

Nurturing Reading Proficiency of Pupils through Phonics: Entrepreneurial Opportunities for Early Childhood Educators in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nurturing reading proficiency among the Nigerian children has become pivotal to a functional and development-oriented education. The place of phonics in achieving this strategic goal seems unquestionable with attendant entrepreneurial opportunities for early childhood educators. This study therefore, investigates the influence of phonics in nurturing Reading Proficiency of Pupils with implications for entrepreneurial opportunities for Early Childhood Educators in Nigeria. Ex-post facto survey design and proportionate random sampling technique were adopted for the study. Structured Questionnaire (PRA Scale, $r=.68$) was administered on a sample Three Hundred pupils from twenty (20) elementary schools in Ikorodu, Lagos, Nigeria. Descriptive statistics of simple percentages was used for data analysis. The findings revealed that teaching of phonics has improved the pupil's reading ability with 96.7% of the pupils applied sound of letters in pronouncing new words; the pupils have imbibed the culture of reading and through the use of phonics, while the teachers have adopted the use of phonics in instructional delivery to pupils. Thus, it was recommended that early childhood educators must be continuously trained in the use of phonics and a national philosophy should be entrenched in the national policy on education emphasizing a school-wide reading proficiency and culture.

Keywords: Phonics, Reading Proficiency, Entrepreneurial Opportunities, Early Childhood Educators

1. Introduction

The preponderance of entrepreneurship and its economic opportunities seem to have invaded virtually all fields of profession. The multidimensional exploration of the divergent nature of this economic driver (entrepreneurship) across all sectors of the nation has become emergent and sacrosanct in the scheme of nations' development globally. This had been evident in the Nigerian education industry. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigerian (1999) placed the nation's education system under the concurrent list; having implication for the involvement of government and private operators in producing the educational services across all levels. This seemingly provides an entrepreneurial platform for the private counterparts especially in the early childhood education sector where the yearning for professional operators is becoming astronomical due to the exponential growth in the population of its patrons.

Van der Kuip and Verheul (2003) affirms that the importance of entrepreneurship for economic development has been widely acknowledged in recent years as it assumed to be a major source of innovation, job creation and growth. Apparently, both entrepreneurship and the educational system are important for economic growth; having the latter serves as one of the determinants of the level of entrepreneurial activity in a country. The educational system broadens the horizon of individuals to perceive and develop entrepreneurial opportunities which involve the search for or the identification of unsatisfied wants and needs in the market place that can be met by introducing a (new) product or service. The perception of opportunities and the behavioural reaction to this perception are becoming evident among early childhood educators in recent times.

Moreover, this quest for sound early childhood educators and the attendant opportunities is not without the ability of the operators to provide valuable (enterprise) and appreciable educational services among which the use of phonics and reading proficiency of the pupils are prominent. These two tend to be more pronounced and easily appreciated by the parents and guardians of the beneficiaries of early childhood education (ECE). It might be pretty difficult for ECE operators to convince parents that their wards are progressing academically without the evidence in the use of phonics and their reading proficiency. These seem to have been the standard of measurement for learning outcomes of the pupils and ultimately a standard of performance for the early childhood educators. Thus, the consequential unmet expectations of the parents could result to dwindling enrolment and high rate of pupils' attrition among others.

The burgeoning demand of early childhood education (ECE) has legitimized the operators to unleash entrepreneurial spirit that motivates them to devise more innovative and effective forms of pedagogy. The profit motive and need to compete for student-clients is said to provide powerful incentives to improve educational

services. Hence, the entrepreneurship which is entrenched on values creation of ECE services become the strategic options for the operators.

The resurgence of phonics in the wake of 1950s as a method of teaching and inculcating reading ability in pupils tend to have established its relevance in the early childhood education. Its fast adoption into the teaching process with the attendant learning outcomes among the beneficiaries portend a cutting-edge approach to achieving educational objectives at ECE level in Nigeria. According Liu (2010), Phonics refers to a method for teaching speakers of English to read and write that language. Phonics involves teaching how to connect the sounds of spoken English with letters or groups of letters and teaching them to blend the sounds of letters together to produce approximate pronunciations of unknown words. Phonics is the system of teaching reading that builds on the alphabetic principle, a system of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations (Adams, 1994 cited in Liu, 2010). In other words, phonics refers to associating letters or letter groups with the sound they represent. As a result, phonics is not essentially a method for teaching English pronunciation; but a method for teaching English speakers to read and write.

