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IMPROVING PUPILS' READING ABILITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE: HOW CAN SELF-ESTEEM HELP?

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Abstract

This paper discussed the essence of self-esteem on the reading ability of learners in primary schools, and ways by which self-esteem can influence pupils reading ability in English language. It highlighted the factors that could affect pupils' reading ability in English language and the possible ways by which learners reading ability in the subject can be improved upon. More so, the strategies by which pupils' self-esteem can be cultivated were discussed. The paper concluded that reading ability is a necessity for learners' enhanced performance in English language and other academic endeavours, and that pupils who have positive self-esteem are very likely to read well. In all, for a robust and sustained pupil positive self-esteem and reading ability, the paper suggested that teachers initiate varying and research proven teaching strategies in teaching reading skills to pupils, teach in simple and flexible vocabulary, read words and sentences during English language class with the accurate intonations and stress; amongst others.

Keywords: English Language; Pupils; Reading Ability; Self-esteem.

Introduction

English as a global language seems to be the major language of printed information. The English language is a sine qua non for human verbal communication and interaction. It is the tool individuals need for the accomplishment of their daily endeavours, and could be necessary for further learning and understanding of many other languages. The value of the English language cannot be overemphasized: it is useful in the entertainment world, for facilitating buying and selling (commerce), for international migration, educational import etc. an individual versatility in the language may be determined by the extent to which he or she can adequately write, speak and read the language.For

the learning of English language, it is necessary for pupils to be accustomed with the various English language skills, among which are listening, writing, reading, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling; amongst others. Pupils need the knowledge as well as proficiency in the language for their health, social and commercial wellbeing. As rightly hinted by Coleman (2012), English is the language of power and the elite.

Pupils at the basic level of education could be facing some challenges in the learning, understanding as well as the adoption of the English language. These challenges hinges on the limitations posed by their ages, homes and social orientations. As cited in Ismail, Syahruza and Basuki (2017), the foremost challenge pupils' encounter in the learning of the language is reading comprehension which is associated with pupils' cultural, textual and background knowledge. Pupils are to grasp the knowledge of the structure of a text, the background from which such text originates from and the cultural undertones surrounding it, for ease of reading. The second challenge is limited vocabulary in which pupils exhibit uneasiness with and in the use of English words. These vocabulary limitations may include vocabulary technicalities, homophones, synonyms and antonyms, idiomatic expressions, figures of speech, tenses appropriation and applications. The third challenge is very long and complex sentences. These aforementioned do affect pupils' ability in reading.

Reading is a tool of communication in written language through the texts form. It is a way by which information can be processed and understanding the meaning of printed words or written symbols, along with other experiences (Patel & Jain, 2008). It is an activity that entails comprehension as well as interpretation of ideas symbolized by written or printed text and is a stepping stone in the walk of knowledge (Iqbal, Noor, Muhabat, Kazemian, 2015). At the school level, it is a required skill appropriated in the comprehension of textbooks, passages and reference materials that are printed in English language. In line with the existing school curriculum, for pupils to learn the language, they are expected to imbibe both the receptive (listening and reading) and the productive (speaking and writing) skills (Ismail et al, 2017). Reading as a skill could incorporate skimming, scanning, reading for general idea/understanding, reading to learn, reading for critical evaluation and reading to integrate information (Carrell &Grabe, 2010).

The purposes of reading as cited in Ismail et al. (2017) are: to gather information about a topic; get direction on how to tackle a particular task; for obtaining knowledge on how to play games/puzzle; for building relationships among friends and business concerns, and for pleasure. Similarly, Harris, Graham and Boardman (2007) revealed the strategies and skills that good readers should possess. They are: speedy and correct word reading; noting the structure and organization of a text; setting goals for reading; creating mental notes and summaries; monitoring their understanding of a text while reading; predicting, revising and evaluating text structure/topic; understanding the text/topic and integrating such for the furtherance of new learning; drawing inferences and using mental images such as visualization in recalling or understanding events or characters.

