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Preschool Teachers' Awareness, Content Knowledge, Pedagogical Skills and Children's Emergent Literacy in Ibadan Metropolis

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Abstract

The primary function of language is communication. Learning about literacy begins long before children can read and write in the conventional sense. Most children at risk of school failure benefit more from high quality experiences as effective instruction in the early years can have a great impact on children's language and literacy development. In the absence of such effective instruction, differences in children understanding and use of language may vary greatly by age three. Reading skills provide a solid foundation for children's academic success. Children who read well tend to read more and, as a result, acquire more knowledge in many content domains. Although, many children learn to read without significant problem, but so many are having serious difficulty in reading which stems from lack of basic skills in emergent literacy. This study adopted a survey design of the correlational type. Random sampling technique was used to select three local government areas in Ibadan metropolis. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 10 participating preschools from each local government area with thirty (30) preschool teachers and (302) preschool children in all. Two validated instruments were adapted namely Preschool Teachers' Awareness, Knowledge of and Pedagogical Skills in Emergent Literacy Questionnaire (Pre-TAKE) and Preschool Children's Emergent literacy Assessment (PCELA) with reliability coefficient at ($\alpha = .89$) and ($r = .51$) respectively. The data collected were analysed using multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed a significant relationship between teachers' awareness ($r = 0.047$; $p < 0.05$), content knowledge ($r = 0.000$; $p < 0.05$) and the level of children's emergent literacy respectively, but there was no significant relationship between teachers' pedagogical skills ($r = 0.91$; $p > 0.05$) and the level of children's emergent literacy in Ibadan metropolis. In view of these findings, it was recommended that preschool teachers should be aware of children's emergent literacy and equipped with an extensive content knowledge, a repertoire of effective teaching strategies and decision making and problem solving skills to cater

for children's needs. Through proper training and support, preschool teachers can acquire the expertise in literacy instruction and thus be successful in promoting literacy skills and motivation of preschool children.

Keywords: *Emergent literacy, Preschool teachers' awareness, Content knowledge, Pedagogical skills*

Introduction

The early years are crucial in children's literacy development because the development of language and literacy starts right from birth and is a lifelong process. In order for an adult to communicate and interact effectively in this 21st century, he /she must have been strongly immersed or equipped with the necessary attitude, skills and knowledge about language and literacy right from childhood. Most of the basic skills needed for better communication and interaction with people in the society by children are laid at the preschool level in a rich literate environment which gives the child a greater edge over other children lacking in these necessary skills in the society.

It has been established by research that the brain develops faster than any other time from birth to age three. The brain of a three-year-old is two-and-a-half times more active than an adult's brain. For this reason, it is expedient to foster literacy during the early stages of life. If children are not stimulated, if they are not read to, if they are not engaged, if they are not asked questions, their brains become weakened, thereby inhibiting the acquisition and development of these skills (Diamanti, Mouzaki, Ralli, Antoniou, Papaioannou, Anthanassios, 2017; Tompkins, 2011).

The primary function of language is to communicate. Learning about literacy begins long before children can read and write in the conventional sense. Most children at risk for school failure benefit from high quality experiences as effective instruction in the early years can have a great impact on children's language and literacy development (Antilla, 2013). In the absence of such instruction, differences in children's understanding and use of language can vary greatly by age three (Copple & Bredekemp, 2009).

The growing ability of children to use language in communicating is a landmark of development that distinguishes pre-schoolers from infants and toddlers. The reason is that language develops speedily in the preschool years because it is the most active years. As children's acquisition of vocabularies increase and they use more complex sentences, their literacy skills emerge. Since literacy in its most simple form is the ability to both understand and express one's feelings, desires and experiences to others, it is more than ever essential for basic survival on a day-to-day basis and it is known as one of the most important academic skill areas because it influences skill acquisition in other academic areas. Hence, a child that struggles to read will struggle in all subject areas (Antilla, 2013), thereby affecting his/her academic achievement and may build a negative attitude towards reading and school in general than other peers.

