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COMPREHENSIVE READING INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

By

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Abstract

Despite the critical role of good reading skills in the lives of all individuals, students with learning and specific reading disabilities often manifest deficits in the acquisition and use of diverse reading skills that are unexpected in relation to their age, cognitive ability, quantity and quality of instruction and intervention. This is particularly worrisome as these reading problems often go unnoticed during the primary school years. Once these students get to secondary school, their reading disabilities become more pronounced and its consequences further apparent to teachers and parents. Based on this problem, this paper discussed the need for a comprehensive reading instruction for students with reading disabilities, the components of a comprehensive reading instruction and guidelines for a comprehensive reading instruction. Thus, it was concluded that no component of the reading skill should be downplayed. Moreover, this paper recommended among other things that teachers of students with learning and reading disabilities should conduct ongoing assessments to determine the actual nature of individual student's reading disabilities. Thereafter, teachers of students with learning and reading disabilities should proceed with delivery of a balanced and comprehensive reading instruction that is guided by scientifically evidence-based procedures as discussed in this paper.

Key words: Learning disabilities, Reading disabilities, Comprehensive reading instruction, Inclusive education classroom

Introduction

Secondary school students with learning and reading disabilities demonstrate lack of proficiency in many academic subjects that involve language such as reading and writing because of their special characteristics. This condition worsens when these students are placed in inclusive education classrooms. Lerner and Kline (2006) identified obstacles faced by

secondary schools in providing inclusive education including: the complex, content-area curriculum; the large gap between skill levels and classroom demands; content-area secondary school teachers not trained to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities and the standards-based, high-stakes testing movement. In spite of these problems, globally, a large number of students with learning disabilities (LD) are

increasingly being placed in inclusive education classrooms. Thus, there is need for teachers to address these issues with the hope of helping students with LD to make progress at school and in life.

Students with learning disabilities in inclusive education classrooms experience varying degrees of difficulties in the acquisition and use of one or more of the following important skills: oral language, reading, written language, and mathematics. According to Obani (2006), students with learning disabilities are those who are of average or above average intelligence as measured by intelligence tests, who perform averagely, above average, and sometimes very highly in many school subjects, but who perform very poorly and experience undue difficulties in learning to read, write or spell (and other language skills), or in doing simple mathematical operations and calculations, even with good conventional teaching and remedial help.

Lerner and Kline (2006) explained that learning disabilities are recognized as a category of disabilities under the Special Education Law-Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004. Learning disabilities, present as a significant discrepancy, of at least two years, between a student's actual potential or ability and his or her academic achievement. Learning disabilities affect people differently and produce serious impact on secondary school students' academic, social, emotional and behavioural life. Put together, the art of dealing with an individual's LD coupled with the increased demands of secondary school

and inclusive education classrooms, exert more pressure on students with learning and reading disabilities. This paper therefore explores one major way by which the problems of learners in inclusive education classrooms particularly, those with learning and reading disabilities, can be alleviated, that is, presenting reading instruction in a comprehensive and balanced manner.

Rationale for a 'comprehensive' reading instruction for students with reading disabilities

A reading disability is a common type of learning disabilities affecting majority of students who have been identified as having learning disabilities. As many as eighty percent (80%) of students who have learning disabilities experience disabilities in reading (Lerner & Kline, 2006), therefore, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive reading instruction to these students. Furthermore, Lerner and Kline (2006) identified the major areas of difficulties for students with reading disabilities as: lack of phonological awareness, problems in learning to decode words, difficulties in basic word recognition skills and/or difficulties in reading comprehension. In addition, students with reading disabilities experience difficulties in acquiring and using different reading skills. They are usually too slow, even after they become accurate readers. If these students are well catered for in inclusive education classrooms they will improve in all their subject areas.

