

Improvement in the Performance Level of Learners of English at the Basic Level Through the Use of Environmental Print to Teach Language

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Abstract: *Reading is a very important skill and so the inability to read has serious repercussions on a pupil's achievement, which also has serious consequences on the quality of his/her life. The fact that there exists a very strong connection between reading, speaking and writing makes it difficult for a child who cannot read to be efficient in speaking and writing. It is therefore only when a child can read that he/she acquires the basic language structures which reinforce writing.*

There are inadequate teaching and learning materials in our basic schools for use by both teachers and learners. Teachers and pupils in the rural areas hardly have materials for their lessons due to non-uniformity in the supply of teaching and learning materials in the country. This state of affairs has made learners' participation in lessons minimal and very difficult. Materials, if made available in the language classroom will increase learning during and after lessons. Children, by their nature like to play, handle and manipulate things on their own. Numerous studies have also shown that children prefer play-equipment that is flexible rather than fixed, simple and oriented to a single use.

This study is to create the awareness that apart from the class readers, there are lots of teaching and learning materials out there in the environment that can be used to learn and teach language. They study is also to assess the effectiveness of the use of environmental prints on the language skills of the learner.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a very important skill and so the inability to read has serious repercussions on a pupil's achievement, which also has serious consequences on the quality of his/her life. The fact that there exists a very strong connection between reading, speaking and writing makes it difficult for a child who cannot read to be efficient in speaking and writing. It is therefore only when a child can read that he/she acquires the basic language structures which reinforce writing.

In his presentation, 'Using Environmental Print to Promote Healthy Literacy' at the Inter-University Conference on Co-Existence of Languages in West Africa, held at the University of Education, Winneba in October 2002, Mr. Abdulai Jakalia stated that, Prints in every corner of our streets reveal an enormous amount of language inputs that inundate our environment. He intimated that such useful materials could be used to good effect in the classroom.

Heilman et al. (1994:62) define environmental prints as print in the environment that is encouraged in a meaningful setting. These include such items as posters, greeting cards, cereal boxes, bumper stickers, names of toys and milk cartons. Others are functions prints such as telephone books, newspapers, catalogs, television guide, list of menu and any print around us.

Print is a part of our modern environment that children experiences, and for decades now, environmental prints has been identified as one of the cheapest teaching and learning material that can be used to teach language in our basic schools. Downing & Leong (1982) emphasize this

by warning that in learning to read and write, children find themselves in a state of cognitive confusion. However, when children are immersed in a print-rich environment, they become familiar with meaningful printed materials and would naturally progress toward a state of cognitive clarity.

Christie et al. (1997) reveal that several types of home experiences stimulate early literacy learning. They emphasize this idea by saying that easy access to print and books supportive parents and caregivers promote early literacy learning. They also content that these supportive parents and caregivers can promote early literacy by, answering children's questions about print and demonstrating different types of literacy behavior. They say this will give children the opportunities to engage in emergent forms of reading and writing. They go ahead to argue that surrounding children with books and functional print in the classroom serves the same valuable functions as it does at home.

Again, Burns et al (1999) states that the environment is full of print and the teacher must make use of this opportunity to link the home environment with that of the classroom. This they say may be possible because children learn to read words they frequently see around them such as advertisement, promotional materials and familiar products such as crest or popular cereals. They feel that teachers should use environmental prints because they are easy to acquire.

According to Heibert (1986) children learn about writing language in an environment enriched with meaningful messages and functional print. He stresses that formal teaching and writing should not occur in preschool but rather the environment can be prepared with planned activities to expose children to language in various forms. Such a context facilitates learning about reading and writing through environmental prints.

Even though environmental prints may be about 30% of waste, teachers constantly complain of lack of print materials to help children in their literacy development. They also complain of lack of teaching and learning materials, and parents/guardians are unable to buy the best literacy material in the market (Jakalia 2002). He adds that experience has revealed that these materials can be comfortably used for teaching and learning in the classroom. Pupils' participation in the language classroom is very minimal due to inadequate or total absence of materials.

