Synthetic Phonics as a Tool for Improving the Reading Skills of Nigerian Pupils

Introduction

Literacy rates in Nigeria have been on the decline. Statistics are suggesting that literacy rates dwindle on a daily basis. According to Igwe (2011), literacy rate reduced from 62% in 1992 to 52% in 2006. In the 4th June edition of The Punch, Executive Secretary of the National Commission for Mass Education, Alhaji Jibrin Paiko disclosed that illiteracy level had continued to rise in Nigeria and about 56 million adults are still illiterate. Many a senior primary school pupil cannot read fluently and many Nigerians graduate from high school without attaining good reading skills (Aina, Ogungbemi, & Adigun, 2011). Most recently, The Guardian of 22nd August 2014 declared a state of emergency on education citing poor examination results especially in English and Mathematics.

Synthetic phonics is not so different to the traditional teaching of Nigerian languages. A summary of interviews with adults (as opposed to literacy experts) over the age of 35 who learnt to read in the Nigerian school system demonstrates this:

School started with little or no knowledge of reading and writing; at best, a person was able to recite the alphabet either in English or in the local language. At school, instruction was in the native language and English was taught as a subject. Reading instruction in the native language progressed in earnest with learning the alphabet. Incidentally, the vowel alphabets as taught were similar to the sounds of the language and the consonants also were close to how they are sounded. Learning the alphabet was also coupled with joining the letters to form smaller segments, then words. For example, for a Yoruba speaker like the author, it would be:

a b d e ẹ f g gb h i j k l m n o ọ p r s ṣ t u w y

This would be accompanied by learning the vowels

a e ẹ i o ọ u

Next would be learning how to join the letters/sounds together to form words. Learning of the vowels would typically be followed by :

ba be bẹ bi bo bọ bu

da de dẹ di do dọ du

fa fe fẹ fi fo fọ fu

ga ge gẹ gi go gọ gu

As demonstrated above, this method of teaching the Nigerian languages (using the letter/sound correspondence) looks quite similar to the synthetic phonics method.

Nigerian language policy stipulates that reading should be taught beginning with the local language; in practice, this is hardly the case, as many schools begin instruction in English from the first day of school. This sometimes occurs because parents prefer their children to be taught in English whilst other times it is because the classroom composition is multi-ethnic and therefore multilingual (and a number of the pupils may not understand the local language). Alternatively, the class teacher may not speak the local language fluently or may not be sufficiently skilled in the language to use it as a means of instructing the pupils.

As a result, there is a need to find a method of teaching English early and quickly to Nigerian pupils to ensure that they achieve at least functional literacy skills.

Methods of Teaching Reading

The most effective way to teach children to read has been the subject of debate dating as far back as the 18th century (Barr, 2001). Many different methods have been used to teach reading, especially at beginners-level, including the alphabetic method, the phonic approach, the language experience method, and the whole word/look-and-say method (Beard, 1990).

Study Proposition

On the basis of previous synthetic phonics interventions in first and second language situations and urban and rural areas, this study proposes that synthetic phonics combined with sufficient emphasis upon pupil participation in the classroom will help to reduce the perennial failure of pupils to attain literacy skills in Nigeria. Training teachers in the synthetic phonics method equips them with the skill and a confidence that they require in order to teach pupils how to read. In addition, training them to make the classroom engaging and participatory enhances the pupil's learning experience and promotes their desire to learn. This will result in greater attainment levels and in future, a higher literacy rate in the country.

The synthetic phonics method, a fast-track multisensory approach to teaching children to read and write has been used successfully all around the world (such as Australia, England, and United States). Successful academic research into this method led to the adoption of synthetic phonics for teaching pupils to read, firstly in the UK. These reports clearly confirm the synthetic phonics method as an effective method for teaching beginners reading.

The synthetic phonics programme used for this study is Jolly Phonics (Lloyd, 1992), a commercially available teaching programme designed by a teacher for teachers (Stuart, 1999). It has been used with positive results in research on developing reading and writing skills by several researchers (Counihan 2010; Dixon et al 2011; Ekpo et al 2007; Johnston & Watson, 2005; Johnston et al, 2011; Stuart 1999).

Research question:

The main research question which guided the study was:

"Can the reading skills of Nigerian pupils improve through the synthetic phonics method?"

