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Interest in Reading as Facilitating Factor in Acquiring Reading Skills

Abstract

The article deals with the problem of evoking interest in reading and its connection with successful acquiring of reading skills. Several theoretical concepts of neuropsychology and speech therapy have been analysed with an emphasis on difficulties regarding the process of learning to read in cases of dyslexia and/or reading disorders.

The aim of the study is to give an overview of the interconnection between interest in reading and successful acquiring of reading skills in order to carry out an empirical research with the help of various methods and principles that foster interest to reading. Materials and methods include an analysis of theoretical literature.

The written word helps children to develop their language considerably. Alarming results of the evaluation of student performance according to international surveys make one conclude that the reading literacy indicators leave much to be desired. An analysis of scientific research carried out in different countries shows close connection between children's interest (including reading interest) and their emotional participation in the learning process, specifically, in learning to read: interest increases the efficiency of the process. The latest discoveries in the field of neuropsychology allow to conclude that interest and interactive action can be encouraged and supported if the zones of the person's cortex are not damaged. It should be taken into account when carrying out an empirical research in which children's interest in reading is stimulated by the use of various methods and techniques. Conclusions of neuropsychologic studies are also of utmost importance when analysing the connection between interest in reading and the quality indicators (reading accuracy, speed and comprehension).

Interest in reading is a significant component of acquiring reading skills. Children's active participation in the learning process is a vital factor that encourages their general development. Interest forms the basis for children's wish to learn and read. Interest in reading will develop if teachers and parents initiate purposeful and well-considered activities.

On the basis of information provided by psychological, neuropsychological and speech therapy studies peculiarities and needs of children's individual development must be taken into consideration.

Key words: interest in reading, reading skills, dyslexia, reading disorders

Introduction

What type of a person do we wish to see next to us in future? What is s/he going to be like? It largely depends on the language this person is going to speak. It is not so important whether that language should be English, German or Latvian. What matters is the content and means of expression. We wish that the language spoken in Latvia and Latvian environment would be rich - that is the way to maintain it for future generations. One of the factors that can affect the development of the oral form of language is its written form. However, it does not find much response in schoolchildren. Reading is not the most favourite pastime activity, as follows from several studies carried out by students in Latvia over the last few years (Esīte, 2008; Bagātā, 2009, etc.). Similar results can be found in studies of specialists in other countries (viewed further in the article). How can one stimulate children's interest in reading? This is a problem that preoccupies scientists all over the world. The article deals with the essence of interest in reading and its connection with successful learning to read. Theoretical concepts in the field of neuropsychology and speech therapy have been analysed with an emphasis on difficulties that arise in cases of dyslexia and/or reading disorders.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to give an overview of theoretical considerations as found in specialized literature on the interconnection between interest in reading and successful acquiring of reading skills in order to enable an empirical research with the help of various methods and principles that foster interest in reading.

Materials and methods

Materials and methods include an analysis of theoretical literature.

Results

There are studies that show close connection between the development of reading literacy and interest in reading. Children who are interested in the reading process and the contents of books learn to read faster and more successfully. They read more books than those children who are not interested in reading and who do not like books as such. A study has been undertaken to find out how children get acquainted with books in their families and at what age it happens, so that the data could be compared with the development of interest in reading and reading literacy at school age. There is evidence that at present schoolchildren do not favour reading as a free-time activity. The most preferred pastime for 15% girls and 14% boys of all first-graders is watching TV programmes; among those who mention reading as their preferred activity there are 12% girls and 10% boys (Esīte, 2008).

A study of children's reading literacy and their success in mathematics and science has revealed an even more alarming picture. On the basis of a comparison of the performance of students from many countries, Latvian schoolchildren's

results have been estimated as average. However, in reality these are unsatisfactory results. According to the data presented by PISA¹ and the OECD Education work group in 2006², Latvia ranks in the 28th place among 57 countries regarding the science and education indicators (Adams, Berezner, Jakubowski, 2010). Reading literacy is a necessary precondition for learning everything enlisted in the school curricula. Students might find that mastering of even those subjects they are interested in is hard since it is reading that causes difficulties in the first place.