Reading disabilities (RD) result in a lot of academic, social/behavioural, and occupational problems such as lack of motivation in reading, frustration while



reading, lack of exposure in reading practice, school failure and school dropout. Notwithstanding these devastating effects of poor reading ability among secondary school students, reading skill has been recognized as a very significant skill within the language system. The National Reading Panel (2000), Lerner and Kline (2006), Fakeye (2008), and Gibson, Carledge, and Keyes (2011) agreed that reading is one of the most important academic skills in schools. Ability to engage in efficient reading allows a reader to acquire new information, gain knowledge and understanding, and develop personal fulfillment. Reading ability is a criterion of academic achievement thus, reading is an aspect of the core English language school subject considered as a prerequisite for admission into tertiary institutions of learning in Nigeria. In addition, reading ability serves as a basis to success in almost every aspect of school subjects. The ability to read sets the foundation for an individual's future success in society. It paves way to entry into various professions for instance, reading helps in the mastering of musical notes and lyrics. It enables individuals to gain access to high technology and a lot of information perhaps information from the computers, internet and mobile phones.

Besides, poor reading skills among secondary school students in Nigeria are becoming more apparent to educators and parents due to the results obtained on the high stakes mandatory testing that all our students are exposed to like the senior school certificate examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council

and National Examination Council (Lazarus, 2013). If a comprehensive reading instruction is not provided to the large number of students who experience unexpected difficulties in reading skills in relation to their age, cognitive ability, quantity and quality of instruction and intervention, that is, students with RD, their reading disabilities will persist and eventually interfere with their overall reading achievement.

In other words, poor readers get poorer without the benefit of a comprehensive, effective reading instruction. This notion is what Stanovich (1986) tagged the "Mathew Effects" in reading. Stanovich's research on the Mathew Effects in reading confirms that those students who have a strong foundation in reading would continue to excel and those who do not would remain below level thus widening the achievement gap. Therefore, to prevent students with RD from continually struggling with reading and other school subjects and skills, it is essential to provide these students with quality comprehensive reading instruction.

Principally, explaining why teachers should adopt a comprehensive approach to reading instruction for students with reading disabilities, Fisher and Frey (2004) argued that before, during, and after reading strategies are necessary for students to successfully conquer any difficult reading endeavour. Moats (2002) maintained that given the right approach, students with reading disabilities will buy in and in fact, they will ask why they were allowed to go so far without being taught to read. More so,

Torgesen, Wagner, Rashotte, Alexander and Conway (1997) observed that reading intervention grounded in research imparts to older readers the skills they missed in the primary school and can bring them to class level in one or two years. Based on this assumption, Moats (2002) and Spear-Swerling (2005) suggested that teachers of students with specific reading disabilities should include intensive reading instruction programmes that can prevent reading problems or improve reading achievement in many adolescents.

Teachers in inclusive education classrooms are accountable for a wider range of students including those with learning and reading disabilities. These teachers need supports to achieve a successful inclusive education programme. One of such supports is equipping themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide a comprehensive reading instruction. In reality, some teachers actually lack a firm grounding in the core reading skills. Therefore, sound knowledge base in all aspects of reading and reading instruction will pay off. If this is acquired by all teachers, students with learning disabilities in inclusive education classrooms will not have to go through the emotional predicament common among the heterogeneous group of individuals with learning disabilities. Lerner and Kline (2006) maintained that if failure to learn is accompanied by emotional problems, the student may be the victim of a continuous cycle of failure. To curb this menace, there is urgent need for teachers in inclusive education classrooms to acquire adequate

knowledge in respect to building a comprehensive reading instruction.

Having established the need for a comprehensive reading instruction for students with reading disabilities, it becomes imperative to shift the focus of this paper to a discussion on the different components of reading and reading instruction that teachers are expected to emphasize in the inclusive education classrooms. This is because teachers of students with reading disabilities are required to become versatile in the use of diverse teaching strategies and in acquisition of in-depth and up to date knowledge and skills in comprehensive reading instruction programme for students with learning and reading disabilities.