In the mid-eighties, the term emergent literacy gained prominence as a theory that explains the origin of reading and writing in young children. Emergent literacy comprises the skills,

understandings and attitudes that young children demonstrate before they are able to perform conventional forms of reading and writing. This is not only acquired through direct instruction but also as the result of exposure and encouragement as they are immersed in print, recognise the pleasure and purpose of reading and writing and are encouraged to try the processes themselves (Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel & Gunnewig, 2006).

Children acquire the skills and knowledge about language that are developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing in the first 5 years of life. Through the support of parents, caregivers, and educators, a child can successfully progress from emergent to conventional reading and writing (Luckner, 2013). Bernstein (2010) opined that it is not necessary for children to be ready before they can learn how to read and write because they learn about language from the moment of birth. He believed that it is never too early to begin reading to a child as babies love hearing the sounds of their parents' voices reading to them, even when it is ordinary morning prayer. This implies that children who grow up in rich literate environments may enter school with a good grasp of the concepts underlying reading while those who are not might be adversely affected.

During the last two decades, the field of reading and emergent literacy research has devoted increasing attention to the underlying or foundational skills that young children need to possess in order to become successful readers (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). A growing body of research has indicated that three emergent literacy factors that are associated with reading achievement and also represent a significant source of individual differences in later reading achievement are: Oral language, Phonological awareness and Print awareness (Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000).

Oral language is the ability to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar, as children depend on language for social interaction and communication, demonstration of ability and knowledge, and acquiring new concepts. Thus, it generally helps in aspect of literacy learning (Parker, Zaslofsky & Burns, 2015; Roskos, Tabors & Lenhart, 2004). Phonological awareness is the ability to detect, manipulate, or analyse the auditory aspects of spoken language (including the ability to distinguish or segment words, syllables, or phonemes), independent of meaning. Phonological awareness refers to the general ability to attend to the sounds of language as distinct from its meaning. It is the ability to detect, identify, and manipulate the sound structure of language, along with being one of the strongest predictors of later reading success (Kelly, Roe & Blanchard, 2015). Print awareness is a child's basic understanding of the purpose and conventions of text and it is acquired before children learn to read and write (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2005). As children develop print awareness they begin to understand the connection between oral and written language. A combination of elements of alphabet knowledge, concepts about print, and early decoding.

The field of early childhood education continues to advance in its understanding of the development of emergent literacy and language skills (Neuman & Dickinson, 2011). A growing body of research is dedicated to examining how best to support teachers in helping children develop these necessary competencies in the preschool classroom (Diamond, Justice, Siegler & Snyder, 2013) as preschool teachers have been found as one of the

significant adult that can contribute immensely to the development of children's emergent literacy apart from the literacy experience acquired from home. Fostering emergent literacy and language skills is a complex task requiring strong knowledge and understanding of how these skills develop in young children (awareness of emergent literacy), content knowledge as well as the use of evidence-based, high quality instructional practices or strategies (pedagogical skills).

Preschool teachers' awareness of children's emergent literacy is the knowledge and understanding that literacy skills evolve in children from birth and continue as they progress from one level of development to the other in a rich literate environment into successful conventional readers. Early literacy learning opportunities are more likely to happen when teachers are aware and have a solid knowledge of emergent literacy and child development. Preschool teachers' content knowledge in children's emergent literacy is the understanding of basic content that makes up children's emergent literacy skills. Content knowledge, also identified as disciplinary knowledge, is the most basic form of knowledge teachers are expected to possess in a specific domain, such as emergent literacy (Cunningham, Zibulsky & Callahan, 2009). Preschool teachers' pedagogical skills are the instructional strategies used by the teachers for the development of children's emergent literacy skills. One of the most important factors that determine how well children learn is the classroom teacher's knowledge and teaching skills (Amosun & Kolawole, 2015).

