

# **IMPROVING LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENT FOR EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: APPLICATION OF SPELLING, SENTENCE BUILDING AND READING PROGRAMMES IN OUR SPECIAL SCHOOLS**



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## **Introduction**

Hearing impairment is a serious sensory deprivation that has been noted to hinder the affected individuals general development and educational achievements in particular. For instance over a decade ago Reamer (2000) noted that impaired hearing during childhood years constitutes a serious barrier to normal educational process. In other words, the inability to hear normally can make the task of school learning more difficult for the affected individuals. Due to the impact of hearing loss, learners with hearing impairments battles with varying degrees of learning and communication challenges which make interpersonal communication so needful in a typical class room setting somewhat difficult (Ozaji, Unachukwu & Kolo 2016).

Past research studies Wells (2006) for example showed that the educational achievement of children with hearing impairment has been significantly below the levels of their peers without hearing impairment. They have tended to lag behind particularly in the area of reading comprehension and writing. Recent studies, however, revealed that academic performance of hearing impaired have improved and many of them are achieving at average or above average levels in reading, writing and mathematics. In spite of this improvement there are still gaps especially in reading (Fitz Patrick, Olds, Gaboury, McCrae, Schramm & Durieux-Smith, 2012).

The difficulties faced by children and youths with hearing impairment in acquiring language and communication skills is a matter of great concern not only for special educators but also the parents of the affected children and youths when we consider the importance of language and communication skills in any given society. Language as a tool for communication is a pre-requisite for effective functioning in the hearing society. Everything one do in this world particularly success in educational endeavors depends on the acquisition of language skills. Since children hearing

impairment especially the congenitally and pre-lingually impaired miss out on the process of language acquisition due to lack of auditory feed back from the environment, they need appropriate instructional strategies or methods to acquire language and communication skills. They need special and thoughtful assistance to learn in order to derive maximum benefits from quality special needs education. This special assistance will come from school/educational institutions but according to Messaria (2002), parents, siblings, family members and the community are all needed to assist as well.

In order to assist the children with hearing impairment develop and sustain good language and communication skills, different methods have been used with some measure of success even through the performance of children with hearing impairment in all areas of language skills still leave much to be desired. This fact underscores the need to search for new applicable alternative in helping children with hearing impairment to improve their language and communication skills. In the light of this scenario, this paper is out to identify some teaching strategies largely left unexplored in teaching children with hearing impairment language and communication skills.

#### **Language/ Language Competence:**

Hunt and Marshall (2005) defined "language" simply as "The verbal means by which humans communicate" As a system it is bound by rules. McCommick (2003) in his own definition sees language as abstract systems with rules governing meaning and use. So different language have different rules – of sequence or order of meaning and of the way language is used. On its own part, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'language' as "The system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area". In the context of this paper these authors agree with McCormick's definition of language. As an abstract system language can be verbal or non-verbal. Language cannot be in verbal/ speech form alone as portrayed in Hunt and Marshall or Oxford Dictionary definitions. For example, English is a Language (verbal) with its own rules of usage so also is the English sign language system or the American Sign Language (ASL) used mostly by pre-lingually hearing impaired people. It is possible to have speech without language e.g. parrot and it is equally possible to have language without speech e.g. the pre-lingually deaf (Okuoyibo and Makinde 2004). Sign- language is a visible natural language of the deaf with its own rules/ structures different from spoken or verbal language. For example in English (See Exact English) we say "I am happy to meet you" but in ASL it is "Happy meet you".

Competence refers to the ability to do something very well. Therefore in the context of this paper language competence refers to the ability of students with hearing impairment to learn and use all aspects of language skills with at least 50% accuracy. Aspects of language skills include reading/reading comprehension speaking/

speaking and writing. Without adequate skills in these three important areas of language usage no one can make any remarkable progress in school related subjects. Therefore attaining some degree of competence in these three areas by students with hearing impairment is a sine qua non for their accessing quality/equitable special needs education.

