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Language Readiness of Pre-primary Children- An Experiment

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ABSTRACT

Language is the key predictor of school success. At the early stage of development, language readiness can help increase participation, improve learning outcomes, strengthen retention, and thus ensure school success. It also enables children to develop cognitive and social skills such as thinking, reasoning, problem solving, sharing, caring, empathy and effective interaction with friends and adults. Understanding the significant role of language at the pre-primary stage a study was conducted in pre-primary sections of four Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) schools with the intent to assess the level of language readiness of 82 children and to identify language learning gaps. In order to address the identified gaps, a set of language readiness activities were designed and implemented in experimental group pre-primary sections for two months followed by reassessment of the level of language readiness of children. Data was collected using the Rating Scale for Language Readiness, Checklist to Review Curriculum Content, and Classroom Observation Schedule developed by the investigator. Findings suggested that all the components of language readiness were not covered in the curriculum and if covered were not being followed in practice. Gap identification showed that children's performance was nearly 50% less in different aspects like sequential thinking, personal information, questioning, thinking and answering, response to needs, rights and emotions, personal preference, expression of needs, initiatives in interaction and cooperation and interest. The largest gaps were reported in sentence making readiness (71.9%) and reading

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readiness/ identification of beginning sounds (65.1%). The lowest gap (20.5%) was reported for only one aspect that is following instructions. Post implementation data showed a considerable increase in language readiness among children. This study has the potential to identify the gaps in language readiness and provide achievable solutions to address this issue at a larger scale.

Keywords: language readiness, pre-primary, Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), gap

INTRODUCTION

School readiness over the last few decades is being globally treated as a significant component of Education For All (EFA). In India, it is setting-up its roots and becoming integral part of pre-primary education programs. It increases enrollment in the first grade of primary education and more likely increases retention, completion, achievement (Mehendale, 2010; *UNESCO*, 2010), earnings and educational attainment later in life (*CEA*, 2016). New Education Policy (NEP) in India also gives lot of emphasis on school readiness of children. Studies have shown that children's readiness for school is made up of multiple components and shaped by numerous factors. Therefore, a consensus was formed, based on a wealth of research that children's readiness for school depends on their level in distinct but interconnected domains. In this context, the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) recommended carrying out activities for all round development and care with more focus on ensuring school readiness among pre-primary children for a prescribed amount of time on a regular basis (MHRD, 2013). The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) reaffirmed that school readiness is the process of preparing children to acquire skills and competencies in the physical-motor, cognitive, language, and socio-emotional domains of development. It aimed at ensuring smooth transition from informal learning at pre-primary to formal learning at primary school (2014a). Among all domains, language is considered as the key predictor of school success.

Language readiness enables children to develop cognitive skills, knowledge and to interact effectively with friends and adults. It also enables children to develop skills in thinking and problem solving; knowledge about the particular objects and the way the things works; and prepare them to interact effectively with peers and adults. Language can help increase participation, improve learning outcomes, strengthen retention, ensure school success, and predict children's reading abilities throughout their educational careers. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (2005) pointed out that this domain includes communication and emergent literacy. Communication includes listening, speaking, and vocabulary. Emergent literacy includes print awareness, story sense, early writing and the connection of letters to sounds.

Since long, the development of language readiness is given preference by the Government of India in its all the educational planning, quality improvement programs, developmental work and strategies for teaching process to improve the level of learning among young children. In this endeavor, the MWCD (2014b) has suggested quality standards to offer a framework for assessing the implementation of pre-primary programs and support the pre-primary centres as well as service providers in developing and maintaining its quality. Where, the language/interaction or the communication is considered as the first standard of quality to be ensured at pre-primary stage. Standard six also emphasized on fostering language and literacy abilities in pre-primary children. In contrast Chandra, Gulati and Sharma (2017) in a review of studies on pre-primary education reported less focus on language activities for children and limited opportunities for children to interact especially with teachers. Kaul, Chaudhary and Sharma (2014) in a longitudinal study reported that most of the government pre-primary education centers do not conduct appropriate language development activities no planned efforts found to encourage interaction. Wherever, these are conducted, are often with few

children. Hence, participation of children in activities was found low. Bhise (2016) informed that opportunities for expression, helping children, framing sentences, patience to listen to their explanations were missing. National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD) reported that activities for language readiness were rarely organized in pre-primary centres in the country (2006).