However, recent studies suggest that many preschool teachers may have insufficient content and pedagogical knowledge necessary to effectively promote emergent literacy and language skills (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009), perhaps due to the high variability in teachers' pre-service and in-service training (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Fuller, Kagan, Loeb & Chang, 2004). Hence, a large proportion of African children complete school without functional literacy skills (UNESCO, 2006). This can become a major problem for the children when they become adults in the literate environment. Therefore, this study attempts to find out the extent of preschool teachers' awareness, proportion of preschool teachers with content knowledge, extent of using the appropriate pedagogical skills and their relationship with the level of children's emergent literacy in Ibadan metropolis.

Statement of the Problem

Recent studies suggest that many preschool teachers may have insufficient awareness, content and pedagogical knowledge necessary to effectively promote emergent literacy and language skills of preschool children. This insufficiency may lead to differences in children understanding and their use of language may vary greatly by age three. Thus, the paper investigated preschool teachers' awareness, content knowledge, pedagogical skills and children's emergent literacy in Ibadan metropolis.

Hypotheses

- H₀₁ There is no significant relationship between preschool teachers' awareness and the level of children's emergent literacy development in Ibadan metropolis.
- H₀₂ There is no significant relationship between preschool teachers' content knowledge and the level of children's emergent literacy development in Ibadan metropolis.

- H0₃ There is no significant relationship between preschool teachers' pedagogical skills and the level of children's emergent literacy development in Ibadan metropolis.
- H0₄ There is no significant relative influence of teachers' awareness, content knowledge and pedagogical skills on children's emergent literacy skill development.
- H0₅ There is no significant composite influence of teachers' awareness, content knowledge and pedagogical skills on children's emergent literacy skill development.

Method

This study adopted a survey design of the correlational type. The population for this study comprised all preschool teachers and their pupils in Ibadan metropolis. Random sampling technique was used to select three local government areas in Ibadan metropolis. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 10 participating preschools from each local government area with thirty (30) preschool teachers and (302) preschool children in all. Purposive sampling was used to get public schools with preschool classes. Out of the (30) preschool teachers, 1 respondent was a male while 29 were female; for school type, 15 respondents each were from both private and public schools; 25 had NCE, the minimum qualification for teaching; and 5 had Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.). For teaching experience, 8 teachers had (0-5) years of teaching experience, 5 teachers had (6-10) years of teaching experience another 5 had (11-15) years teaching experience, only 3 teachers had (16-20) years of teaching experience while 9 teachers had (21) years above teaching experience and above.

Two research instruments were adapted namely Preschool Teachers' Awareness, Knowledge of and Pedagogical Skills in Emergent Literacy Questionnaire (Pre-TAKE) and Preschool Children's Emergent Literacy Assessment (PCELA) with reliability coefficient at ($\alpha = .89$) and ($r = .51$) respectively. The data collected were analysed using simple descriptive statistics of frequency count and percentage for the research questions while the hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis.

Results

- H0₁ There is no significant relationship between preschool teachers' awareness and the level of children's emergent literacy in Ibadan metropolis.

Table 1: Summary of correlation matrix table showing relationships between the variables

Variables	Children Emergent Literacy	Teachers' Awareness	Teachers' Content Knowledge	Teachers' Pedagogical Skills
Children Emergent Literacy	1			
Teachers' Awareness	.096	1		
Teachers' Content Knowledge	.258*	.494*	1	
Teachers' Pedagogical Skills	.077	.233*	0.84	1

Note: (*) connotes that the relationship between the variables is significant.

Table 1 shows that there is a significant relationship between Teachers' awareness and the level of children emergent literacy ($r = 0.047$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, H_{01} is rejected. There exists a positive relationship between teachers' awareness and the level of children's emergent literacy skill development. This means that as their awareness increases, the level of the children's emergent literacy skills increases.

H_{02} There is no significant relationship between preschool teachers' content knowledge and the level of children's emergent literacy in Ibadan metropolis. According to table 1 above, there is a significant relationship between Teachers' content knowledge and the level of children's emergent literacy ($r = 0.000$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore H_{02} is rejected. There exists a positive relationship between teachers' content knowledge and the level of children's emergent literacy skill development. This means that as their content knowledge increases, the level of the children's emergent literacy skills increases.

