Book Development for Effective Literacy Acquisition at Early Childhood Period

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to evaluate some of the books which under-five children (0 -5 years old) in Nigeria are exposed to with the view to improving literacy level of children from early years through reading. Literacy is concomitant with human development, influencing every aspect of life. It should therefore be given adequate attention starting from the early years of children before it becomes difficult to inculcate. Books as a leverage to literacy development should therefore possess certain qualities to bring about the desired end (functional literacy) in children. The findings revealed that foreign-based books are the prominent ones available for children, which invariably reflected in the presentation of some concepts that are not familiar or that are culturally irrelevant to children's environment. It is also showed that some genres (drama) are non-existent. Recommendations were given towards what will aid the development of functional literacy in children early in life through what may be regarded as good books.

Keywords: Book development, literacy acquisition, early childhood

1. Introduction

Literacy, no doubts as expressed by experts, is a basic necessity of life as well as a survival kit (Okediran 1999). Just as food is to the proper growth and development of man so is literacy. It aids in the development of man's mind and body. Man is able to know his rights, liberate himself from the hands of those who could prey on him only when he is literate. More often than not, he is able to develop the right self-concept, self-esteem and a high potential for creativity if he is literate. In other words, to be functional to self as well as to the society where one may be, to be literate would then be unequivocally pertinent. Therefore, to place emphasis on the acquisition of literacy is not an overstatement neither is it an over flogged issue because high percentage of the populace in the developing countries are still illiterate. In fact, the nine most populous developing countries known as E9 (with Nigeria as one) are said to contribute about 70% to the population of illiterates worldwide. As a result, the Nigerian government in collaboration with agencies like Nigerian National Council for Adult Education (NNCAE) and World Bank are working assiduously to tackle the menace of illiteracy in the country; mounting mass literacy campaign and programmes for young people and adult who missed formal education. As good as the government effort in promoting adult literacy education is, it would be more expedient if attention is given to literacy development early enough rather than spending huge amount of money on remedial programmes. Be that as it may, the literacy skill with its major strength in reading, writing and numeracy needs to be taken serious from the early years of children most especially now that emphasis is on early childhood care and education (ECCE) in the global goals of Education for All (EFA –Goal No 1). Without proper literacy skill development, the foundation for prospective academic or school success and life-long learning may be on shaky ground (Shabi, Omoba & Oyedapo 2010). Besides, educational system would only be breeding non-functional product that would become liability to the society, therefore, whatever areas that would aid in the adequate acquisition of laudable skills of literacy ought to be maximally explored. One of such vital areas is that of book development that this current research is based on.

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Books are inevitable and inseparable from the development and promotion of literacy skill. They are sources of information and knowledge needed for living. To expatiate further on the importance of books, the primitive persons stated that a book has the power to predict the future, reveal the hidden, a guide and a counselor as well as a living being that can speak. To crown it all, book is said to be mystical (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2004) which may be explained in line with Dallmann, Rouch, Char & DeBoer (1978) that:

> 'if all things in the world were destroyed
> and man is left with nothing but books,
> man would still find his path out of the thickest
> darkness of ignorance…'

This simply implies that man can completely liberate himself from the bond of ignorance if only he is able to get hooked with books. To this end, if permanent literacy is to be inculcated in children right from early childhood period as stated in the Nigeria National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria,2004), exposing children to high quality books would be a way in a good direction to place children on that path of literacy. Nwagbara (2003) pointed out that the amount of knowledge a child acquires from well-written books cannot be quantified therefore, books as much as possible should be part of his/her learning process as learning to read begins with learning to see and listen (Stockar, 2006). That is the reason Wilson (2008) advocates a "litter environment" which simply means classroom environment that is full of print. Angie-Dorrel (2006) also states that the selection of high quality children books is a very important part of literacy process. It is therefore worthwhile to examine those books that could be regarded as of high quality or standard that would help to set children, especially under-five, on the pedestal of literacy. Such books ought to satisfy basic human needs, (that is, physical, intellectual, language, emotional, social, creativity and moral needs) and should also be in conformity with the developmental stages of the children.

