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Developing Literacy Skills in Primary Schools through Theater-in- Education

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Abstract

This paper investigated the effects of using theatre in teaching story reading in seven government primary schools within Awka town in Anambra State, Nigeria. The study was guided by one research question and one hypothesis. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 168 pupils from primary 3 classes (24 pupils from each of the seven schools). The population is divided into two to form the control group and the experimental group. Both groups were exposed to pre-test to ascertain their homogeneity level prior to teaching. A 12 item literacy performance test was the instrument used for data collection. Pre-test was administered to both groups before treatment. The experimental group was exposed to story reading lesson using theatrical activities while the control group was taught the same lesson using oral reading and explanation. Both groups were post tested after 4 weeks of teaching. The result revealed that the experimental group performed better than the control group. It was therefore recommended that the use of theatre should be encouraged in teaching story reading in primary schools because it is a vital tool for building literacy skills.

Key Words: Literacy, Theater, Education, Theatre-in-education Introduction

In recent years, the school system has witnessed an increase in the enrolment of "under aged" learners as a result of the increased number of working mothers. In addition to this, the introduction of the compulsory basic education in the school system has also flooded the school system with all manner of learners, some of whom are in the system simply because it is free and compulsory. These developments and many more call for urgent need for more creative, interest-sustaining and life centered approach to learning. It therefore becomes imperative that cultivation of full personality through the process of discovering and fostering the natural talent in pupils is made less stressful and more interesting. This objective can only be achieved through the application of the gained knowledge and development of interest in the pupils. Therefore, learning needs to be effected through concrete, direct and fun-filled experience.

In the light of the above need, some concerned authorities have taken the pains to investigate the use of the various senses in the learning process. Many scholars such as Gardner (1999), Griggs (2001), and Obadiogwu (2019) uphold the theory of learning by experience which applies very obviously when working with infants. By this they uphold the old Chinese platitude which goes thus:

I hear: I forget I

I see: I remember

I do: I understand

This implies that what we hear is what we easily forget. There is however a chance for one to remember what he saw but forgetting some details, while what one actually participated in is what one is likely to remember and internalize. Participation therefore is very important in building literacy skills in children. In handling learners of primary school age, the use of oral instruction alone may not provide all the necessary learning experience. This is because, learners within this age range are prone to distractions and are easily bored, thus necessitating a more creative and attention sustaining techniques in their learning process. A close observation of pupils within the primary school age also revealed that pretending to be is part of their life development. They are always seen playing pretend roles, imitating the actions and speeches of adults around them. They observe activities and pretend to be or to do what they observed especially when they are encouraged with enough information and motivation that will help them play the role.

This paper is anchored on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence. This theory suggests that the school system teaches, tests, reinforces and rewards primarily two kinds of intelligence, verbal and logical. Gardner (1999) is of the view that learners learn in many different ways. They have different intelligences that reflect how they learn and what interests them. Thus if teachers teach the pupils bearing in mind that there are other intelligences besides verbal and logical, pupils will have better chance of learning.

In view of this, this paper sets out to investigate the use of Theatre-in-Education (TIE) in building literacy skills in primary schools. The fundamental submission of the paper being that Theater-in Education is very helpful in inculcation of literacy skills in pupils within the primary school age.

Theatre-in-Education (TIE) is an extension of children's play and combination of theatricalities and classroom techniques. It is concerned with the dramatic activities used in the transmission of knowledge especially to young people using drama/theatre. Roger (2016) defines it as a teaching tool that allows students to participate, demonstrate and observe in a 'controlled' or non-threatening environment. For Robson (2018), theatre in education is a process that uses

interactive theatre/drama to aid the education system. It is about educating young children using theatre. Other variations include creative dramatics or drama in education. Anderson (2009) defines it as the use of drama techniques to support learning in the classroom. Erikson (2009, p.33) sees it as the "deliberate application of dramatic means of expression and forms in education to facilitate aesthetic experiences, knowledge and formation". Isyar and Kay (2017, p.14) state that TIE is a teaching technique "where young people are engaged at a personal emotional level and yet protected into that participation by a theatrical construct.....It is an approach that uses skills of actors/ teachers (trained in both disciplines) in structured projects with young people that enable non- judgmental critical thinking" According to Obadiogwu (2019, p.31), "it incorporates democratic shared control, mutuality of participation, dialectic generation of knowledge and egalitarian communication". Theatre- in Education thus encourages knowing through doing and creating, with children learning to express ideas and emotions- through voice, movement, actions and different expressive forms. It breaks the age long tradition of verbal explanation which most often leaves the learners more confused by allowing the learners to participate more actively in the learning process. TIE is therefore not just drama performance in school. It is a carefully coordinated classroom activity usually structured around a topic of relevance both in the curriculum and the learners' developmental needs. Its' ideal lies on the use of drama and other theatrical performances to teach children in school which help them in improving interpersonal relationship and skills. It also aids the learners' attitude towards school and the way they perceive themselves and the learning environment.