Reading is the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information. The process involves the construction of meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge; the information suggested by the text being read and the context of the reading situation (Connors-Tadros, 2014). Reading proficiency requires the ability of the pupils to identify words on the page accurately and fluently, having enough knowledge and thinking ability to understand the words, sentences, and paragraphs on the page. This includes the pupils been motivated and engaged to use their knowledge and thinking ability to understand and learn from the text.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The agitations of the Nigeria parents and the consequent displeasure towards the reading ability of their wards have beamed a searchlight on the method of instruction used by the early childhood educators in developing the reading proficiency among the Nigerian children. These seemingly result into dwindling enrolment, high rate of pupils' turnover in the schools and frustration of enterprise value of early childhood education among others. Also, the questions about the efficacy of different instructional approaches to reading and over four decades of research into reading ability of pupils prompted the investigation on the place of phonics in the reading proficiency of Nigerian children.

1.3 Research Questions

The following research questions are relevant to this study:

1. Has the teaching of phonics been able to improve the pupils' reading ability?
2. Did the pupils imbibe the culture of reading and perhaps writing through the use of phonics?
3. Are teachers giving home work on phonics to the pupils after the class?

2. METHOD

2.1 Design

Survey design was adopted for the study. The population comprised of One Thousand (1000) basic two and three pupils of Primary Schools in Ikorodu Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria who have gone through phonics classes. Twenty (20) Schools in Ikorodu Local Government Area of Lagos were randomly selected and used. The participants were stratified into basic two and basic three, while proportionate random sampling was carried out in each of the strata. Seven (7) participants were selected from basic 2 and Eight (8) participants were selected basic 3, making it fifteen (15) participants selected from each school, which brings the total sample to three hundred (300) participants.

2.2 Instruments

The research instrument- Phonics and Reading Ability (PRA) Scale was employed. It is a self-developed questionnaire. The questionnaire sought relevant information necessary for a comprehensive analysis of the effect of phonic on the reading ability of Nursery and Primary School pupils. PRA scale was divided into two sections with section "A", dealing with the demographic data of the pupils, while the section "B" elicits responses on the influence of phonics on the pupils' reading ability. The scale consists of ten (10) items with internal consistency coefficient of 0.68. *Item sample include; do you always apply sound of letters in pronouncing new words? Does phonics help you in spelling English words?*

2.3 Procedure

The researchers personally visit to the twenty (20) selected schools in Ikorodu Local Government Area of Lagos State after which permission from the schools' management were sought to conduct the study. The researcher

administered the questionnaire on the pupils who have been taught phonics. The Data resulting from the instruments was tabulated and itemized according to the response sought in the questions. The researcher used the simple percentage method.

3. RESULTS

The results are as presented in tables 1-3

3.1 Research Question 1: Has the teaching of phonics been able to improve the pupils reading ability?

Table 1: Has the teaching of phonics been able to improve the pupils reading ability?

S/N	STATEMENT	YES	NO
1.	Do you always apply (sound of letters) in pronouncing new words	290(96.7%)	10(3.3%)
2.	Are you always interested in reading and answering English comprehension passages?	290(96.7%)	10(3.3%)
3.	Does phonics help you in spelling English words	291(97%)	9(3%)
10.	Has your knowledge of phonics so far helped you to read better?	291(97%)	9(3%)

The first statement from the questionnaire; do you always apply sound of letters in pronouncing new words. 290 pupils which is (96.7%) of the total respondents said yes, 10 pupils (3.3%) disagreed. The second statement from the questionnaire: Are you always interested in reading and answering English comprehension passages? 290 pupils which is (96.7%) of the total respondents said yes, 10 pupils (3.3%) disagreed with the statement. The third statement: Does phonics help you in spelling English words. 291 pupils which is (97%) of the total respondents said yes, 9 pupils (3%) disagreed. Also, The tenth statement: Has your knowledge of phonics so far helped you to read better? 291 pupils which is (97%) of the total respondents said yes, 9 respondents (3%) disagreed. Hence, the finding for research question one in that, teaching of phonics has to improve the pupil's reading ability.