For books to satisfy the emotional and social development of children, they ought to encourage a sense of security, self- esteem, respect, loyalty, control fear, independence, encourage group membership in children and should be humorous. These virtues should be reflected in the content, illustrations and pictures in the books as all these would have influence on the tender mind of children. For intellectual as well as language needs of children, books should present accurate information about people, objects and events in the environment. This is needful because children could not yet perceive things or concepts the way adult would, hence information should be as much as possible be accurate. It must be emphasized in line with Maria Montessori's theory of 'absorbent mind' that if information is wrongly presented, children would absorb hook, line and sinker which may thereby be difficult to erase from their mind (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2011).The language should be appropriately simple and should be connected with the children's spoken language. Furthermore, the books that would appeal to the aesthetic taste of children should be pictorial in nature to attract and sustain children's attention. The pictures should be clear and accurate, giving the children opportunity to bring up their own stories in their little way (Dare 1980, Aiyedun 1991 Ihebuzor 1995 Nwagbara 1997, Nwagbara 2003,; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2011). Lowry (2011) also indicates some indicators of quality books for children under-five years of age as colourful and with realistic photos. To meet the physical needs, children's books should be strong, handy and very easy for the children to peruse without thinning out.

To further promote literacy skills in Under-five children, the developmental stages of children need to be reckoned with in book development. This is because each developmental stage of development has its own characteristics and bearing these in mind during writing and production of books for children will enhance appropriateness of books for children. Experts have emphasized that, it is not 'too soon' to expose children to books but that to delay till children are ready for formal education may be too disastrous for literacy development (Fayose 2000; IRA/NAEYC 1998, Nwagbara 2003, Eugie,2006). This would therefore debunk the notion that very young children can not be exposed to reading. To expose children to literacy material early does not mean teaching of reading to younger children in form of formal instruction. This is developmentally inappropriate but rather giving them wide opportunity to interact with books(Zero to Three, 2008). So, to expose babies to books is not bizarre. Hence to develop books for babies (0-1 year) who, according to Sigmund Freud, are at their Oral Stage of development, the general characteristics of babies as exploring the world around them through the mouth and hand ought to be put into consideration.

Zero to Three (2008) identifies a strong connection between an infant mouthing a book and the book handling behaviour of a two year old, thereby establishing early literacy development as a dynamic developmental process. Books for such age need to be sturdy, durable and probably made of washable materials. Children between ages 1-2 learn by handling and exploring the world around them, therefore good books ought to be readily available for them to interact with, books that these children should be exposed to ought to have bright colours, pictorial, be a repetitive text, and they should not be wordy or lengthy. It may be wordless and should focus on familiar things (that is, it must be culturally relevant to the child). The pre-schoolers (2-5years) are at the pre-operational stage of development. They have started to develop thought process, they start using symbols in play and they like to see, feel to learn and ask a lot of questions. They are also excited to learn about the world outside their home, school or environment at this stage. Hence, books to be presented could be slightly complex with more in-depth characters. The essence is to develop the reasoning capability of children. Such books should be rhythmical, repetitive, the stories with a sequence would help children predict and play with words. They can be exposed to folktales, fact-filled non-fiction books and books based on topics that could interest them (Angie-Dorrell 2006).