Also, Heilman et al (1998) view environmental print as something that helps children understand the function of print, recognize letters and letter names, develop knowledge of visual details and build sight vocabulary. They further argue that parents and adults who point out and talk about print in the child's environment facilitates the development of the concepts of prints.

Taylor, Blum & Logsdan (1986) also are of the view that children whose homes are usually filled with environment prints, children's books and adult reading materials are stimulated by such home environments and their curiosity about written language provides models of conventional print and encourage the children to begin formulating hypothesis about what print does and how it works.

The abundance of environmental prints in every corner of our environment and their inexpensive nature gives one the feeling that the situation can be saved. Teachers and parents do not need much money to acquire these prints since they can find them in their kitchens, baths and surroundings. This action research based in Anglican Junior High School (JHS) in Winneba will intervene with copious environmental prints to help improve the language of pupils.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The Context

This research was carried out in St. John's Anglican Junior High School (JHS) in Winneba in 2013. Established in 1927 by the Anglican Missionaries, the school is located two hundred metres (200m) away from the northern gate of the south campus of the University of Education with a population of about two hundred pupils.

2.2. Description of Demographics Characteristics

The study was conducted in the J. H. S. one class. This class has a population of eighty three (83) pupils, out of which forty-nine (49) are boys and thirty-four (34) are girls with ages ranging from

thirteen to seventeen years.

The pupils of this class have very varied backgrounds. Most of them have illiterate parents who are mainly engaged in fishing with little or no value for education. Others live with their ground parents who have no source of income and so these pupils are compelled to either sell, do other jobs or ran errands after school for their upkeep. It is important to state that, because these pupils come from very poor families they are not able to pay their school fees and so they are sacked from school almost every day. This has affected the social, psychological and most especially the educational development of those pupils. It is however important to state that some pupils have parents who value education.

2.3. Problem

Many children are unable to read or speak English in most Ghanaian schools. This can be attributed mainly to the fact that, these children are not exposed to literate-rich environment both at home and at school.

The fact that the child's environment is very important in the learning process cannot be over-emphasized. It is important to mention here that, most Ghanaian classroom walls are bare and in cases where teachers try to paste interesting print materials to attract pupils to read, they are limited to an area since the classrooms are not bright enough. The same thing can be said about the home-children are not exposed to print materials.

Also, the teaching of grammar, reading/comprehension and composition in English as a second language (ESL) in the Ghanaian classroom sare textbook-based of which Anglican J. H. S is no exception. The book mainly used for teaching English in these schools is English for Junior Secondary School by the Curriculum Research Development Division (CRDD) and the syllabus. It is important to mention that these materials are woefully inadequate and so limited that, about four-five (4-5) pupils are crowded around one textbook during a lesson and this makes teaching and learning of English very stressful and unattractive.

The issue of vanity publishers cannot be over-emphasized. These people come to dump their "zero standard" works on teachers who without going through these books to see whether they are good or not, encourage pupils to patronize them and this compounds the problem rather than solve the problem in the sense that pupils trust so much in these books, they never move away from them.

Finally, the library which is supposed to supplement the few reading materials in the school is small in size, with very little ventilation and no furniture as a result, pupils do not patronize it. Apart from this, the library is under-stocked with books and these few books are mostly of foreign background, making them strange to pupils. Borrowing of books from the library is not a common thing in this school since it is feared that pupils will mishandle and steal the books. The question then is how can these children read if they have no access to reading materials?

2.4. Intervention Procedure

Pre-intervention

Intervention

Post-intervention

2.5. Intervention Objectives

The objectives of the intervention were to help non-English Proficient children become literate in the English language through the use of environmental prints.

2.6. Pre-Intervention Test (See Sample in Appendix B)

The pre-intervention test was to find out the abilities of learners in some language skills before the intervention. This was done by asking pupils to write a simple essayon "myself" to elicit their language proficiency. Here specifics like expression which include creative use of language, idiomatic use of language, good expression and sentence construction were looked at. Also, range of vocabulary which included number of words and correct spelling were of special interest.