Components of a comprehensive reading instruction

Research has revealed that reading instruction has different components and each of the components is an important element in teaching all students particularly those with reading disabilities to become proficient readers (National Reading Panel (NRP), 2000). A focus on any single element is not sufficient to comprise an effective reading programme. Bos and Vaughn (2006) stressed that these components and their integration are important in learning to read effectively and in using reading as a vehicle for learning and entertainment. Bos and Vaughn (2006) categorized reading and reading instruction into components or areas as depicted in Figure 1.1. These components are: (i) phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence,

and the alphabetic principle; (ii) word identification, decoding and word study;(iii)

fluency; (iv) vocabulary and (v) comprehension.

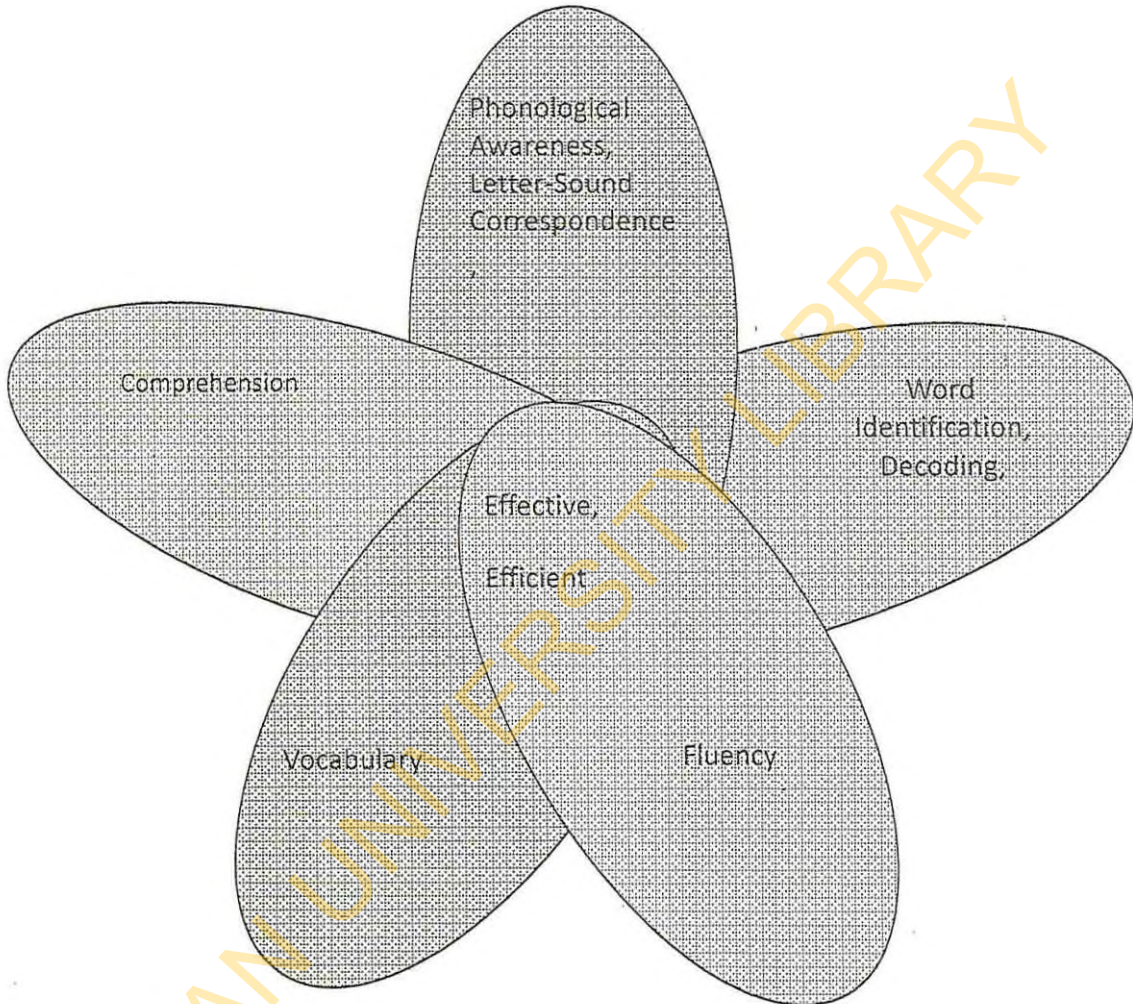


Figure 1 Components of reading and reading instruction

Source: Bos & Vaughn (2006) Phonological awareness (PA) refers to awareness of individual sounds in spoken words and knowledge of sounds for letters and common patterns, and the ability to apply that knowledge to read unfamiliar words. Similarly, phonics in the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) definition refers to understanding the relationship between sounds and letters that allows readers to decode and understand the written word. It

is not unlikely to find most students with RD in the upper primary classes and secondary school who have either pronounced or residual needs for instruction in these basic skills. When this is observed, the students will require explicit and direct instruction in phonics (Torgesen, Wagner, Rashotte, Alexander & Conway, 1997; Lerner & Kline, 2006). Reading skills exist in a continuum hence, a solid mastery of phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence



and alphabetic principle is a precursor for a student's skill in word identification and decoding.

During reading, efficient readers identify words fluently and if a word is unknown, they use effective decoding strategies to decipher the word. Therefore, comprehensive reading instruction is such that emphasizes the need for all students to develop a sight word vocabulary and decoding strategies to support them when they encounter an unknown word (NRP, 2000). Fluency is the ability to read with accuracy, speed and expression (NRP, 2000). Accuracy is the ability to decode words correctly, automaticity is the speed or ability to read words and connected text automatically while prosody is the rhythm and tone exhibited when reading orally. A fluent reader uses voice inflections with various pitches and tones, as well as reads through text in a fluid manner, free of errors (Thoermer & Williams, 2012). Moats (2002) observed that sound – symbol associations and word recognition are usually fast and automatic in proficient readers as such readers employ little conscious attention when they identify words. On the contrary, students with RD are usually too slow, even after they become accurate because they do not practice reading independently.