### **The Hearing Impaired and Language Usage:**

Hunt and Marshall defined hearing impairment as an umbrella term which refers to all degree of hearing loss. Hearing loss is the inability to hear speech sound normally by affected individuals. Based on this definition, the hearing impaired are individuals who have hearing difficulties and are handicapped to such an extent that some form of special education is required (Northern & Downs, 2002). Mba (1995) stated that the term "hearing impaired" covers the whole range of auditory impairment encompassing not only the profoundly deaf person, but also the one with very mild loss (hard-of hearing) who may understand speech without much difficulty. Thus, a person who is deaf and another who is hard-of-hearing may be referred to as hearing impaired persons.

Individuals with hearing impairment have difficulty developing and using the spoken language of their societies. This is so because hearing loss seriously affect the affected person's ability to normally develop or acquire the spoken language of his or her community. This creates communication difficulties which adversely influence school achievement and interaction with others. Contributing to the issue of language and deafness, Boison (1999) stated that all children must learn to listen before they can talk (speak), but if the child has hearing impairment, that will make it difficult for him to understand sounds of people's voices; the child will have a very hard time learning to say words and even harder time using appropriate societal/verbal language. Hearing impaired persons who were born deaf or became deaf before age 2-3 do not develop the normal spoken or verbal language which is the pre-requisite for effective functioning in a hearing society. This is because they lacked auditory feedback from their environment which is most essential for language development. Consequently, the deaf child has difficulties in both understanding speech and production of speech that is intelligible.

The hard-of-hearing or those who develop hearing difficulty after age 4-5 do not have much difficulty with language learning and usage as the deaf do. However, both groups of hearing impaired need competent teachers and appropriate teaching approach to enable them acquire the necessary competence for quality special needs education.

## **Strategies for Improving Language Competence of Students with Hearing Impairment the Neglected Forgotten/Unexplored Alternatives**

Some largely unexplored workable approaches to teaching language skills to hearing impaired children include the following among others:

### **1. Individualized Spelling Programme:**

Ehri (2000) noted that spelling and reading share many linguistic skills and are similar in the development and that spelling is a good predictor of reading level. This fact underscores the importance of spelling training for children and youths with hearing impairment.

The spelling programme involves the children working with/studying selected words each week with a view to master not only the spelling but also the meaning and usage or function. The programme is individualized in nature. Through this approach, children are challenged at their own level and by extension set their own pace in terms of the number and difficulty of words they learn each week. Children who are fast in mastering spelling of given words are not kept waiting for other children to catch up and the less able spellers are not left behind even when they are unable to master any of the materials as the spelling list changes each week. One other very important aspect of the individualized spelling programme is that the children's own words, i.e. words that are significant to each child can be included in his/her personal spelling list.

### **Strategies for learning to spell include**

**Phonics:** This involves learning the sound of letters or pronunciation and letter combination. This is especially important for the hard of hearing.

**Memorization:** This means "sight-word recognition", and involves studying the words and memorizing them.

**Letter patterns:** Learning combination of letters that occur frequently in English.

**Spelling rules:** This is learning the rules and the exception to the rules governing spelling in English language, e.g. rules of plural formation, subject-verb agreement, formation of past-tense etc.

### **The Spelling Programme Procedure:**

#### **a. Selection of words for weekly spelling list:**

The teacher may select words for spelling programme from:

- **High frequency words:** e.g, do, can, am, will etc. These authors suggest that each school for the hearing impaired should prepare list of graded high frequency words to use with the children. Ideally, nursery and lower primary levels should begin with 2-3 letter words etc. the words selected for each week should be a blend of nouns, pronouns, verbs, function words that the children can use to make sentences.