3.2 Research Question 2: Did the pupils imbibe the culture of reading and perhaps writing through the use of phonics?

Table 2: Did the pupils imbibe the culture of reading and perhaps writing through the use of phonics?

S/N	STATEMENT	YES	NO
4.	Do you always write dedicated English words easily	265(88.3%)	35(11.7%)
5	Can you read other subjects such as Social Studies and Civic Education by yourself	89(44.5%)	81(40.5%)
6.	Do you find reading story books difficult?	23(7.7%)	277(92.33%)

The fourth statement: Do you always write dedicated English words easily. 265 pupils which are (88.3%) agreed with the statement, while 35 pupils which is (11.7%) disagreed. The fifth statement: Can you read other subjects such as Social Studies and Civic Education by yourself, 89 pupils which is (44.5%) agreed with the statement, while 81 pupils which is (40.5%) disagreed with the statement. The sixth statement: Do you find reading story books difficult? 23 pupils which are (7.7%) agreed with the statement, while 277 pupils which are (92.3%) disagreed. The finding for research question two is that the pupils have imbibed the culture of reading and perhaps writing through the use of phonics.

3.3 Research Question 3: Are teachers giving home work on phonics to the pupils after the class?

Table 3: Are teachers giving home work on phonics to the pupils after the class?

S/N	STATEMENT	YES	NO
7.	Do you always do your phonics and English assignment with people's help?	87(29%)	213(71%)

The seventh statement; Do you always do your phonics and English assignment with people's help. 87 pupils which is (29%) agreed, while 213 pupils which is (71%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. The finding for research question three is that teachers do give home work on phonics to pupils after the class.

4. Discussion

The finding from research question one is that teaching of phonics has improve the pupil's reading ability. This underpins the influence of phonics on reading proficiency pupils at early childhood education level. Contrary to the conventional look-say instructional method of reading, Chall (1965) as cited by Kim (2008) found that phonics produced better word recognition outcomes in the early grades and helped children read with better comprehension up to fourth grade. It was reported that the code-emphasis in phonics also produced larger benefits for less-skilled readers and children from low-income families. Furthermore, Kim (2008) avowed that children needed to develop phonemic awareness; the knowledge that words are composed of units of sounds

(phonemes) represented by letters (graphemes) and masters the alphabetic principle in order to become independent readers. United States National Academy of Education (1984) as cited in Liu (2011) found that phonics instruction improves children's ability to identify words. It was reported that useful phonics strategies include teaching children the sounds of letters in isolation and in words, and teaching them to blend the sounds of letters together to produce approximate pronunciations of words. It also states that phonics instruction should occur in conjunction with opportunities to identify words in meaningful sentences and stories. Moreover, Stahl and Miller (1989) cited in Kim (2008) reported that low-income children and poor readers needed explicit instruction in sound-symbol relationships (phonics) in first grade to become skilled readers. This seems to constitute the unmet expectations of the parents and subsequent agitations for better deliverables from the early childhood educators.

Interestingly, it was also discovered from the findings of this study that the pupils have imbibed the culture of reading through the use of phonics. This implies that the use of phonics enhances the reading culture among the Nigerian children. The meta-analysis report of the national Reading panel (2000) showed that instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and guided oral reading fluency improved children's ability to read words, to read connected text with speed and accuracy, and to comprehend text. Fabunmi and Folorunsho (2010) are of the view that the reading habit is learnt, nurtured and cemented in the school environment. A good school should form the habit of providing the pupils with things to read whether they are books, inscription or toys. When individual habitually and regularly read books and other information materials that are not necessarily required for him advance in his profession or career, he is said to have a reading culture. Little wonder that Igwe (2011) opined that reading culture is the process of building up positive reading attitude among students and children over a period of time. Reading culture is a sustained regime of reading textual and non-textual materials for the purpose of broadening the horizon of knowledge within and outside one's disciplinary interest (Akinbola, 2007 cited in Fabunmi & Folorunsho, 2010).