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks on which this study is premised are the social learning theory of Albert Bandura. Social learning theory explains how individuals learn from watching the behaviour and subsequent consequences of those around them who have similar characteristics such as age, gender and overall appearance and modeling the behaviour. This type of learning is called observational learning which may come through three basic models as identified by Bandura namely, a live model wherein an actual person performs behaviour, a verbal instruction model which involves telling or giving descriptions of behaviour and a symbolic model which includes books and other media resources. These are said to arrest attention which then enhance memory and motivation. Lowry (2011), placed premium on books over and above other media resources such as electronic book making reference to the study of de Jong and Bus (2002) who compared 4-6 year old children's learning from a paper and an electronic version of the same book. The finding showed that children who were exposed to paper book were more concentrated and less distracted than the other group of children. They also made better gains than those exposed to electronic book. Books with high quality afford children the opportunity to immensely interact with full attention and eliminating distraction. It is further emphasized that the more interesting the model (books) is, the more likely the attention is gained and learning is ascertained (Sincero, 2011). With this backdrop, this study embarked upon evaluating some existing story books for the Under-five to ascertain whether they possess the identified qualities that will make them suitable for the target audience as well as the readily availability of the books for the target audience (0 – 5 years).

3. Present Study

Most studies found on children's literature in Nigeria focused on the importance of books in the development of reading culture(Saka, Bitagi, & Garba, 2012; Oyemike, 2012) or highlighting the characteristics that children's books should possess (Obi, 2010) but none was found evaluating the existing children's book to see whether they could promote literacy or reading culture. In an attempt to fill this gap, this study is embarked upon. To evaluate the existent children's books, answers were sought to the following research questions.

1. What is the distribution of Under-five books in form of;
    a. Type
    b. Genre
    c. Shape
    d. Weight
    e. Sentence structure
    f. Paper used
    g. Classification
2. To what extent do available Under-five books meet up with the physical requirements of a good book?
3. To what extent does the content structure of the books applicable to Under-five?
4. To what extent do the books satisfy the basic needs of the Under-five?

4. Method

The study used survey design. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select books prepared mainly for under-five children. Two hundred of such categories were selected.

The instrument for the evaluation of the books for the Under-five was tagged "Book Evaluation Scale (BES) adapted from Sybil James (1980) instrument tagged, 'Guidelines for Evaluating Books for Classroom Use (GEBCU)'. The instrument has three sections. Section A dealt with the general characteristics of books, such as type, genres, nature, shape, size, weight etc. Section B has two parts that considered properties of the books in terms of physical and content. It was based on three-point scales from good to poor. Section C was to examine the extent to which the books satisfy the basic needs of the children. It has six parts and based on three-point scale of fully available to not at all. The instrument was re-validated because the original 'r'(correlation coefficient) could not be traced. Experts in Language Arts & Communication were consulted to review the content while a statistician examined the statistical aspect of the instrument. It was then subjected to trial-testing on materials outside the scope of this study. Reliability was therefore ascertained using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and 0.83 was attained. The data collected were subjected to frequency distribution of percentages.

5. Results

5.1: **Research Question 1**: What is the distribution of Under-five books in form of; Type, Genre, Shape, Weight, Sentence Structure, Paper used, Classification ?

This research question is answered and results presented in Tables 1 -

Table 1a: Frequency Distribution of under-five books by Type

Type	N	%
Fiction	120	60
Non-fiction	80	40
Total	**200**	**100**

Table 1 reveals that out of the under-five books evaluated, 120 (60%) of them are fiction while 80 (40%) are non-fiction.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Under-five books by Genre

Genre	N	%
Drama	-	-
Prose	162	81
Poetry	38	19
Total	**200**	**100**

Table 2 shows that books on drama as a genre for Under-five are not available at least among the evaluated books so far. 162 (81%) of those evaluated are prose and 38 (19%) are poetry.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Under-five books by Shape

Shape	N	%
Rectangular	178	89
Square	20	10
Oval	2	1
Circle	-	-
Triangle	-	-
Others	-	-
Total	**200**	**100**

From table 3, 178 (89%) of the Under-five books are in rectangular shape, 20 (10%) are in square while 2 (1%) are in oval shape, other shapes are not available.

Table 4: Frequency Distribution by Weight

Weight	N	%
Heavy	-	-
Handy	200	100
Total	**200**	**100**

Table 4 reveals that all the books for Under-five evaluated are handy and none is discovered to be heavy for subjects to handle.