Vocabulary refers to the knowledge of meanings of individual words. Normally progressing students can read most of the words in their listening vocabulary by fourth or fifth grade. From then on, they learn new vocabulary primarily by reading at a rate of several thousand new words per year. Students with RD have limited vocabularies

compared to other students without intervention; these students are likely to fall behind in the content areas (Rupley & Slough, 2010).

Bos and Vaughn (2006) reiterated that comprehension is the essence of reading and the ultimate goal of reading instruction. Reading comprehension has been defined as an active and complex process that involves understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning, and using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose and situation (National Centre for Educational Statistics, 2005). Furthermore, students with reading disabilities often manifest deficits in comprehension skills. Gibb and Wilder (2002) reiterated that comprehension be it literal, inferential, critical, or creative can be assessed and improved upon through the use of appropriate comprehension strategies.

In the light of the foregoing, students with learning and reading disabilities will benefit immensely if provided with intensive reading instruction that focuses on the components of reading discussed so far. Comprehensive reading instruction thus requires concise teaching of the different reading skills. It entails that teachers demonstrate flexibility in providing reading instruction. It involves ensuring that students with reading disabilities are taught how to manipulate phonemes accurately, decode and recognize words effectively, read with fluency, derive meanings from texts and use pre-reading, during reading, and after reading strategies for comprehension.



Guidelines for comprehensive reading instruction

The following guidelines can be employed in delivering a balanced and comprehensive reading instruction to all students with learning and reading disabilities in inclusive schools:

- (i) **Thorough and continuous assessment:** There should be a comprehensive and thorough assessment to determine the nature of reading disabilities among students in inclusive education classrooms. McNamara (2007) stressed that assessment of reading disabilities will enable teachers to develop a reasonable, sensible, scientifically based intervention plan. Osurji (2010) investigated the assessment of children with learning disabilities in a clinical setting, in Jos, Nigeria, using 30 children with LD and submitted that an accurate assessment process provides a clearer understanding of the concept, issues and perspectives of LD. More so, Osurji reiterated that identification and assessment of LD paves way for effective intervention.