Although literacy has been thought of as the ability to read and write, researchers have come to realize that literacy in the present dispensation has gone beyond this. Odiaka (2016) collaborates this by stating that literacy is no longer viewed as mere ability to read, write and calculate. It is rather expected to make individuals possess that critical thinking that can enable them solve health, political, economic and domestic issues.

According to Onukogu, Abiodun-Ekus and Enemoh (2012), literacy is that outstanding empowerment that enables humans to beautify their thoughts in such a way that common place events take a new dimension when they are beautified through the written medium. Ijiga (2013) quoted in Fasae (2016) observes that literacy is but not restricted to simple reading of words or a set of associated symbols and signs but an act of critical understanding of the situation of the world. Thus Fasae (2016) defines it as a means of learning skills that serves as stimulus for acquisition of education. Eze (2016) contends that the primary sense of literacy still represents the lifelong, intellectual process of gaining meaning from a critical interpretation of the written text. It encompasses all complex set of abilities to understand and use the dominant symbol system of a culture for personal and community development. Literacy is the ability of an individual to understand and master his immediate environment

One of the basic aims of literacy is to expose the child through the processes of discovery and fostering of natural talents. Efficient utilisation of drama in teaching aids the pupils' participation and enables them direct their observation. Theatre in- Education offers the learner the opportunity to make use of all the various types of intelligences, necessary for literacy acquisition. Thus Obadiogwu (2019, p.7) maintains that "drama techniques help the child to explore the potentials of his own resources and make him to be aware of expressive resources at his disposal"

Kwasnica (2006) adds that drama (theatre) accommodates the various learning styles of the students and allows them to develop, refine and weave new ways of learning into their everyday lives. Theatre in -Education also helps the pupil to develop language skills by talking, listening, reading and writing. It is also beneficial in building self-confidence and self-awareness. This is because the pupils are given opportunities of being active learners through discovering ways of solving problems using theatre activities. In addition to the above, by reaching out to others, during theatre activities, children develop speaking skills. This is achieved through their conscious effort to communicate with others within and outside the cast. Robson (2018) observes that by using drama as a learning tool, young people can add purpose and value to their creativity and find their own unique ways to discover things themselves. The author adds that working in this way ultimately improves self- esteem, motivation and achievement.

In theatre- in- Education, particular emphasis is laid on improvised drama activities as opposed to acting of scripted play. Improvisation gives the child a feeling of importance because he feels that he is in-charge. In an effort to impress and demonstrate his importance to his mates and teachers, he will try as much as possible to use correct grammar. Because TIE offers the learners the opportunity "to play improvised roles within an imagined context, there is no sharp distinction between actors and audience" (Agofure, 2013, p.240).

Theatre in Education enables children to learn through play. It helps them to exercise-their brains and muscles and at the same time learn and even enjoy and entertain themselves. Observations have revealed that when children work together in a drama class, they are more likely to use their own imaginations and various individual skills. This helps in the development of their critical thinking.

The improvised nature of TIE offers learners the opportunity to develop their own lines, thus improving their language skills. TIE stimulates creative response, provides interesting approaches to topics there by providing happy learning. It also enables nonreaders to participate verbally and none verbally. Those with speech problems can be given nonverbal roles like jumping, clapping, waving, wagging of tails etc. Analyzing the educational philosophy of Fafunwa, Idowu and Alao (1994) state that the lessons in African music, dancing and role playing among others should be included in the school curriculum because with such lessons coupled with intelligent guidance, the child could create something that is new and different. In this regard, Delvin (2013) maintains that by including different forms of activities especially drama- based activities, in the classroom, teachers can reach out to struggling readers, resistant readers or even bored students who are tired of sitting still in the class.

Theatre in Education generally transfers to the classroom those activities like singing, dancing and role playing which are natural instincts to the pupils. The multiplicity of roles available in Theatre enables all the learners to participate meaningfully in the classroom activities. This is because it is easy to relate to a concept presented in action than a concept described verbally. According to Moor (2004), drama gives educators the opportunity to teach their students in a way which would create a love for learning. In addition to these, observations teachers who use Theatre/ Drama as a medium for instruction increase interactions and encourage friendship between students especially those with special needs. Thus, Mirrione (2011) states that TIE engages and educates students by presenting dramatic materials that directly relate to their concerns and need.

There are no specific patterns or models for using theatre in the classroom. However, it will not be out of context to enumerate some useful tips that could be helpful in using theatre in the classroom.

- It could be done in small groups or whole groups.
- The pupils could be asked to write out their own role in an improvised story.

- They can also improvise the costumes and props from available materials in the immediate environment.
- In word study class, words can be dramatized. Pupils can form words with their bodies, make letters with their fingers. Word and story substitution can be acted out in front of the class with a child representing a letter or a word.
- Word meanings can be acted out e.g. eat; run, jump, slow, etc.
- Other subjects and topics can be taught by building stories around the topic. The stories can be acted out for or by the pupils.
- Story reading/telling classes can be brought to life in the class using theatre; roles can be assigned to the pupils to be acted in the class.

