varied vocabulary and language arts skills faster because, many grandparents use a lot of idiomatic

expressions and figure of speech. They also give more attention in describing and answering questions asked by their grandchildren/wards.

Ballad (2010) affirmed that as parents engage in conversation during activity with their children, they expose them to new words and varied vocabulary as they used new words to explain concepts. As they continue to interact with everyday items, they are able to learn the names of different colours and develop counting skills. For instance, while cooking, a mother can ask her child to tell her the colour of the vegetable, pepper, onion, tomatoes or count the number of tomatoes in the bowl.

The provision of age-appropriate learning materials (e.g books, toys) that facilitate learning has been shown to support young children's language growth and learning. Learning materials provide opportunities for parent child exchanges about specific objects and actions such as when a parent and a child pretend to cook a meal. In such instances, materials serve as a vehicle for communicative exchanges around a shared topic of conversation. Specifically, exposing toys to young children that enable symbolic play and support the development of fine motor skills should relate to children's early receptive language skills, intrinsic motivation and positive approaches to learning. In addition, children's familiarity with story books can also be linked to their receptive and expressive vocabularies and early reading abilities.

However, developing literacy during the early years requires more than parents simply reading to children but, requires strategic efforts toward developing skills such as letter sound recognition, recognition of sight words, print recognition, left to right awareness and reading comprehension. Letter sound recognition refers to the association of letters with sound and identification of upper and lower case letters. Recognition of whole words by sight is used to master words such as a child's name or high frequency words. Learning to distinguish punctuation marks, letters from words and when words start and end is accomplished as children develop a stronger concept of print; print recognition in order to read with understanding (Goals for your Kindergarten Reader, 2013).

The child's characteristics such as gender and birth order (as two of many factors), have been linked to early measures of language development. Example, girls tend to have a slight advantage over boys in the early stages of vocabulary development (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009). Tamis-LeMonda and Rodriguez also mentioned that studies have documented that families spend substantially more time in literacy related activities with girls than with boys. Equally, first born children have slightly larger vocabularies on average than their later-born peers. Further, the author concluded that mothers differ in their language, engagement and responsiveness toward their first and later born children with input favouring first born.

Implications of parental involvement in language skills development in childhood education

The implications of parental involvement in children's language skills development are seen in the fact that:

1. Research on children's early learning environment is relevant to policy makers, educators and teachers who seek to promote the positive language development of young children.
2. Intervention and preventive efforts should target multiple aspects of children's early language and learning environments, including supporting parents in their provision of literacy-promoting activities, sensitive and responsive engagements, and age-appropriate materials that facilitate learning. These efforts should begin early in development, as children are likely to benefit most from supportive years of rapid language growth and learning.
3. Interventions with parents that aim to support children learning should attend to the cultural context of early development when working with parents from different backgrounds, and also, consider the broader social context of parenting by attending to the barriers created by poverty and low parental education.

Factors militating against effective parental involvement in language skills development in early childhood education in Nigeria

Some of the major challenges in involving parents in language skills development in early childhood, especially in Africa, are enumerated by Mudzielwana (2014) as:

1. Parental literacy level

The low literacy levels limit the active parental involvement in children's education. This, according to Adam (2005) and Donkor (2010), implies that parents with low literacy level might have the will to assist children with their language skills but are constrained by their own limited formal education.

2. Socio-economic status

This is a major barrier to parents' involvement, as studies have found that parents with higher socio-economic status are more likely to be involved in their children's education (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris in Simonds, 2012). In another study, Simonds (2012) reported that Sui-chi and Willms (1996) found that socio-economic status was significant and positively related to parental involvement in children's education. This is because unlike rich parents, poor parents cannot afford materials like books, toys or lesson teachers to assist their children in developing the art of language.

3. Marital status

Marital status has been shown to have a positive influence on parental involvement in children language skills development based on the resources available in a two-parent household. Fantuzzo, Tighe and Childs (2000) reported that married parents were more involved in home-based and school-based activities and involvement than single parents. Also, Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) found that parental involvement was significantly related to having two parents in the home. Those homes with two parents were able to share responsibilities, allowing for parent

participation in activities for their children's education. This is so because, single parents may have to work longer hours due to one income source and, have increased family responsibilities thereby limiting their involvement (Simonds, 2012).

4. Time constraint due to employment demands

The number of hours worked and the time of day, the proximity of employment and the ability to shift the work schedule all contribute to the range of parental involvement in the language skills development of the children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; cited in Simonds, 2012). If the parents work long hours during the day and are unable to take time off for school related activities, parental involvement in the child's language skills development will likely be negatively impacted.

5. Parents' attitude to parental involvement

Some parents are more likely to become involved in the language skills development of their children when they believe their role as a parent includes involvement. Parents take responsibility for what they believe is necessary for their child's schooling. Therefore, the parents' positive attitude along with expanding the literacy environment to include other vehicles, help generate a child's enthusiasm for literacy learning (Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006) and will play a crucial role in the child's development of reading language and cognitive skills.

The way forward for effective parental involvement in language skills development in early childhood education

1. Basic education for the adults should be introduced in areas affected so that parents could learn how to read and write.

2. Parents who are highly engaged at working should assign a lesson teacher to assist their children in developing language arts skills.

3. Motivational talks or presentation should be held in community centres, churches, mosques, market areas and town hall meetings to aid with the attitude of the parents who have relegated their responsibilities to schools and do not want to be consciously involved in assisting their children in developmental strides.

4. Good relationship between educators/teachers and parents should be established. This would create room for collaboration towards effective development of language skills early in a child's life.

5. Educators should acknowledge the transactional nature of children's early language and learning experience.

6. Schools should provide parents the opportunity for involvement in their child education by providing needed support such as through Parent – Teacher Association (PTA) meeting, good parent-teacher communication whether formal or informal.

7. Non-governmental organizations can assist in the setting up of home libraries with the provision of essential books for both parents and learners to enhance their language skills development. This support will serve to mitigate the negative impact of poverty on the literacy-development of poor children.

Conclusion

In this paper, parental involvement has been established to be very crucial in the early language arts skills development of children. Children's experiences at home are critical to early language growth and learning. In particular, three aspects of the home literacy environment promote children's learning and language development; learning activities (eg. daily book reading), parenting quality (eg responsiveness), and learning materials (eg. Age-appropriate toys and books). Additionally, parents with more resources (eg. Education, income) are better able to provide positive learning experiences for their young children. There is therefore need for development literacy in adult, through some adult literacy training.

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