Furthermore, Saskatchewan Learning (2004) enumerated assessment areas within the reading skills component of language for students with RD. For example, an informal assessment may require a teacher to create a student profile that includes: oral language, phonological awareness, decoding skills, and vocabulary (lexical and

semantic cues and conventions). An informal reading inventory (IRI) can also be used to determine the instructional needs and the nature of support that the student needs. By administering an IRI, the teacher would get to know the reading level of the student with RD and develop appropriate reading intervention plan. Above all, teachers can conduct formal assessments with the use of standardized tests (such as Woodcock Reading Mastery and Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test 4).

- (ii) **Use of research-based reading instruction strategies:** McNamara (2007) averred that after identifying student's strengths and weaknesses, a suitable intervention plan should be adopted based on the assessment reports. Popular among the effective teaching strategies is the use of direct instruction in reading. The major characteristics of direct instruction programmes are: teacher training, brisk lessons, assessment of students on placement test, maximum of 14 students in homogeneous groups, 35 to 45-minute lessons, scripted lessons, specific correction procedures and the use of behavioural principles (McNamara, 2007).

In addition, Torgesen, Houston, Rissman, Decker, Roberts, Vaughn, Lesaux (2007) undertook a meta-analysis of instructional research that focused on struggling readers in the primary schools and



concluded that schools must provide superior instruction that varies in intensity and focus depending on student's challenges in word-level and comprehension skills. Torgesen et al. added that professionals trained in the area of reading are appropriate and necessary in upper primary and beyond (junior and senior secondary schools). Reading accuracy and fluency are specific areas of concern. Some effective research-based instructional strategies are guided reading, choral reading of dramatic material, multisensory strategies, phonics instruction, graphic organizers, transactional instruction, and the use of independent reading comprehension strategies such as activating prior knowledge, prediction, questioning, comprehension monitoring, summarization, and visualizing (McNamara, 2007).

- (iii) **Instructional grouping:** It is critical to consider grouping as an instructional factor that can powerfully influence individual student's reading engagement in an inclusive education classroom. The content being covered should influence the choice of grouping options as some instructional material is better suited to a particular grouping option. The following are frequently used groupings that teachers of students with RD can adopt in their inclusive

education classrooms: one-to-one instruction (this involves students who work alone with a teacher, a paraprofessional, or a computer with well-sequenced materials at their own level); small group instruction (may be with a homogeneous or heterogeneous groups of students, depending on the instructional objective); whole class instruction (can be used for brainstorming discussions, video watching, and game playing) and peer tutoring (this should be carefully structured, with tutors trained, materials prepared and an appropriate location designated) (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Kouzekanani, Bryant, Dickson, & Blozis, 2003; Davis, 2010).

- (iv) **Differentiated instruction:** In an inclusive education setting, no two learners are alike, so premium is placed on creating opportunities for all students to learn and be assessed in a variety of ways. Teachers adjust instruction in response to the individual student's readiness, interests and learning profile, whether the student is struggling or accelerated. For students with reading disabilities, teachers take a direct approach by providing reading instruction that is individually determined, intensive, validated, sustained and explicit. With the student with reading disabilities at the centre of instruction, the teacher can differentiate reading instruction



by giving different groups of students including those with RD in the inclusive education classroom different tasks linked to the lesson they want to learn.

Another way of differentiating is to consider the outcome of the learning process. Here, the teacher gives all the students the same task but the response to the task can be varied based on quality, length or complexity of response. For example, if the task is to record thought and discussions about a character in a book, some students may write several paragraphs of prose, others may make a list or a mind map, or sketch an illuminating scene from the book. The teacher can also choose to differentiate based on support given to students with RD. Students with RD may receive more support from the teacher or the teacher can assign a more competent peer to assist the student with RD. Technological support can be used to enable a student with RD to access text more successfully or record ideas more independently (Access Centre, 2004).