Observations have shown that children who reenact stories are better at connecting and integrating events in the story than children in an oral story reading group. According to Salaami (2000), children unconsciously get easily involved in theatrical activities and this offers their developing minds genuine excitement. Obadiogwu (2019) adds that the use of drama in the classroom is in accordance with the modern philosophy of education which states that we learn better by doing.

It is in line with the foregoing that the study is designed to investigate the use of Theatre in developing literacy skills among primary school pupils in Awka town. To achieve this objective, the following research question and hypothesis guided the study:

What is the effect of using theatre in developing literacy skills among primary school pupils?

There is no significant difference in the performance of pupils taught story reading using theatre and those taught without Theatre/Drama.

Methodology

The study was carried out using seven randomly selected government primary schools in Awka. A total of 168 pupils were purposively selected from primary 3 classes located in seven schools. In each of the schools, 24 pupils were used. In each school; the pupils were divided into two groups to form the control group and the experimental group.

A pre-test/post-test experimental method was used. The pre- test was administered to the two groups before commencement of treatment to ascertain the homogeneity of the two groups. The equivalence of the two groups were determined and tabulated.

The instrument used for the study is story reading comprehension test. Pupils were pretested using story reading comprehension test based on the story, *Sunshine the Miracle Child*. Pupils were given 12 questions made up of five fill in the blanks, five multi choice questions and two open ended questions.

The experimental group was allowed to dramatize chapters one, two and three of the story as they read it. They improvised their stage, costume and props from available materials within their various schools' environment. The control group was taught using oral reading and explanation method. The treatment lasted for 50 minutes per day, 4 days within 4 weeks interval. At the end of the treatment, posttest was administered to all the groups.

Result

The findings of the study are presented in the tables below.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviations of Pre- Test/Post Test scores of students in the experimental and control group.

Group	N	Mean Pre-Test	Post-Test	Standard Pre-Test	Deviation Post-Test
Experimental	84	14.	68	10	13
Control	84	16.	56	9.2.	16

Table 1 reveals that the performance of the pupils in the pre-test of both groups shows no significant difference while there is significant difference in the achievement scores of the experimental group in the post-test. This indicates that using theatre in developing literacy skills is effective.

Table 2: Two tailed test (t-test) of the difference in scores of the two groups in the learning gained.

Group	N	X	SD	a	df	t-cal	t-crit
Experimental	84	56.	13	0.05	116	7.3	1.9
Control	84	40	16	0.05	116	7.3	1.9

From Table 2, the calculated t value is 7.3 while t - critical value is 1.9. The t -cal is greater than the t -crit. This shows a significant difference. Therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a significant difference between the achievement scores of pupils taught using drama and pupils taught without drama.

Discussion of Findings

The result of the data analysis in Table 1 reveals that the experimental group performed better than the control group. The mean the post-test scores of the pupils in the experimental group were higher than those of the control group. This shows that there is significant difference between the achievement scores of pupils taught using theatre-in-education

The statistical analysis in Table 2 showed that t_{cal} (7.3) is greater than t_{crit} (1.9) at 0.05 level of significant. This corresponds with Mirrione's (2011) observation, that theater in education engages students by presenting dramatic materials that directly relate to their concerns and need. When a learner is given the opportunity to identify his needs, he will then be in a better position to work on it. Furthermore, this study also revealed that dramatising a story gives the pupils a better opportunity to remember. Dramatizing a lesson for young learners helps in Sustaining their attention which aids their retentive memory.

Psychologists such as Robert (1990) believe that once a story has been developed and acted out by the entire class or small groups, the experience can be used to transfer the ideas to paper as appropriate for each individual's literacy development. Thus the author further states that visualizing can help in the expression of information and ideals. Memory is considerably aided by dramatic play. This is because, as Obadiegwu (2019) puts it, participatory dramatic activities in the classroom give power and voice to the children and allows them the opportunities to contribute to the learning activities. It also aids the process of repetition and facilitates the recall of images.

Theatre-in-education makes use of several skills that involve critical thinking in developing literacy skills, Theatre-in-education increases the rate of learning and encourages learners' involvement in teaching and learning process, thereby making teaching and learning real and immediate.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Using Theatre in Education to develop literacy skills aims at promoting communication skills, teamwork, dialogue and socialisation in children. In addition to these, it stimulates imagination and creativity. It also allows the individual learners to understand themselves and co-learners within the classroom environment. Theatre activities are crucial to early literacy development because it allows children to see literacy as a holistic and meaningful fun-filled process which develops language, through speaking, listening, reading and writing.

This paper thus recommends that:

Teachers should be encouraged to use theatre in teaching their pupils.

Government and school Management should provide basic props and costumes for dramatic activities to motivate teachers to make use of theater in teaching.

Curriculum planners should include theater-in-education as general studies course in colleges of education and other teacher training institutions so as to equip teachers with skill of using drama as instructional strategy.

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