As defined by Richards and Schmidt (2002), reading ability entails skillful reading like discerning main ideas, noticing specific details, understanding sequences, making inferences, making comparisons, and making predictions in second and foreign language instructions. It is an active process by which a reader can create meaning from what is being read and a way of negotiating such meaning in written or visual forms (Strickland, Galda& Cullinan, 2007; Brown 2000; Mareilon, 2007). The reading skill is paramount for the overall enhanced success of pupils even in other subjects. This is the reason why the skill should be strengthened among learners. Mickulecky and Jeffries (2004) restated the essence of pupils' ability in reading English language to include but not limited to: empowering learners' thinking ability; enlarging pupils vocabulary; improving pupils writing, speaking and listening skills; providing avenues for pupils to obtain new and valuable facts, ideas and experiences.

The reading ability of learners can be a direct indication of their level of self-esteem, as they both go hand in hand (Sweet & Burbach, 2011; Hisken, 2011). Self-esteem is an individual's subjective evaluation of his or her worth as a person (Orth & Robins, 2014). It is also the complication of feelings about ourselves that guides our behavior, influences our attitudes, and drives our motivation; with confidence and self-worth as its major components (Dedmond, 2009). In the educational setting, pupils' self-esteem could mean pupils' believe about teachers, peers, school environment and learning. It can also be regarded as the extent to which pupils' feel respected, loved, valued, appreciated and understood. For a robust teaching and learning to be achieved, the

levels of self-esteem of learners should be reinforced on a continuous basis as it could dampen with time, learning cycles and other factors arising from parents, peers, teachers, the society, religious beliefs, culture/traditions or the school/educational structure and systems in place.

Self-esteem affects nearly every aspect of pupils' lives. Class teachers at the school level are to monitor and continually monitor pupils with respect to their self-esteem. Learners with positive self-esteem are likely to achieve better in their learning outcomes and classroom teaching-learning interactions. These learners are also more motivated to learn and attain set goals, possess strong social skills and ability to nurture helpful and lasting relationships (Watson, 2020). Dweck (2016) posited that one of the ways teachers and parents are to maintain positive self-esteem is to give productive, soft-critical feedback to pupils; as feedback plays a pivotal role in the development or otherwise of learners' self-esteem. She argued that feedback from both teachers and parents should be goal-oriented rather than person-oriented; since the former instills in pupils a belief that they can grow, improve and develop.

Pupils can continue to maintain a positive self-esteem is when they can read with ease; as ability to read do confer boldness, confidence and self-reliability on learners. When pupils feel the lack the ability to read, the problem of low self-esteem emerge. The ability or inability of pupils to read could in a long way affect their academic learning outcomes. Reading failure has been associated with poor academic performance among learners (Challen, King, Knapp, & McNally, 2008). To address the early onset of reading failures, pupils' reading challenges need to be addressed along with the factors necessitating it. Hisken (2011) examined the correlation between learners' self-esteem, reading ability and level, and academic achievement and asserted that there exist a positive relationship between self-esteem and reading ability, reading level, and academic achievement and concluded that learners' levels of self-esteem positively impacted on their reading success and academic pursuits.

In order to foster a positive high self-esteem in pupils; teachers, parents and education stakeholders should accept learners for who they are; teach pupils on how to develop a sense of responsibility and ownership; help pupils establish self-discipline; promote pupils' self-advocacy skills; always give positive and timely encouragement and feedback; teach pupils on how to cope and live with mistakes and failure; be friendly and open to pupils; make

teaching and learning interactive. Zarei, Shokrpour and Nasiri (2012) restated the need for teachers and education stakeholders undertake measures aimed at enhancing the pupils' educational self esteem by improving the quality of education, using learning methods skillfully, avoiding comparing learners against themselves and avoiding giving negative feedbacks to them and their parents.Therefore, this paper highlights the factors affecting the reading ability of learners, the connection between reading ability and self-esteem as well as ways by which learners' reading ability in English language can be improved.