Table 5: Frequency Distribution by Sentence Structure

Sentence structure	N	%
Short	119	59.5
Long	81	40.5
Total	**200**	**100**

From table 5, 119 (59.5%) of the books for the Under-five are written in short sentences while 81 (40.5%) have long sentences.

Table 6: Frequency Distribution by Paper Used

Paper used	N	%
Thin	8	4
Newsprint	11	5.5
Standard	181	90.5
Total	**200**	**100**

Table 6 shows that larger percentage 90.5% of the paper used for Under-five books are standard, 11 (5.5%) are newsprint while 8 (4%) thin paper is used.

Table 7: Frequency Distribution by Classification

Classification	N	%
Foreign	139	69.5
Home-based	57	38.5
African	4	2
Total	**200**	**100**

Table 7 indicates that 139 (69.5%) of the books available for Under-five are foreign-based, 57 (28.3%) are home-based while 4 (2%) are from other African countries.

5.2: Research Question Two: To what extent do the Under-five books meet up with the physical requirement of a good book?

Table 8: Frequency Distribution by Physical Requirement

Physical properties	Good	%	Fair	%	Poor	%
Cover	162	81	38	19	-	-
Pages	146	78	54	22	-	-
Binding	139	69.5	48	24	13	6.5
Typeface	194	97	6	3	-	-
Spacing	146	73	54	27	-	-
Picture	169	84.5	21	10.5	10	5
Colourful	164	82	30	15	6	3
Illustration	167	83.5	30	15	3	1.5

Table 8 shows that 162 (81%) of the Under-five books' cover are good while 38 (19%) are fair. For the pages of the books examined, 146 (78%) are suitable for the children within this age range, while 53 (22%) are manageable.

The binding for the books examined, 139 (69.5%) are in order for Under-five children, 48 (24%) are just fair, while 13 (6.5%) are not suitable at all for children in this age bracket. On the typeface of the books 194 (97%) are adequate while 6 (3%) are fair. 146 (73%) of the spacing given to the assessed Under-five books suit the age they are meant for, while 54 (27%) of these books are not very suitable. For pictures, 169 (84.5%) of the books have good pictures, 21 (10.5%) of the books are not good enough while 10 (5%) are poor for the level of the children meant for. 164 (82%) of the books are colourful, 30 (15%) are just fair while 6 (3%) are not suitable at all. For illustration, 167 (83.5%) of the books are very adequate, 30 (15%) are rated fair while 3 (1.5%) are nothing to write home about.

5.3: Research Question Three: To what extent does the content structure of the books apply to Under-five?

Table 9: Frequency Distribution by Content

	Good	%	Fair	%	Poor	
Simplified Vocabulary	180	90	20	10	-	
Repetitive	132	66	68	34	-	
Rhythmic	130	65	70	35	-	
Familiar Concepts	130	65	70	35	-	
Cultural Relevance	110	55	90	45	-	

Table 9 indicates that vocabulary state of 90% (180) of the assessed books is simple enough for the Under-five children while 20 (10%) are a little bit difficult for the age range. 132 (66%) of the books are good in repetitive words which may easily aid children's acquisition of vocabulary, 68 (34%) of the books are not good enough, 130 (65%) of the books are well rhythmical to rouse children's interest while 70 (35%) are just fair. 130(65%) of the assessed books treated familiar concepts. 110 (55%) of the books treated ideas that are relevant to the children's culture while 90   (45%) fairly treated the ideas.

5.4: Research Question Four: To what extent do the books satisfy the basic needs of the under- five?