2.7. Intervention (See Sample in Appendix A)

The intervention was done by exposing and sensitizing learners to environmental print in the classroom and the community.

Here the classroom walls were decorated with prints of different kinds and an environmental print corner created in the classroom and pupils were encouraged to read them.

Again pupils were made to pick any environmental print of their choice, copy it out nicely, spell it, use it to construct a sentence(s) and write anything they find interesting about the print. They were also made to play environmental print games and talk about them in pairs and in small groups using the English Language. Pupils were also encouraged to look out for good environmental prints in town and at home and talk about them or write about them to create an environmental print folder.

2.8. Post-Intervention Test (See Appendix B)

After the intervention, there was a post-intervention test which was meant to find out if learners have made any improvement in their language skills that were tested in the pre-intervention test. Here a similar test like the one given in the pre-intervention test was given to learners. Also, the post-intervention test was to find out whether learners have cultivated the habit of reading in their environment and their impression about the use of print in the classroom.

2.9. Data Collection

The data collection was by the portfolio system where pupils were asked to fill environmental prints they found interesting and the very good ones have been mounted in the classroom. Pupils also kept portfolios. These portfolios will contain their best products.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Introduction

This section discusses the results of the pre-intervention, intervention and post-intervention. The discussions include the changes that have taken place in learners. To do this, the chapter will be broken down into the following headings:

- Learners portfolios
- Learners Literate Behaviors
- The New Literate Environment
- Challenges

3.2. Learners Portfolio (See Appendix B)

During the intervention, learners built their own portfolio using interesting print materials they brought from home. Some of the print materials included: soap wrappers, empty biscuit and toothpaste pockets, writings from billboards, stories from the Junior Graphic, magazines and many more. Learners also wrote short essays and interesting things about some prints such as Milo, Lipton, Key-soap and many more. A learner who built his portfolio using a big brown envelop had the following as its contents: Lipton, Omo, Action mosquito coil, Pepsodent, Digestive biscuit and Medi-soft boxes. There was a very interesting story from the Junior Graphic entitled “Kofi’s encounter with dwarf”. This learner also wrote a short essay on key-soap and its uses, making the portfolio a very interesting one. It is interesting to state that learners were competing as to who had the nicest and the most interesting print material.

3.3. Learners Literate Behavior

The intervention brought a drastic change in the literate behavior of the learners. Their attitude towards reading is quite impressive now. A lot of print materials that used to go unnoticed on the school compound are now being noticed. Learners pick up print materials they find on the school compound and instead of the old culture of throwing them away, they try to read them. In cases where they are unable to read, they seek assistance from their peers or teachers.

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As a result of this, the school compound has now become very neat because when learners pick materials and find them useful they keep them but if they are not useful they put them in the dustbin. The observation is that there is an indication that learners have been reading prints. Some of the prints read after the intervention included; labels, adverts, obituaries, names of shops and stores. Specific examples mentioned are: University of Education, God's Grace Supermarkets, Stop Aids love life, Action mosquito coil, Rosalinda and many more.

Again, it was noticed after the intervention that learners had improved in their reading and writing as seen in learners' essays. The length and grammar of the essays has improved and this can be seen when we compare essay A and B. Samples of these can be seen in appendix B.

Learners also learnt general issues such as HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, importance of education and many more since the environmental prints were general. This is indicative that environmental prints have something important to offer learners. Apart from the fact that they can help learners improve their performance in class, they also help them get information on what goes on around them.

Environmental prints had a significant influence on the writing of learners. They were able to acquire more vocabulary and good expression from prints and this made essays better than before. Learners were able to write short essays on some environmental prints as one of the new things learnt from their interaction with prints. For example, a learner was able to write an essay on Omo and how it is used. See sample in appendix B.

It was also realized that environmental prints had a significant influence on learners' understanding of what they read. Learners demonstrated higher understanding in reading and comprehension as seen in a learners previous and present essays labeled A and B in appendix B.

It is important to state that learners showed a greater interest in the use of stories from the Junior Graphic for their reading and comprehension lessons. Some of them saved part of their pocket money to buy Junior Graphic. This implies that their reading behavior can be improved by the use of print in the classroom.