Factors that Affect Pupils Reading Ability

1. The text font size: the font size of the text can impede pupils' ability in reading. The English text should have a moderate and appreciation font size that will appeal to learners' interest to read.
2. The context: the context on which the text is premised can affect reading ability.
3. The reader: the reader's mind set towards the language or the subject, as well as personality is a factor that can affect reading ability.
4. Vocabulary: the vocabulary used in a text especially for the basic level is expected to be simple, familiar and applicable to pupils in their day to day interactions. Usually, pupils with reading ability have limited vocabulary (Biemiller&Boote, 2006).
5. Word recognition and comprehension does affect pupils' reading speed and ability.
6. Pupils' family background can affect their reading ability. Pupils from families with educated members are likely to have better reading ability than their counterpart.
7. Reading Strategy: for pupils to have a good ability in reading, they are to know the different strategies for reading (Baker & Beall, 2009; Pressley, 2006).
8. Pupils' reading motivation: the motivation levels of learners towards reading are a deciding factor of their reading ability (Unrau&Schlackman, 2006).
9. Pupils' reading attitude: attitude towards reading is a contributing factor to pupils' decision to read as well as their ability to read (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014).
10. Pupils reading anxiety:

How to Improve Pupils' Reading Ability in English Language

Improving learners' ability in reading requires a holistic approach; some of which are:

1. Explain and highlight text: teachers should teach learners on the need to highlight and underline valuable information as they come across word while reading.
2. Personalize the content: pupils are to be enlightened on how they could personalize particular text content while reading.
3. Teaching the problem-solving strategies in reading as a skill for strengthening reading ability.
4. Teach pupils ways of recognizing themes in a sentence or paragraph while reading.
5. Teaching pupils the need for setting reading goals.
6. Teaching pupils the art of reading in bits; as this makes reading interesting and easy for them.
7. Teaching pupils how they should guide their reading.
8. Teaching pupils to trust themselves and their ability.

How to build Pupils' Self-esteem

1. Focusing on the positive characteristics of pupils: teachers and parents should always praise pupils even in their weaknesses and shortcomings as negative comment or reprimand would lead to self-defeat and low self-esteem.
2. Constructive criticism: pupils should be positively criticized in order to maintain their self-image. This goes a long way to make them feel appreciated, valued, accepted, and loved.
3. Encouragement: Pupils should be encouraged to find or do the things they like about themselves. Regular encouragement of pupils is tantamount to their academic successes.
4. Set realistic expectations: teachers and parents should set goals and expectations that are within the reach if the learners. They should be allowed to pursue their dreams, goals and expectations in their own way and pace.
5. Learning from mistakes: parents and teachers should teach pupils both at home and at the school that mistakes are part and parcel of life. This will enshrine the right perspective of life in line with failures, successes as well as making mistakes bare before learners.

Conclusion

Reading ability is a necessity for learners' enhanced performance in English language and other academic endeavours. Pupils who have positive self-esteem are very likely to read well. Many factors do hamper pupils reading ability and self-esteem, and these should

be addressed as early as possible by education stakeholders. The various workable strategies by which the reading ability of learners and their self-esteem can be improved should be of great concern to parents and teachers.

As such, this paper proffers the following suggestions:

1. Teachers should initiate varying and research proven teaching strategies in teaching reading skills to pupils for them to be better in their reading ability.
2. Teachers should also teach in simple and flexible vocabulary and ensure that an interactive is maintained and sustained.
3. Teachers should read words and sentences during English language class with the accurate intonations and stress
4. After every English classroom interaction, teachers should endeavour to give pupils a take home assignment/homework on reading, especially in the area of comprehension passages.
5. Teachers and parents should instill good reading and study habits to learners both at school and home.
6. Teachers and parents should also instill the right, positive self-esteem on pupils; while providing a favourable environment for its growth and development.

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