- **Children's own words:** these are words that an individual child tries to use in his/her sentence/writing but do not know how to spell.
  - **Topic words:** these are key words in each topic in every subject the teacher will teach in the particular week. Examples, domestic/wild, animal, air (science), add, multiply, subtract (mathematics).
  - **Basal readers being used in the class/school e.g.** Macmillan Primary English Books 1-6. The number of words selected for each week should depend on the particular child's ability. In any case, the number of words should not exceed ten (10) from the list. Example, 6 high frequency words from the list, two (2) topical words and 1 child's own word(s). However, the teacher may assign more than ten (10) words to a student that learns fast and doing exceptionally well in the programme.
- b. **Pre-test:** Here the teacher tests the children by signing each word for the pupils to write (I they recognize or know it). Teacher then marks the pre-test and record those words the child needs to learn and give back to the child. Where a child gets half of the selected words right, new words are added to those he /she got wrong. The child then works with those words for the week.

The purpose of the pre-test is to identify those words each child already knows from the list of words for the week. It is suggested that primary 1-6 are given pre-test on Monday. However, the teacher can decide on the convenient day of the week to start.

c. **Teaching spelling definition:** Teacher teaches the sign for and the meaning of each word. This should be done through pictures and/or demonstration. The function or parts of English each word belong to should be explained to the children.

The next thing in this stage is to use simple sentence construction to demonstrate meaning and usage of each word. All children use all words so as to ensure that those who spell a word correctly understand the meaning. Level of sentence should reflect level of children. Expect more from higher class. After necessary corrections, the sentences are copied neatly into sentence book.

d. **Spelling practice:** words cards, games and activities are utilized. The procedure goes like this (a) look, (b) sign, (c) finger spell, (d) cover, (e) write, (f) cross check. After adequate practice, children would be able to utilize this technique to learn how to spell on their own. If a word is got wrong, it is looked up and written again.

e. **Post-test:** This is done after children have practiced spelling for a week. The focus here is only to verify the children's. Mastery of spelling of words for that week. The teacher dictates words shared by the whole class then go round to test each child on own words.

It is suggested that after the test is completed, teacher display or uncover list of all words and allow children to mark each other's work. Teacher then cross check all children's books for accuracy and record the score for each child. This should form part of continuous assessment for the particular term.

Children tick off words they got correct on their list and enter them into their spelling dictionary. Words they got wrong are written into their spelling book for the following/next week list. It is suggested that during the week when children are writing, any word they wish to spell should be added to their personal spelling list. These are added to his/her weekly list two or three at a time. Teachers should use spelling period to reinforce sentence rules, grammar rules and hand writing skills.

## **2. Sentence Building/ Creative Writing**

Sentence building programme should be utilized side by side with the spelling programme. It should, however, be assigned a separate period on the school time table.

What this activity entails is that the children use the words they have learned to spell and whose meaning have been explained and /or demonstrated to them. In constructing his/her sentences, the child may also combine other words with those they have learned in the spelling programmed.

The teacher's role here is to guide each child to write accurate or near accurate sentence (s). The teacher gets the child to read (sign) his sentence then guide him to correct his mistakes where necessary. For example, a typical deaf /hearing impaired child may write a sentence like "my is name Hannatu". The teacher helps the child to correct her mistake by signing the sentences in the correct format and have the child write the same. The corrected sentences are copied neatly in another book. The child is called upon from time to time to read the sentences he has made to the teacher. Ideally, before children leave the classroom at closing time, the teacher may ask each child to make or write a sentence (demand for different sentence each time).

Deaf children are essentially visual learners by nature. They are more likely to write more creatively if they have experienced a situation. To help deaf children develop interest in writing, it is necessary to provide them varied learning experiences through field trips or observational assignments where field trip is not possible. There are varied ways in which to make these experiences meaningful and enhance productive language and conceptual growth.

## **Reading /Reading Comprehension**

Reading according to Boison (1986) is a process of getting thought from printed symbols by associating known meanings with these symbols. The printed symbols here refer to words. As a rule, all children (handicapped or not) need to possess certain readiness skills in order to be able to develop practical reading ability. These include (a) ability to understand, speak/sign and express himself well in whatever language he is to be taught reading skills, (b) ability to recognize, write/identify letters that form their name as well as other letters of the alphabet, (c) ability to understand similarities and differences, and (d) ability to sequence both auditory and visual task (moving from left to right when reading), (Andzayi and Umolu, 2004).