Again learners' developed the habit of cross-checking the meanings of words from the dictionary and this helped their understanding and increased their range of vocabulary.

Finally, it is important to mention that in language development, a learners' progress will depend on what he/she already knows. Their performance therefore depends more on their levels even at the pre-intervention point. Those who were good improved faster than those were not good. This means that active use of environmental prints in teaching in the classroom could improve language performance at all levels.

3.4. The New Literate Environment

The fact that the future of the classroom environment is critical when it comes to language learning cannot be over-emphasized. Before the intervention, the classroom walls were bare and therefore not inviting enough for learners to engage in reading, but now these walls are decorated with colorful and meaningful prints that entice learners to read (See this in appendix A). The prints that were used to decorate the walls were from the junior Graphic, the Mirror, Magazines, empty soap and biscuits boxes and many more. These prints have not only come to arouse learners' curiosity but also their interest, to the extent of making them add their own prints to what has been pasted by the teacher.

Materials such as empty tins and boxes that could not be pasted were put in a box, and kept in a corner to create an "environmental print corner". Some of the materials in this corner included empty milk, coffee, bournvita, tomatoes, and sardine tins, soap wrappers, different toothpaste boxes etc. It is interesting to say that teacher and learners shared ideas about these prints.

Finally, a class portfolio was created in which the best environmental prints that learners brought to school were kept in a file. Interesting essays that learners wrote about some environmental prints were also kept here. This class portfolio also included an environmental print book that was created by learners. This book was created by putting together interesting print materials and short stories from the Junior Graphic and other sources.

3.5. Challenges

Though environmental prints are a good source of materials for language learning, they have their peculiar problems. It is very difficult to use some prints in the classroom because it is considered culturally improper to do so. For instance, it is extremely difficult for a teacher to use a print like condom to teach teenagers. This is not because they will not understand what they are being taught but they will giggle and may even tag the teacher as immoral. They will do this because this is a very silent area in most Ghanaian homes (an area that parents do not often discuss).

Despite the immense benefits learners had from the intervention, environmental prints were a source of distraction since learners sometimes concentrate on the prints on the walls instead of listening to the teacher. This perhaps was due to the fact that learners were so much excited about the prints because they were new. It is however possible that with time learners will get use to the prints on the walls and pay attention instead of gazing at the prints.

Television and the radio adverts are among source of worry when it comes to the use of environmental prints. The language of some adverts can be very misrelating. For example, the advert on Bells Mineral Water which says “The coolness of the water has provoked my English speaking”. The advert on Action mosquito coil say “Do not be let mosquitoes to do this to you”. And many more can make learners think the language is correct and they may start using such language since they believe in the infallibility of such media.

Again, wrong use of words and wrong spelling is another problem that cannot go unnoticed when it comes to using environmental prints in the classroom. Some of the writings on signboards and adverts that learners brought to the classroom had such problems. Specific examples are uncle Ato’sFoto studio, FC skin and Beauty Klinik, uniik 95.7 fm, Lat pat’s Beauty Saloon, Dunk a Lipton “N” win and many more.

Samples of these can be seen in appendix C.

It must not go unmentioned that environmental prints destroy wall paints when they are pasted in the classroom. Again most classroom walls have not been designed to suit pasting of environmental prints.

In spite of all the problems that environmental prints pose, it is believed that if teachers are given an in-service training on the proper use of environmental prints, these problems could be drastically reduced.

Again, a careful selection of prints can minimize the learner’s interaction with bad construction and wrong use words. Learners could also be cautioned on the fact that not all prints are a good source of language learning.

Teachers should go a step further to break the “cultural taboo” by bringing into the classroom, environmental prints that belong to this group. Also, classrooms should be built in such a way that will make it easy for prints to be pasted on their walls.

Finally, it is important to say that, the problem of environmental prints is not prominent enough to over-shadow the benefits of using them in the language classroom.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning materials are inadequate in our basic schools for use by both teachers and learners with the situation being worse in the rural areas. The awareness of the usefulness of environmental prints can reduce drastically this unfortunate situation.