The issue of the development of reading skills and the importance of interest in reading have been accentuated by many scientists. Zenta Anspoka writes: "Due to the youngest schoolchildren's often unstable attention, less extensive language activity reading texts need to be prepared. They should not be lengthy, so that students do not get tired as readers and they do not lose interest" (Anspoka, 2008, 218). In the learning process it is a real necessity, however, not everything can be shortened and presented in an adapted form. There are materials, books and other information offered in the so called Easy Language³ which was initially devised for people with intellectual development, comprehension and other developmental disorders.

Since reading is a conscious process with an aim to acquire information or get aesthetical enjoyment, there must be an inner need to read. How can interest in reading be evoked and reading literacy achieved? It was Kārlis Dēķens who already at the beginning of the 20th century pointed to the necessity for a child to understand what has been written so that s/he does not lose interest (Dēķens, 1919). Comprehension of the text read is a significant precondition so that reading would be efficient and its aim would be achieved. Readers understand texts only if they attribute the expressed ideas to their own experience and knowledge actively, and they are capable of building notions in their memory. David Sousa, an outstanding neuroscientist and researcher has been dealing with the brain activity while learning and particularly learning to read. He emphasises the significance of the comprehension of a written text: "Comprehension is a complex interactive process that begins with identifying words by using knowledge outside the text, accessing word meaning in context, recognising grammatical structures, drawing inferences, and self-monitoring to ensure that the text is making sense" (Sousa, 2005, 97). Not always do children comprehend the text independently and without difficulty. Sometimes they need to be helped, especially if they have dyslexia and/or reading disorders.

There are studies of the connection between interest in reading and the child's overall interests, also what stimuli affect it and how to encourage interest in studies

¹ PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

² OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

³ Easy Language – an adapted language of the text made easier to read but not to perceive; also, an alteration of a text that is necessary for people with physical and/or intellectual development disorders as well as with limited reading and writing skills.

in general, especially in reading. One of the studies of the kind that had been carried out over a longer period of time and presented in Toronto University in 2001 by Susanne Hidi was dedicated to the connection between interest in reading and learning (Hidi, 2001). Since preschool age children's attention is mostly drawn by visual stimuli, television doubtlessly is a powerful competitor for the book. The visual stimuli of the television are supplemented by the audible ones, and together they have considerable advantage in comparison with the text of a book (Hidi, 2001, 193). What does a text need to be like (letter size, layout, pictures, etc.)? How does the plot of the text encourage interest? This is defined by individual qualities and differences as well as situational interest influenced by stimuli from the environment and their interaction. As Hidi remarks, several authors emphasise that prior experience is by far not the main provoker of interest as it was considered before (Hidi, 2001, 197). The link between attention and interest is an important precondition for mastering reading skills, consequently ensuring a successful learning process. Thus, one of the main tasks is to find a way how to use various opportunities for evoking interest so that students would read with an aim to learn more as a result (Hidi, 2001, 204). Interest is characterised by both cognitive and emotional aspects, sometimes a distinction is made between individual and situational interest referred to above. Individual interest is connected with a relatively lasting wish to get involved in the events of the book. If interest is increased, students learn better and read more. Parents are the first people to support children, and it is within their power to encourage interest in reading, at the same time preventing any possible dislike for it (Tübele, 2008, 120). What are the ways of not losing the tight link between children and their parents and evoking stable interest in reading? The American psychologist Glen Doman says that all questions that children have, especially the first ones, must be answered otherwise there are not going to be new questions and the given area will lose attractiveness in the child's eyes (Доман, 2004).

One of the conclusions arrived at by the teachers of Benchmark School in Philadelphia sounds as follows: children need to be active partners in the learning process. The school has been designed for struggling readers; the learning process is realized by teachers' acting in innovative ways and continuously searching for an approach to achieve increasingly better results. It came as a surprise to them when the results showed that students are much more successful when classes have a strict structure and they are conducted by the teacher instead of letting students learn on their own (Gaskins, 2005, 135). After many years of work and research, Irene Gaskins who founded the school in 1970 emphasised the necessity to inform students how and why they need to learn providing them with strategies that help in the course of their learning process (Gaskins, 2005, 219). However, it cannot be done without interest on the part of students themselves which is a great driving force.

Children's emotional involvement in social interaction and other processes, for instance, learning process, is a factor that encourages their general development.