Sub questions from this overall interest include:

- "What is the attitude of the pupils towards the use of synthetic phonics in the classrooms?"
- "What is the attitude of teachers to the synthetic phonics method?"

The Procedure

The study reported here is a six-month study of 154 pupils in four Primary One classes in government-run schools in Nigeria. This was broken down into two experimental schools (synthetic phonics group) and two control schools (traditional method group). The study started with a pre-test of all pupils using standardised reading tests; the Burt Reading Test (1974) and Schonell Spelling Test (1952) were selected. Ruth Miskin's Phoneme Awareness and Oral Blending test was chosen to test the children's phonetic progress. There was synthetic phonics training for the teachers in the experimental schools. After the training, the teachers in the experimental schools taught their respective classes using the synthetic phonics method for six months while the teachers in the control schools taught their pupils using the traditional method they always used, i.e, the alphabet/rote learning method. The synthetic phonics classes were observed over the period. At the end of six months, the tests were repeated.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of pre- test scores

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Phoneme awareness	Control	.26	2.12	0	20
	Synthetic Phonics	.40	.93	0	6
Blending	Control	.21	1.59	0	15
	Synthetic Phonics	.03	.25	0	2

Burt reading	Control	61.18	2.58	60	74
	Synthetic Phonics	61.55	2.37	60	69
Schonell Spelling	Control	60.39	1.52	60	72
	Synthetic Phonics	61.65	1.08	60	66

This table illustrates the pre-test reading level scores of the pupils by group (synthetic phonics and control). The results show that in phoneme awareness, the mean pre-test score of the control group was low as compared with those of the pupils in the synthetic phonics group (control M=.26, synthetic phonics M=.40). The mean pre-test blending scores for the control group was higher (M=.21) than that of the synthetic phonic group (M=.03). The mean of pre-test Burt reading age for the control group was lower (M=61.18) than that of the synthetic phonics group (61.55); the mean pre-test score for spelling age for the pupils in the control group was lower (M=60.39) when compared with that of their counterparts in the synthetic phonics group (M=61.65). In all the tests, the standard deviation of the control group was higher than the synthetic phonics group showing that there was a wider range of ability among the pupils than the pupils in the synthetic phonics group.

The descriptive statistics shows that the distribution of pupils' scores was not normal. It was more appropriate to use a non-parametric test for the analysis of the post-test results hence the use of (Mann-Whitney U test) for the analysis of the data. In using these tests, data gathered from two different samples (Skay, 2007), are changed from scores to ranks (Siegel and Castellan, 1988).

Table 2: Post-test results

Variable	Group	Mean Rank	U	Z	p
Phoneme awareness	Control Group	49.01	231	-10.63	0.00
	Synthetic Phonics	119.77			
Blending	Control Group	71.96	234	-3.67	0.00
	Synthetic Phonics	85.72			
Burt reading	Control Group	71.19	270	-.63	0.53
	Synthetic Phonics	74.99			
Spelling	Control	78.54	276	-0.49	0.62
	Synthetic Phonics	75.96			

The outcome of the post- test phoneme awareness revealed that the mean rank of the control group was 49.01, while that of the pupils in the synthetic phonics group was 119.77. Mann Whitney U test indicates that mean ranks of the two groups in phoneme awareness were significantly different (U = 231, Z = -10.63, p = 0.00). This implies that pupils taught with synthetic phonics scored significantly higher in phoneme awareness than their counterparts who were taught using the traditional method.

For the post-test blending, the mean rank of the control group was 71.96, while that of the pupils taught with synthetic phonics was 85.72. The Mann Whitney U test shows that mean ranks of the two groups in blending were significantly different (U = 234, Z = -3.67, p = 0.00). This thus implies that pupils taught with synthetic phonics scored higher in blending than their counterparts exposed to the traditional teaching method. Teaching using the synthetic phonics method significantly enhances blending skills of pupils compared to teaching using the traditional method.

At the post-test Burt reading, the mean rank of the control group was 71.19, while that of the pupils taught with the synthetic phonics method was 74.99. The results indicated that the mean rank of the synthetic phonics group in Burt reading was higher than the mean rank of the control group. In other words, the pupils in the synthetic phonics group had higher scores on the average than those in the control group.

The post-test Schonell spelling revealed that the mean rank of the control group was 78.54, while that of the pupils in synthetic phonics group was 75.96 suggesting that on the average pupils taught with synthetic phonics scored less in spelling than did their counterparts in the traditional method group.