The study revealed that there are lots of environmental prints that can be used in the classroom to teach the English language. Again, learners themselves acquired most of the environmental prints used for the intervention and this suggests that they are aware that acquiring environmental prints does not necessarily involve money.

Though environmental prints have their own problems and also make the classroom dirty, they create an environment rich in literacy where learners’ language can grow. It also came to the realization that environmental prints can be used to teach such aspects of the English language as reading / comprehension, spelling and writing.

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Appendix A: Samples of Environmental Prints



Teacher and Pupils viewing prints on the Classroom wall

Appendix B: Earners Products and Portfolio

Angela Sackey – Pseudonym 16th November 2012

Myself – A

Angela Sackey is my name. I comes from Winneba in the Central region.

I am fifteen of my age. I am dark in complexion. I am one and half metre tall. I have round face with two small eyes and two bit ears.

The food I like best is fufu and groundnut soup and the game I like best is football. There are ten player play the ball with one goal-keeper.

The subject I like best is English, Mathematics and Science. Why I like the subject I mention is that when I grow up in future I can becomes a teacher or Doctor. I have three brothers and one sister. My pen is getting finish so I will end it here.

This is a sample of a learner's essay

Appendix B: Learners Products and Portfolio

Angela Sackey - Pseudonym

5th March 2012

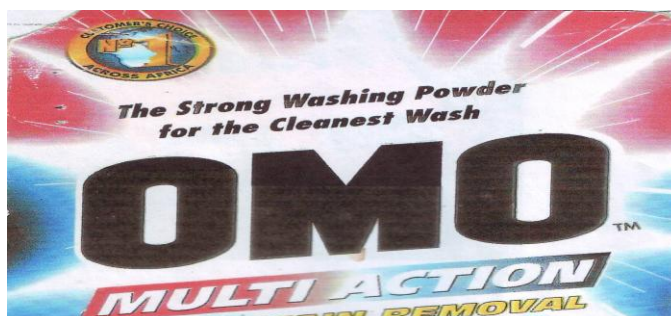
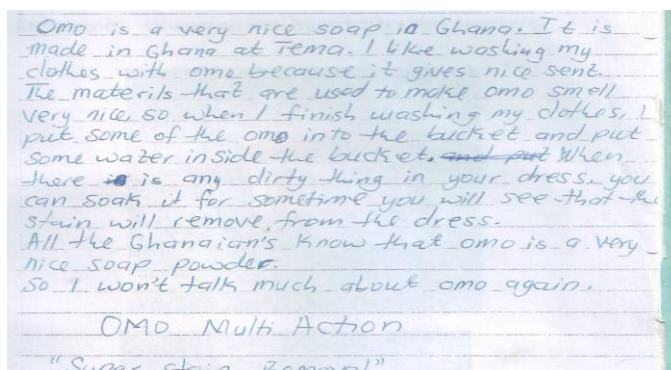
Myself – B

My name is Angela Sackey and I am fifteen years old. I come from Winneba in the central region and I stay in Abasraba. The names of my parents are Mr. And Mrs. Sackey. I am dark in colour. I have a broad face. My mother is a teacher and my father is an Accountant is Obuasi.

My mother is not a housewife. I have three brothers and one sister so we are five. I Mary Sackeyis a third born and my brother who is call John is a last born.

I attend Anglican Junior Secondary School in Winneba. I am in form one. I sit in the first row. The name of class teacher is Mr. S.K. Mr. S.K. is fer in colour. He a bit short. He like playing so people like him very well. There are fourty students in my class. As for my class they are cleaver students so I like them well. Fifteen are girls and twenty five are boys. The like best ludo and four people play that game. We use our hand to play it. The name of my best friend is Cynthia Bondze. She is sixteen years old. She is fat and have a broad face. She is short and the game she like best is volley. We play volley on the field. I like my it to me. I trust my friend very well. She don't cheat people and when you tell hell something she don't spread it to everybody.

The food I like best is fufu and groundnut soup and tilapia and I like it because when I eat it, it gives me energy to grow.



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