This is proved by the studies carried out at Moscow State University. There Tatyana Ahutina and Natalya Pylayeva have created a system of methods called "Attention School" that is based on children's emotional involvement in the learning process thus leading to a natural increase of children's capacity of work as well as efficiency of the brain activity (Ахутина, Пылаева, 2008). Inteorisation of children's activities is implemented in an interactive way: from common activities of a psychologist and children by developing and implementing the programme in an external form to activities with the help of a psychologist in case children experience difficulties in performing the activity independently (Ахутина, Пылаева, 2008, 82). Such an interactive and corrective as well as developmental strategy of action is one of the most up-to-date approaches that is based on research conclusions of neuropsychology. It is scientifically justified and yields good results. Emotional involvement and active interest in what is going on might form the basis for a reading strategy for children who have not been successful so far or have reading disorders.

Regarding children whose speech and language development does not proceed within generally accepted norms for the particular age group, several authors are of the opinion that speech disorder and/or delay in the speech development cause difficulties in a successful learning process at school. The greatest difficulties are associated with reading and writing literacy development as it influences all further education (Ott, 1997; Reid, 2003; Snowling & Stackhouse, 2001). Children with reading disorders and with dyslexia can be assisted, and they can even become excellent readers. As Sally Shaywitz writes, children's involvement is especially important and it can be achieved with the help of methods that encourage drawing attention to reading and then learning at some particular age. Parents should be involved in the process and encouraged to act together with children to achieve excellent results. "The activities should be short and enjoyable. If he (child) is not interested, let it go. Little is accomplished if he sits there passively with you talking at him. Try to do these activities when both you and he are alert and in a good mood" (Shaywitz, 2005, 185). A child can become a good reader only by reading. What books shall one choose? How shall the wish to read be encouraged? Books must be selected in such a way that they are suitable for children's perception and are exciting. At first books should contain words well known to children so that they would be easy to decode (easy to "find" a familiar image in the brain). The already acquired reading skills are trained by reading the same text repeatedly; as a result reading techniques (accuracy, speed, precision) improve, and children become confident about their skills and abilities. Gradually it encourages them to take up and read more complex texts.

It is very important to discuss what has been read with the parents or the teacher in such a way broadening the child's horizon. The first books that children can read (printed in large letters, with qualitative and precise illustrations and familiar words) should be read again and again. Shaywitz says that reading together must become a

habit (first parents read for children and later children read for their parents) so that children would become confident they can read and parents are close by to give advice and help if necessary (for instance, to cope with an unexpectedly difficult word) (Shaywitz, 2005, 221–222). Fluent reading builds a connection between the decoding of the word and its comprehension that is so necessary for children who suffer from reading disorders.

Gavin Reid's studies discuss several factors that define children's attitudes towards reading. One of the conclusions accentuating differences between children's viewpoints states that for some children reading is like a task where words must be recognised and learnt, whereas other children consider reading an enjoyable action (a function), and the aim of the process is to understand the plot of the text (Reid, 2003, 25). Why then are there such considerable differences in children's viewpoints when it comes to their understanding what reading is? Does it depend on teaching methodology and strategy used by the teacher? Or are the answers to be sought in children's own abilities and skills and in how easy it is for them to learn to read and learn in general? Reid insists that reading failures are bound to influence children's attitude towards reading: they will perceive it as a task of reading words only, in such a way losing the educational value, and books will become a contradiction between pleasant and unpleasant aspects of the learning process (Reid, 2003, 26). A challenge for teachers is to turn the learning process into an exiting experience where books and reading play a significant part.

One must take into consideration that there are differences in the brain activity, functions and speed processes, for instance, if there are slight changes of a functional character they can considerably affect the reading quality. During an intellectual activity, the number of zones that operate simultaneously increases noticeably (especially in the frontal lobes of the cortex of the big hemispheres of the brain). According to the studies of Alexander Luriya, a number of zones take part in implementing complex types of psychic operations performed together with the speech system (Лурия, 2008, 190). If utterances are simple, the systems of the frontal lobe take practically no part in decoding processes. However, when it comes to decoding of complex sentence structures, complex utterances or subtexts, an **analysis is necessary to decipher the significant elements of the plot**. Knowing how complex the seeking and regressive movements of a human eye are (multiple returning to the fragments of the text that have already been read) in case of a complex text one can understand what difficulties occasionally arise in comprehending its general meaning. It gives a possibility to assess the significance of the reader's active participation in decoding complex information. Luriya states: "That is why in cases when the frontal lobes have been damaged, an ability to perform a directed, programmed and selected action is lost and an active behaviour is substituted by either impulsive, fragmentary reactions or inert stereotypes or inert stereotypes significantly inhibiting comprehension of complex

speech structures. The ability to understand words and simple sentences is not affected, however, a complex, elaborated speech and especially subtexts are hard to grasp” (Луприя, 2008, 301).