An experiment conducted by Nonoyama and Bredenberg (2009) suggested that intervention brings improvement in language readiness of children. It was reported that children in experimental group significantly out performed children in control group in the language test. Similarly the results of (Head Start REDI- Research-based, Developmentally Informed) another intervention also revealed significant differences favoring children in the enriched intervention classrooms on measures of vocabulary, emergent literacy and learning engagement (Bierman et al., 2008). At pre-primary level language, intervention proved successful to ensure language readiness among children. Hence, early intervention is critical for children's language development especially at pre-primary stage (Chandra, 2017)

With this vision, ensuring that all children receive language readiness stimulation at pre-primary is vital. Taking this into account an in-depth study was conducted in pre-primary sections of Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) schools to develop and implement language readiness activities. The MCD schools of Delhi considered as the most appropriate schools for the present study because majority of school for children in Delhi come under MCD administration. Apart from this, the curriculum review and classroom observations suggested that less focus is given on development of language readiness among pre-primary children.

OBJECTIVES

- To identify gaps in the performance of children in language readiness.

- To find out the outcome of the language readiness activities on the performance of children in language readiness.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in 4 randomly selected pre-primary sections of MCD schools under South District of Delhi having 82 children enrolled (40 experimental and 42 control group). Data was collected using a five-point 'Rating Scale to Measure Language Readiness of pre-primary Children', 'Checklist to Review Curriculum Content', and 'Classroom Observation Schedule' developed by the investigator. Reliability of the rating scale was drawn 0.95 using 'Test Retest' method and 'Pearson Correlation Coefficient' formula. Both the instruments were piloted in pre-primary sections and validated by the experts before use. The study was conducted in three phases. In first phase the level of language readiness among all 82 children including experimental and control group studying in all classes was assessed by the investigator to identify the gaps. In second phase, language readiness activities were designed and implemented in the experimental group sections for two months to address the identified gaps. There were 80 activities for children and few guidelines for teachers. It was expected from the teachers to organize two activities each day i.e. 10 activities in a week. They were also asked to follow the guidelines while conducting the activities and dealing with children in general. During this phase teacher training was done on the effective implementation of language readiness activities. In third phase the performance of both the experimental and control group children was reassessed to see the outcome of the language readiness activities. Finally, the data was analysed using MS excel and results were drawn in percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study fall into four parts. First part charts the gaps in the performance of children. Second part describes the development of language readiness activities. Third part explains

the implementation of developed activities. Finally, fourth part shows the outcome of language readiness activities among children. The results of the study are as follows:

Gaps in the Performance of Children in Language Readiness

Gaps were considered as weak performance of children on 20 aspects under language readiness. The results are illustrated in the figure-1.