Economically, the ability to read is essential to being able to learn any subject taught in school and compete favourably in today's job market and high-tech society. Reading is essential to literacy and it is an emancipatory tool that liberates one from ignorance, disease and poverty as well as providing one with the liberty for all round development. Iheanacho (2007) cited in Fabunmi and Folorunsho, (2010) opined that a healthy reading culture has a pivotal role to play in the social, economic and technological development of any country. Reading is a very essential commodity in the task of nation building. It is a main political weapon in the development of any nation. Reading skills dictate performances in other discipline hence a good reader has a better opportunity for greater achievement (Ogbemudia & Alasa, 2014). Incontrovertibly, nurturing a reading culture and proficiency is indispensable to a functional, durable and development-oriented education.

The finding for research question three is that teachers do give home work on phonics to pupils after the class. This indicates that teachers adopt the use of phonics in nurturing reading proficiency among the Nigerian children. Kim (2008) asserts that empirical findings affirmed the vital role that teachers played in improving children's reading skill and that explicit instruction involving phonemic awareness, phonics, oral guided reading, and comprehension strategies was more effective in improving children's reading skills than student-centred approaches like sustained silent reading, in which children received little or no guidance from teachers in selecting and reading text. It was concluded that teacher-directed instruction was essential to improving children's reading proficiency (USA National Reading Panel, 2000). According to Holte, (1998) in Fabunmi and Folorunsho, (2010), over 180 studies have proven that phonics is the best way to teach reading to all students. It has also been shown that phonics is the only way to teach reading to all youths with learning difficulties such as dyslexia (difficulty in learning to read due to one or more information processing problems such as visual perceptual or auditory perceptual deficits). It was suggested that countries that use the phonetic language, like in the English Language should employ phonic in teaching how to read. For children, phonic is a very vital tool in teaching to read because it teaches children to read the same way they learnt to talk. Yilmaz (2000) cited in Fabunmi and Folorunsho, (2010), affirmed that people who do not learn to read through an intensive phonic programme often have one or more of the following symptoms; below grade level reading achievement; slow reading; poor comprehension; fatigue after reading only for a short while; poor spelling skills and lack of enjoyment from reading.

5. Conclusion

The fecundity of phonics over other instructional strategies used in teaching reading has been established as it improves the pupil's reading ability; helps them to imbibe a reading culture and ultimately was found effective by the teachers in nurturing reading proficiency among the Nigerian children. It is indeed a cutting-edge approach that is multisensory, active and designed to help children master letter sounds, discriminate sounds and blend sounds in spoken words hence they are able to read independently at an earlier than average age. These have the potentials of delivering the educational expectations of the parents and provide entrepreneurial opportunities for ECE operators.

6. Recommendations

Early Childhood Educators must be grounded in the use of phonics. Adequate preparation should be given to them for quality delivery of instruction and should be exposed to the basic rudiments of reading instruction for effective and efficient productivity. Appropriate instructional material should be used by the ECE operators as availability and creative use of instructional materials make pupils learn more and retain better what they learn. Colorful pictures, flash cards, posters, card games, cartoon collection, coupled with actions and blending songs will be so captivating to the pupils thus making the lesson lively and comprehensive to the pupils.

Educational managers in pre-basic schools must provide leadership towards establishing and sustaining reading culture. Leading instructional staff toward a strong reading culture, the head of school must articulate high expectations of all staff and hold them accountable for working toward these expectations. They must also engage staff and other stakeholders working toward this outcome; cultivate stakeholder participation in supporting the process. This process is the essence of leadership when enterprise value of a service is questioned.

A national philosophy entrenched in the national policy on education emphasizing a school-wide reading proficiency and culture. It is important that the entire citizenry a shared vision of readership among the Nigerian children, a mission (sense of purpose) and shared beliefs that the desired outcome is attainable. A planned and deliberate attempt to raise the national consciousness must be embraced by the governments at all levels.

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