H_{03} There is no significant relationship between preschool teachers' pedagogical skills and the level of children's emergent literacy development in Ibadan metropolis. According to table 1 above, there is no significant relationship between Teachers' pedagogical skills and the level of children's emergent literacy ($r = 0.91$; $p > 0.05$). Therefore, H_{03} is not rejected.

H₀₄ There is no significant composite influence of teachers' awareness, knowledge and pedagogical skills on children's emergent literacy skill development.

Table 2: Composite influence of teachers' awareness, knowledge and pedagogical skills on children's emergent literacy skill development

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	R	R ²	Adjusted	Remark
Regression	1658.692	3	552.897	7.692	.000	.268	.072	.063	Significant
Residual	21419.281	298	71.877						
Total	23077.974	301							

Table 2 shows that there is a joint relationship ($R = 0.27$). This led to the fact that the independent variables accounted for 6.3% of the total variance or change in the children's level of emergent literacy (Adjusted $R^2 = .063$). The joint influence is shown to be significant ($F_{(3,298)} = 7.69$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, H₀₄ is rejected. The implication of this is that preschool teachers should take their awareness, knowledge and pedagogical skills in interacting with children serious as they are found to be potent in determining children emergent literacy development.

H₀₅ There is no significant relative influence of teachers' awareness, content knowledge and pedagogical skills on children's emergent literacy skill development.

Table 3: Relative influence of teachers' awareness, content knowledge and pedagogical skills on children's emergent literacy skill development

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	26.842	6.584		4.077	.000
Teachers' Awareness	-.150	.171	-.058	-0.880	.380
Teachers' Content Knowledge	.825	.189	.281	4.369	.000
Teachers' Pedagogical Skills	.137	.118	.067	1.167	.244

Table 3 shows that only Teachers' content knowledge contributed significantly to children's emergent literacy ($\beta = 0.28$; $t = 4.37$; $p < 0.05$) out of the three independent variables. Teachers' content knowledge has the highest contribution ($\beta = 0.28$; $t = 4.37$; $p < 0.05$): followed by Teachers' Awareness ($\beta = -0.06$; $t = -0.88$; $p > 0.05$) and lastly is Teachers' Pedagogical Skills ($\beta = 0.07$; $t = 1.17$; $p > 0.05$). Therefore, H_0 is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

Hypothesis one focused on the relationship between preschool teachers' awareness and children's emergent literacy. The paramount focus here was to see whether there is a significant relationship between teachers' awareness and level of children's emergent literacy development. The finding revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between preschool teachers' awareness and level of children's emergent literacy. This means that preschool teachers awareness is an important element for children's emergent literacy development as majority of the preschool teachers are reported to be very much aware of children's emergent literacy. This finding corroborate Green, Peterson and Lewis (2006) who reported that early childhood teachers' awareness of dominant educational theories is a factor that influences understanding of literacy and how these translate into practice. Also, McLachlan, Carvalho, de Lautour and Kumar (2006) identified that entrenched belief systems and conceptualisations that are resistant to change inhibit the ability and preparedness of teachers to reframe their practice in light of changing views on effective literacy practices. The explanation for this result may be that the recent awareness and enlightenment of society by the government and other stakeholders in early childhood education and the incorporation of pre-primary education in Nigerian primary school influenced the preschool teachers to be aware of basic pre-academic needs of the children.