- (v) The use of assistive technology: Some students with reading disabilities do require greater assistance to successfully participate in learning activities and access the inclusive education curriculum. Using assistive devices can be an effective means of providing such assistance. Assistive technology,

according to IDEA 2004, refers to both equipment and to a special education related service that is used to help compensate for an individual's disabilities. For improved reading achievement, the teacher can provide students with RD with word processors and teach them how to use them effectively; provide students with RD with assistive technology such as speech to text software (as student speaks, text appears on computer screen), text to speech software (computer reads books, newspaper, web information to student), software that voices what a student types, audio versions of books, spell checker software, and picture board (communication board) - voice output device (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004).

- (vi) Use of learning strategies: Deshler (2005) reported that learning strategies curriculum includes many different strategies and addresses a variety of skills that students with learning and reading disabilities need to access the general education curriculum successfully and perform well in high-stakes assessments. For example, in the Paraphrasing Strategy (Schumaker, Denton & Deshler, 1984) students learn a reading comprehension strategy that is remembered by the acronym RAP: Read a paragraph; Ask yourself, "What were the main idea and details in this paragraph?" and Put the main idea and details into your



own words. If students need to learn prerequisite skills, such as finding main ideas and details, teachers teach those before teaching the strategy, and reinforce student mastery of those skills during strategy instruction. Students typically learn to use a learning strategy in small groups, sometimes in a resource room, through short, intensive lessons over several weeks. Furthermore, the Calgary Learning Centre (2009) stated that another learning strategy that is supported by scientific evidence is: TELLs where "T" represents study story Titles, "E" represents Examine and skim pages for clues, "LL" represent look for important and difficult words and "S" represents think about Story setting(s). This is a strategy used in understanding and comprehending narrative (fiction) texts.

- (vii) **Co'laboration with Content Area Teachers:** The teacher of students with reading disabilities in an inclusive education classroom serves as a member of a collaboration team to improve the educational services of the students especially, in the area of reading. Torgesen et al. (2007) submitted that the teacher is to carefully co-ordinate reading instruction between resource teachers and general educators so that common curriculum provides the foundation for teaching and for practicing the use of instructional strategies. The student is placed in the content area classes for

instruction but collaboration and supportive services are supplied by the teacher of students with reading disabilities. By so doing, the negative impact of the student's reading disabilities will be minimized.

Conclusion

Students with learning disabilities and particularly, those with reading disabilities have numerous academic concerns that are often overlooked in the primary school and exacerbate later in life. To remediate this condition is to adopt comprehensive reading instruction for secondary school students with learning disabilities in the inclusive education classrooms. In view of the foregoing, this paper highlighted the components of a comprehensive reading instruction as well as guidelines to follow in achieving this goal. Thus, teachers of these students are encouraged to understand the nature of learning and reading disabilities, plan and provide a comprehensive reading instruction for students learning and reading disabilities and employ the guidelines for comprehensive reading instruction and recommendations proffered in this paper.

Recommendations

Teachers of secondary school students with learning and reading disabilities in inclusive education classrooms will become more efficient and their students more successful at school if these teachers continuously and deliberately organize unending regular assessments to understand the nature of reading disabilities and ensure that remediation is provided. Ongoing progress monitoring of students' reading activities and assignments is also vital. Special education teachers in inclusive

education classrooms should carefully coordinate reading instruction between English language/reading and general education teachers. Based on the individual needs of students with reading disabilities and the particular context, teachers in inclusive education classrooms should seek out evidence-based reading interventions. Whenever necessary, assistive technologies for reading should be introduced. Teachers in inclusive education classrooms should endeavour to teach their students with learning and reading disabilities how to use research-based effective learning strategies for enhanced reading achievement and school success

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