Reading is a critical skill to students' success both in and outside school setting (Miliham and Gwanshak, 2013). Miliham and Gwanshak further reported research findings in Nigeria which indicate that most students can not read with adequate comprehension or are severely deficient in reading skills. This is particularly true of students with hearing impairment. Aside having difficulty with other language modes, a student with hearing impairment, especially the pre-lingually impaired, is at double disadvantage in acquiring reading skills. He cannot easily convert written symbol into oral symbol and his language grows so slowly that many of the words have no meaning to him in any form. This is why it is very important to follow Putz (2017) suggestion that reading programme for children with hearing impairment should start very early- as early as the baby starts manipulating objects.

The typical deaf child is at a double disadvantage here as he cannot easily convert written symbols into oral symbols. And his language grows very slowly that many of the words he is struggling to identify in written form have no meaning to him in any way.

### **Developing Reading Skills in Deaf Children**

The abysmal performance of deaf and hard-of-hearing children in reading comprehension despite several years of schooling is a clear indication that special educators' usual approach to teaching English language to these children need to be reexamined and improved upon. These authors therefore advocates rigorously implemented reading programme for students with hearing impairment at primary school level, if they are to attain quality equitable special needs education.

For a start, teachers of the deaf and hard-of-hearing must develop in the children the interest (and ability) in reading any materials that has meaning and use to him. In other word we need to inspire the children to want to read and guide them to develop critical thinking and trust in their reading. Toward this end, the reading programme should be based on the actual interest of the children. This is because a child is first interested in himself and his family and later in his friends and his school and finally in his community and in the world. The teacher should therefore be guided by his pupils' actual interests in choosing reading materials.

Secondly, reading "experience" should be provided instead of reading "Lesson". Reading experience focus on the content as opposed to reading lesson which emphasizes the mechanism of reading.

A good developmental reading programme should be pursued and must provide the children with a lot of first hand experiences through which they may build and associate concepts which will enable them to bring meanings to the printed words. Developmental reading refers to the guided reading sessions in which reading skills are developed sequentially. The most commonly used materials for developmental reading are the basal readers, e.g. Macmillan English Book 1,2 etc. and other graded

short story books. Basal readers have been specifically designed to facilitate the mastery of skills by controlling the vocabulary load. There is a gradual progression from easy to more difficult materials. What ever book one uses, the criterion should be: Is the reading material of interest to the child?

Does the child like to read it?

Teachers of students with hearing impairment should, however, bear in mind that these basal readers were originally prepared for students with normal hearing who have relatively well developed oral language skills. The readers can be adapted for use with the hearing impaired students but they should be edited/modified to meet the language/ vocabulary level of the affected children. The alternative is to develop basal readers specifically for students with hearing impairment.

As the children progress to higher levels in primary schools and there is more need to use the basal readers, teachers must make every effort to modify the content without necessary watering it down. The modification here entails picking out and explaining unfamiliar/difficult words or replacing them with other word (s) synonymous to them and /or restructuring the content to match the reading level or ability of the children. It should be pointed out here that modification of learning materials for special needs children is the primary responsibility of special education professionals.

In asking children comprehension questions after completing the reading task, it is not necessary to use already set questions that accompany the passages in the basal readers. Depending on the content of the reading materials, the teacher may need to modify the questions or better still set new ones using words the children are most familiar with especially those they are working with in spelling and sentence construction programmes.

All children can be taught to read, but the teacher should do more than this- he should inspire them to love to read. Apart from knowledgability expected of him, the teacher's attitude should reflect love, respect and acceptance. The teacher should have good reading culture. In other words, he should have positive attitude towards reading. He should be willing to read stories to deaf and hard-of-hearing children with pleasure. It is sad to note that most teachers of the deaf are poor readers (emphasize ours). How can such teachers' teach children with hearing impairments how to read?