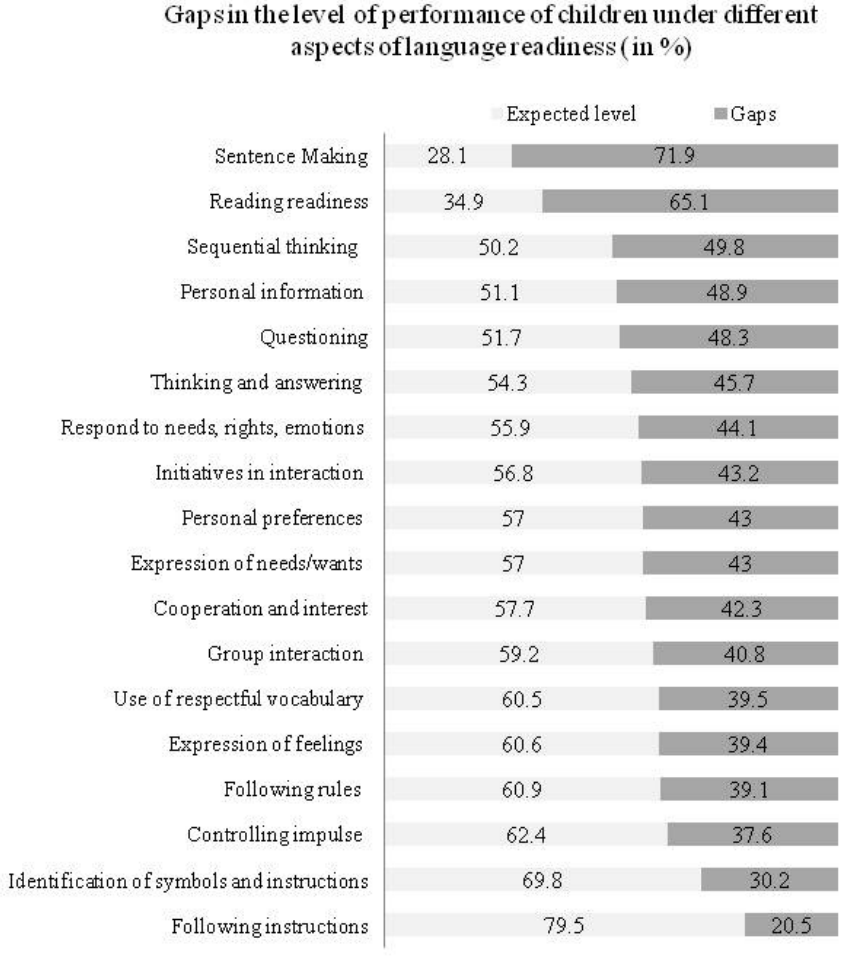


Figure 1: Gaps in the level of performance of children in language readiness

The gap identification data shown in figure-1 reveals that there were gaps in the level of performance of children in all the aspects of language readiness. Largest gap i.e. more than 50% was reported in sentence making skills (71.9%) and reading readiness/ identification of beginning sounds (65.1%). The lowest gap (20.5%) was reported for only one skill i.e. following instructions. Rest of the 17 aspects of language readiness skills fall in the gap range of minimum 30.2% to the maximum 49.8%. As per the intensity of gaps the aspects are sequential thinking, awareness of personal information, ability of ask questions, ability to think and answer, ability to respond to the needs; rights, emotions of others, taking initiatives in interaction, showing personal preferences, expression of needs and wants, ability to interact in group, use of respectful vocabulary, expression of feelings, following rules, and identification of various symbols and instructions.

On interaction, majority of the children were unable to tell their full name, correct age, birthday, the name of parents and school and address. However, most of them were independent and showed preferences in many situations. They took initiatives in interaction and activities. Some of them were less responsive and less interactive. In addition, some children had no patience to wait for their turn; and few of them used to quarrel, hurt others, use abusive language, and roam aimlessly. They tried to win material and game sometimes through quarrel.

The classroom process anecdotes and curriculum review suggested that although the pre-primary curriculum contained some of the language related activities, but in practice, these were only occasionally organised. Therefore, most of the time these, activities were related to sentence making (storytelling and conversation), and writing of number and alphabets. A few activities for the

identification of objects, and alphabets were being conducted in all the classes. Usually, teachers asked children to copy the alphabets from the blackboard and do some writing work. It was noticed that all the children carried copies and pencil in their bags. On asking, teachers informed that due to the parents pressure they give them some kind to writing exercise. They said if they don't do such exercises parents think nothing is happening in the class and teachers are not teaching. However, found no planned activities for the language development of children. Interestingly, children got ample opportunity to talk or converse. In day to day relationship, interaction and during play or any other activities some children were not seen to be inclusive when it comes to include all the children in play and converse with them.

Studies in the past strengthened the findings of the present study in many ways. Studies conducted by NIPCCD (2006) and Kaul et al. (2014) reported conduct of less number of activities for language development in most of the pre-primary classes. Kaul et al. (2014) found no readiness activities for reading, writing and number in 50% ECCE centres in A.P, *Rajasthan,* and *Assam* while, private centres were conducting them but for a shorter duration. The participation of the majority of children in both places was unsatisfactory. Kaul and Chaudhary (2017) found minimal peer interaction and children were observed sitting quietly throughout the day. Therefore interaction between the children and the teachers was not observed in government pre-primary classes. Bhise (2016), in her study noticed that in 76% pre-primary centres social interaction was permitted but was not encouraged during the activities and in 17.5% centres such interaction among children and with teacher was not encouraged.

The result confirms the need of language readiness stimulation to the children of pre-primary sections in all the aspects. Hence, 80 language

readiness activities for children were designed and implemented in experimental group classes and the outcome was recorded.