The lecturer of Warwick University Dimitra Hartas accentuates the necessity to select books that are interesting and suit children’s age. It is not unimportant if we wish children to take part in various activities, ask questions and answer them, narrate and comment upon what they have read (Hartas, 2006, 59). Interest is also the main factor that encourages student activity in the learning process. Besides, students with reading and writing disorders require support since they need more time to carry out the task. Assistance is necessary in choosing the learning techniques, for instance, games that reduce speech stress should be introduced and the number of reading tasks and activities related to the text needs to be gradually increased (Naegele, 2001, 112). Motivation and positive self-assessment for students with legasthenia (a term used to denote dyslexia/ specific reading disorders in Germany) mentioned in Ingrid Naegele’s studies help to choose games and activities purposefully; active participation on the part of students is of utmost importance (Naegele, 2001, 121).

Philomena Ott stresses the teacher’s role and responsibility in the studies of children who suffer from dyslexia: “...All students suffering from dyslexia learn to read if they have teachers who know how to do it” (Ott, 1997, 343). Several important activities that ensure a successful outcome are emphasised. One of them is to take into consideration the individual type (style) of learning that has to be incorporated into the choice of learning strategies. The studies should be based on those **areas that are individually better developed** and in which students can succeed; it gives an opportunity for the development of a successful career. Margaret Snowling and Joy Stackhouse consider that whatever the reading curriculum, it must be based on cooperation and must meet the individual needs and development of every child. A matching curriculum can be devised only in a supportive environment and by carefully examining the needs and abilities of every child, ensuring multisensory possibilities and scientifically acknowledged activity methods (Snowling & Stackhouse, 2001).

Peter Rathenow gives several pieces of advice how to create and develop interest in reading:

- Read aloud for children from the age of two
- Do not prohibit children to listen to their preferred stories and fairy tales for several times
- Encourage children's imagination and tell and create fairy tales
- Go together to a book-store to choose the latest books
- Go to the library to take part in the book openings and other events organised
- Do not force children to read books they liked before their interests changed
- Laugh together with children if what you read is funny; positive emotions

are very important

- Be a model for children while reading; show that it is interesting
- Read together with children if they cannot do it on their own
- Do not disturb children without unnecessarily when they read something interesting and exciting
- Find out children's interests in everyday life to select corresponding literature
- Mind that the reading environment and the adults' attitude are essential (Rathenow, 2003, 128–129).

Books in the printed form are not dyslexic children's friends, therefore such children are not particularly interested in what libraries can offer. Librarians on their part should have some knowledge of reading problems and should be able to advise appropriate audio books.

There are several studies that have not been touched upon in this article but that include good ideas how to encourage students' reading literacy. It is pointed out that emphasis should rather be on the content of books, and not so much on the reading process.

One should truly appreciate teachers' wish to devise school readers that allow students, especially those who are already experiencing difficulties in their learning process, study and read with interest. One of such projects has been carried out by the teachers Jana Jansone, Inese Stepko and Daiga Skudra who work at Liepāja Secondary School No 15. They have devised a teaching aid called “Let’s Read with Pleasure” that allows learning the Latvian language with real pleasure. Were the book more colourful... Unfortunately, not all desires can be granted under the circumstances.

Conclusions

Taking into consideration an analysis of several research results and scientists' conclusions, one can assert that interest in reading is a significant component of acquiring reading skills.

Children's active participation in the learning process is an important factor that encourages their general development.

Children's interest is the basis for their active participation in the study process.

Interest in reading will develop if teachers and parents initiate purposeful and well-considered activities.

Peculiarities and needs of every child's individual development must be taken into consideration, and they should be based on results of psychological, neuropsychological and speech therapy studies.

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