Hypothesis two established if there is a relationship between teachers' content knowledge and the level of children's emergent literacy development. The main focus was to find out whether there is a significant relationship between preschool teachers' content knowledge and the level of children's emergent literacy development. The finding showed that there is a significant positive relationship between teachers' content knowledge and children's emergent literacy development. This indicates that preschool teachers' content knowledge plays a pivotal role in the development of children's emergent literacy skills. This finding is in line with Spear-Swerling and Brucker (2004) who revealed significant links between teacher knowledge and practices and most importantly, student reading achievement and they suggested that teachers need support to acquire the disciplinary knowledge required to assist children, even in the earliest stages of literacy acquisition as preschool teachers, content knowledge has been found as one of the basic factors that can help or hinder the development of basic literacy skills in children. This result may be explained in the sense that the curriculum of early childhood education in Nigeria may have impacted on the preschool teachers.

Hypothesis three examined relationship between preschool teachers' pedagogical skills and children's emergent literacy development in Ibadan metropolis. Thus, the relationship between the preschool teachers' use of appropriate instructional strategies and level of children's emergent literacy development was the focus. The finding revealed that there is no significant relationship between teachers' pedagogical skills and the level of children's

emergent literacy development. This finding indicated that preschool teacher's pedagogical skills did not influence the level of children's emergent literacy development as most preschool teachers use repetition and drill, read loud and after the teacher. Early literacy pedagogy is greatly related to how children acquire literacy and develop as readers and writers and it calls for developmentally appropriate practice in literacy instruction in preschools. This finding corroborates Amosun and Kolawole (2015) who asserted that the pedagogical skills of the preschool teachers were low. Moreover, Block, Oakar and Hurt (2002) who reported that highly effective kindergarten teachers believe that frequent repetition enhance background knowledge and have the talents to create inviting, print-rich classrooms. So, they spend more time in small-group teaching which includes teacher-directed text activity, and explicit teaching in phonics, comprehension and vocabulary. Nevertheless, Hall (2003) commented that outstanding literacy teachers do not adhere to one particular method of teaching. Instead, they build upon the variety of strategies the children acquired outside of school and are adept at seizing the 'teachable moment' (Block *et al.*, 2002).

Hypothesis four examined composite influence of teachers' awareness, content knowledge and pedagogical skills on children's emergent literacy skill development in Ibadan metropolis. The finding of this study reported a significant joint influence of teachers' awareness, knowledge and pedagogical skills on the level of children's emergent literacy skill development. The focus of hypothesis five was whether there is a significant relative influence of teachers' awareness, content knowledge and pedagogical skills on children's emergent literacy skill development. That is, is there a significant influence of each of the independent variables or not on the level of children's emergent literacy development? The finding revealed that only Teachers' content knowledge contributed significantly to children's emergent literacy out of the three independent variables. Though, teachers' content knowledge has the highest contribution followed by teachers' awareness and lastly teachers' pedagogical skills. The reason for the results may be that preschool teachers were well-equipped during their pre-service or orientation programme. The finding of this study negates the findings reported by Amosun and Kolawole (2015) which revealed a low display of pedagogical knowledge and skills by the preschool teachers.

Conclusion

The results of this study support previous evidence that preschool teachers' awareness, content knowledge, pedagogical skill play a pivotal role in the development of children's emergent literacy skills and academic achievement. The findings of this research study were unexpected as research has established that the major problem confronting the school system in Nigeria is its inability to help learners acquire functional and critical literacy skills. This has been blamed on the type and quality of teachers' literacy instructional practices in preschool and the type of training they undergo in various educational institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teacher training programme in Nigeria should be repositioned to make all preschool teachers professionally and academically competent to develop the emergent literacy skills of preschool children using research – proven best practices. Literacy

education should be offered as a specialist course that will certify trainees to teach reading and writing.

2. Preschool teachers need continuous and coherent professional development to keep their literacy instructional practices relevant and to develop new understandings, insights and skills in teaching. Preschool teachers should, therefore, ensure that they go on in-service programmes to update their knowledge and skills.
3. Teachers colleges should incorporate emergent literacy into preschool teachers' curriculum and in-service training in emergent literacy should be provided for serving preschool teachers by respective schools and colleges.
4. Preschool teachers should keep themselves abreast of best practices, policies, curriculum and frameworks on early literacy instruction by organising workshops and conferences for them.

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