Development of Language Readiness Activities

Aiming at reducing the gaps identified in the performance of children under different aspects of language readiness and improving the level of language readiness of children, a set of 80 activities related to different aspects of language readiness for children were designed considering the age, need, developmental correctness, existing experiential knowledge of children, their real life context, and the norms of the program planning/ curriculum planning. General principles and guidelines to improve teacher performance was included in the activities.

Implementation of the Language Readiness Activities

Initially, a six days training of teachers on the implementation of language readiness activities with hands-on experience was given to the experimental group teachers. The training consisted of a brief introduction to the school readiness; demonstration, and practice over each week's activities scheduled in the activities; and sharing of experiences and problems faced during teaching-learning process. The experimental group teachers conducted the designed activities following given principles and guidelines for two months. Finally, post data was recorded following same process followed for baseline data.

Outcome of Activities on the Performance of Children in Language Readiness

Performance of the children of experimental and control group on baseline and post activities were compared to understand, whether the performance of children in language readiness increased from baseline to post activities and also the performance

of experimental group children differ from control group children on post activities. The results are illustrated in figure-2

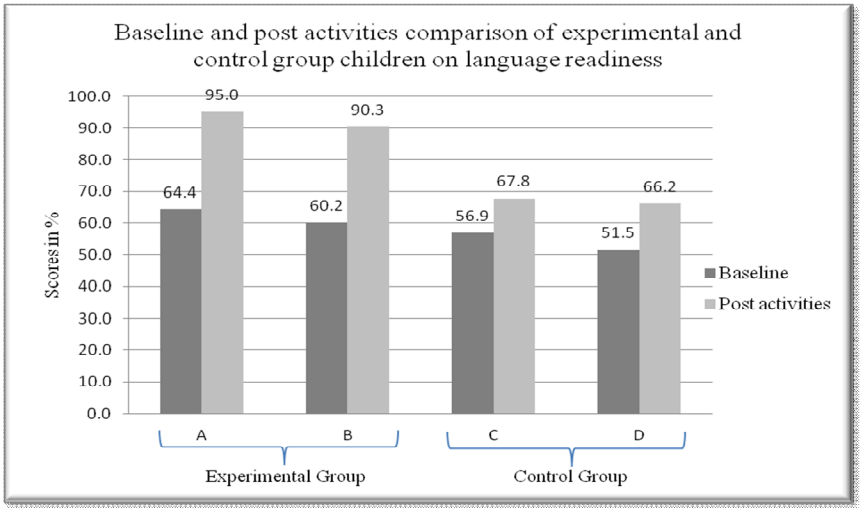


Figure 2: Baseline and post activities comparison of experimental and control group children on language readiness

Results of figure-2 clearly shows that on baseline, the performance of both experimental and control group children was almost similar, while on post activities it differed. On baseline, the performance of children of all four classes (A, B, C, D) ranged between 51.5% to 64.4% while on post activities it improved, that ranged from 66.2% to 95%. The results reveal that the performance of experimental group children in language readiness improved from baseline to post activities and also better than the performance of control group children on post activities. Initially, the performance of children of both the pre-primary classes i.e. A and B of experimental group was 64.4% and 60.2%, respectively. After the activities their performance improved and reached upto 95% for class A and 90.3% for class B. However, in case of children of control group classes i.e. C and D it also improved but not significantly. On baseline their performance was 56.9% (C) and 51.5% (D) that on post activities became 67.8% and 66.2%, respectively. This shows the positive outcome of the activities in terms of improvement in the language readiness of experimental group children.

The results of the present section is in harmony with a similar study by Pears et al. (2014) who found that children who received the activities demonstrated significantly greater improvements in letter naming, initial sound fluency, problem solving, and understanding of concepts about print than their peers who did not participate in the activities.

CONCLUSION

The results revealed that initially, there were many gaps in the level of performance of children in language readiness. Hence, the language learning activities were needed. The baseline and post activities data revealed that after activities, the performance of experimental group children has improved. Therefore, it is concluded that there was a positive outcome of the activities in terms of improvement in the language readiness of children. In this view, school based activities consisting of components for children to improve language readiness and guidelines for teachers to provide language stimulation designed to address the identified gaps, improves the performance. In addition, teacher training for the effective implementation of the developed activities are the important component that contributes to the performance of children. Therefore, language readiness activities must be designed and conducted as and when required. However, age, need, developmental correctness, existing experiential knowledge of children, their real life context, and the norms of the program planning/ curriculum planning essentially be considered during this process.

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