Table 10: Distribution of Books by Developmental needs of Children (SPICE-M)

Developmental Needs(SPICE-M)	F	%	P	%	N	%
Social	178	89.0	22	11.0	-	-
Physical	200	100	-		-	-
Intellectual/Language	194	97.0	6	3.0	-	-
Creativity	182	91.0	18	9.0	-	-
Emotional	186	93.0	14	7.0	-	-
Moral	190	95.0	-	-	10	5.0

Table 10 reveals that 178 (89%) of the assessed Under-fives' books catered for the social needs of the children (that is, areas like turn-taking, encouraging team-spirit, giving consideration for others and other related issues), 22(11%) of the books partially touch such issues. 200 (100%) of the books met the physical needs (easy to lift, appeal to fine and motor skill coordination, appeal to eye coordination and the like). On intellectual/language needs, 194 (97%) of the books encourage issues like promoting logical thinking, giving room for drawing inference, promoting problem-solving, acquisition of fixed response pattern and so on, 6 (3%) partially touch such issues. 182 (91%) of the books cater for the creative need of the children (i.e. attractiveness, rouse the desire to read/write/draw and others, 18 (9%) of them partially met the need. 186 (93%) of the books cater for the emotional need (that is, encourage sense of security, control fear/anxiety; cause laughter, remove biases and so on), while, 14 (7%) of them partially treated such issues. On moral, 190 (95%) of the books uphold moral values and condemn vices while 10 (5%) of the books are passive about this need.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings have shown that genres of literature except drama were available for Under-Five. This finding is in line with Ukala (1992) who also identified the dearth of play/drama genre for children and he pointed out that the inclusion of this genre for this category of children will also boost their logical thinking since at this impressionable age, children engage in role play. Apart from role- playing, it is a means of developing children's language skills of speaking and listening. It may also serve as a means to inculcate sense of hearing/listening to other people's opinion in children. The study also revealed that the commonest shape for the books developed for Under-Fives is the rectangular type while other shapes are not common or not existing except for some foreign-based books. On research question two, the study showed that the evaluated Under-Five books possess to a large extent the features expected of a good book for this age cohort except in the areas of binding, picture, colourful and illustrations. A few of the books are not fit for the children as the books will be in pieces within few periods of handling, pictures are either not clear enough or clumsy for children. The colour or the illustration is not sharp enough and as a result could discourage reading in children. The study further showed that the content structure of the Under-Five books (in terms of the vocabulary, repetitive, rhythmic) is relatively good while some of the books do not contain concepts that are familiar or culturally related to children. The implication of this is that the children may have difficulty grasping the concepts being treated in the books and as a result hindering comprehension or being abstract for the children. This is in agreement with the findings of Ekwensi (1980) and Fayose (2004) analysis and they called for books that are relevant to African children's environment in textual context and illustrations. Another reason that could be deduced from this finding is that the majority of the Under-Five books available in Nigeria are foreign-based 69.5% and by this many unfamiliar concepts are presented. On the basic needs of the Under-five, (i.e. Social, Physical, Intellectual/Language, Creativity, Emotional and Moral-SPICE-M) a very high percentage of the books would satisfy the basic needs of the target children (89%)- Social; 100%- Physical; 97% intellectual/Language; 91%- Creativity; 93%- Emotional and 95%- Moral). The implication is that the children would be set on the pedestal of literacy once the books are able to satisfy their basic needs.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the experts in the area of children's books should work more on various genres-poetry and more importantly, drama as role- play is a good learning strategy for the Under-Five. Besides, play will make life's issues more real and amusing to this category of children. Experts are also challenged to write books that will be more culturally relevant so as to make learning more relevant to children as well as transmit and preserve cultural heritage to children through books. It is also to give opportunity for wide range on selection of books both home-based and the foreign-based books for the Under-Five. The government should encourage the publishing houses in the area of funding so that quality books will be readily available in the market and at the home- front for the Under-five. The publishing bodies should as well endeavour to go for quality materials in book production for Under-five so that home-based books will also be captivating to children. There should also be a deviation from the usual rectangular/square shapes to others like oval and star shapes in order to rouse the children's interest to books as well as to foster learning in different dimension.

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