Shandel (2012) preferred the following suggestions to parents and teachers in helping students with hearing impairment become successful readers:

- **Learn to sign:** Both parents/teachers need to be able to teach the hearing impaired children how to communicate and be able to communicate with them. Teachers and parents being able to sign is important because hearing impaired children need continuous exposure to the words they are learning.
- **Focus on the visual:** This means using colourfully illustrated books. Picture books are essential in helping hearing impaired children learn to read. Here you sign -



- spell the word, to the child(ren), point to the printed word the accompanying picture and then use the sign for the word.
- **Using letter cards:** The letter cards can be used to demonstrate how individual letters form words.
  - **Build vocabulary:** Try introducing a new vocabulary/ word every day. Work that word into conversations and display the word on the wall of the class near the picture of the signed words.
  - **Adjust your environment:** Hearing impaired learners need a visual environment to thrive. The children should be encouraged and guided to label things in their classroom or rooms at home.
  - **Test for comprehension:** Ensure that the children understand what they are reading. For example, point to a picture or printed word and have them sign the word to you. As language questions about characters/plot of a book.
- Putz stated that the key to teaching reading is to make it fun. Learning to read doesn't have to be a dreary/ boring process for teacher/ parents and the child. It should be incorporated in every activity in the class, outside the class as well as at home.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Children with hearing impairments have difficulties in the three basic fundamentals of English Language viz speech, writing and reading comprehension which ironically provide the foundation for effective learning and adjustment in a society dominated by hearing people. For these affected individuals to access quality and equitable special needs education, efforts should be made to improve their language skills/competence. As special education professionals, we need to re-engineer our approach to teaching language or English to the hearing impaired especially at the nursery and primary school level where educational foundational foundation is laid. Honest and committed application of the strategies described in this paper would be the right step in this direction.

To facilitate effective implementation of the strategies, the following recommendations are in order:

1. Since there is no written equivalent of American Sign Language being used by the hearing impaired in Nigeria, it is necessary to have a viable book development programme for this special group of learners. The focus of this programme would be the production of texts and reading materials that take into account the language deprivation of these learners. Reading materials should be in signed English format (i.e. with standard sign accompanying each word).
2. Books/reading materials being applied with the hearing impaired in our schools today were written mainly for those with normal hearing. Teachers of the hearing impaired should therefore modify the content to match the reading level of the children.

3. Spelling, creative writing/sentence building and reading programmes should be assigned separate period in the school time-table. The application of the strategies should be seriously supervised or coordinate by the school authority.
4. Teachers of the hearing impaired should be resourceful. They should make every effort to develop simple stories for their classes with active involvement of the children using words the children have learned to spell and recognize on sight. Toward this end, there should be regular thematic activities and field trips which will provide the base for new stories/creative writing.
5. It is highly necessary to train special English language teachers for students with hearing impairment at this point in time. Proficiency in sign-language usage should be emphasized in teacher training programmes of higher institutions offering special education discipline.
6. Each special school for the deaf should have a library stocked with colourful children's story books. Children can go to the library at assigned period to pick and read books of their choice under the guidance of the teacher. During this reading period, the teacher can identify words children have problems with and note them down for the weekly spelling programme.
7. Two heads are better than one. Hence, every school for the hearing impaired should have weekly teacher training programme for all teachers. The teacher training session would provide opportunity for each teacher to give others feedback about progress and constraints in application of each of the strategies in his/her class. The exchange of ideas here could lead to cross fertilization of ideas that might bring new and even better strategies for teaching language to children hearing impairment.
8. The need for involvement of parents/family of the hearing impaired in education of their special children can never be overemphasized. Because of the observed inability of most families of hearing impaired children to communicate with them in formal sign language, it is suggested that sign language classes should be organized by every special schools for family members of the hearing impaired students. The sign language class should be made mandatory for the family members so that at least two or more of each family members can communicate in sign language with their children /siblings. By being able to communicate with hearing impaired members, the family can supplement the teacher's efforts at home by helping the hearing impaired child to read books at home after school hours and during holidays.

Finally, good relationship must exist between the pupils and the teacher. Teachers themselves should have good reading culture and positive attitude toward the hearing impaired otherwise; their efforts at teaching language to them would not yield the desired result.

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