The post-test scores of the pupils indicates that the synthetic phonics method of teaching enhances the teaching and learning of reading skills. Pupils in the synthetic phonics groups significantly outperformed the control groups in phoneme awareness and blending skills. These are the foundational skills in synthetic phonics teaching. A child who can blend already has a good foundation for fluent reading. Although the pupils in the synthetic phonics schools did not appear to have any advantage over the pupils in the control schools in spelling tests, this is because at the time of the post-test, the pupils in the synthetic phonics group had not yet been taught some alternative spellings which would enable them write many of the words in the Schonell spelling test. However, this phenomenon is not unusual. It is similar to the findings of Bryne, Freebody and Gates (1992) which revealed that although at second grade non-phonics taught children recognised more real words than their phonics-taught counterparts, by third grade, the pupils who were not taught with phonics fell behind in both word reading and comprehension while the phonics taught children gained greater ability to decode non-words. When phonics-taught pupils have learnt more alternative ways of spelling sounds and they have more tricky words in their vocabulary, they achieve increase their reading and spelling skills. Once this foundation has been laid, the pupils will

not need to be taught how to read or write every new word but will apply their phonics knowledge to tackle new words.

The Pupils

Classroom observation showed pupils in the synthetic phonics schools participating actively during lessons. They answered questions, offered suggestions, and challenged the teachers' opinion. They were also very attentive when teachers were speaking. The synthetic phonics classrooms were lively and every pupil was engaged whilst identifying the sound, blending, counting sounds in words or writing on their friends' backs. In classrooms, pupils often raised their hands and at the same time jumped off their seats in an attempt to get the teacher to invite them to answer questions. The teacher would then gently remind them to sit down and raise their hands quietly. There were no dull moments in the synthetic phonics classrooms. However, in the traditional classroom, pupils always sat still, mostly listening to the teacher. The statement "read after me" was characteristic of this class as is usual with the purely rote learning pedagogy.

The pupils in the synthetic phonics classroom were eager to learn and looked forward to their English classes. Pupil interviews confirmed that the pupils enjoyed being taught using the synthetic phonics method.

Quotes include:

"I use phonics to pronounce hard words"

"I sound difficult words and pronounce"

"it has helped me to read"

"it has helped me to learn spelling"

"it has improved my reading"

"I like it"

"it is good to learn sounds"

…. and the Teachers

Teachers were observed while teaching and also engaged in two focus group discussions. Classroom observation showed that the teachers were focused, they taught with passion and they made a participating classroom environment, thus keeping the pupils engaged.

An unexpected benefit was that the teachers found synthetic phonics to be a vibrant tool for developing even their own pronunciation skill.

Teachers in the research endorse the method as evidenced by many who use it claiming that it revolutionises pupils reading abilities within a few months of teaching the synthetic phonics method. In the words of a teacher who taught one of the synthetic phonics groups,

> "It (synthetic phonics) makes my teaching very effective as it facilitates reading and writing, especially for those children who cannot. When you give them the sounds, you give them the written aspect of it as well so it helps the children actually to read and write and also improve their hand writing."

Conclusion

The study found that pupils were more eager to learn in the collaborative and engaging environment offered by the synthetic phonics programme. Also, teachers were more confident to teach English language and they found the programme very useful and easy to use. Moreover, there was a significant difference in the improvement in the reading skills of the pupils in the synthetic phonics groups compared to the pupils in the control groups. The study concluded that synthetic phonics is a possible tool for improving the reading skills of Nigerian pupils nationwide.

Recommendations from the findings

1. **The synthetic phonics method should be adopted into the Nigerian national primary school curriculum**
2. In-service synthetic phonics training of teachers of early years should receive not only a nod from the government but **the government should take synthetic phonics on as a major project**. This will result in producing good readers for the years ahead.

3. Thirdly, to prepare teachers of primary school for the task of teaching pupils to read and write, **courses for primary school teachers in training at the NCE/degree levels should include compulsory modules in synthetic phonics** for all trainee teachers
4. **Introducing pupils to the synthetic method at the Early Years level will yield better results than introducing it in Primary One.** The earlier the pupils receive synthetic phonics training, the better it is for developing reading skills.

These recommendations are reiterated by (Eshiet 2014) in response to the call for a national emergency on education and published in the 2nd September edition of The Guardian.

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