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Effect of Phonics on the Reading Skill of Preschool Children in Ilorin West Local Government Area, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the effect of phonics on the reading skill of preschool children in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State, Nigeria. The study adopted a pretest-posttest control group quasi experimental design. Simple random sampling technique was used to select two pre-primary schools. A total of 27 preschool children participated in the study. Two validated instruments used for data collections were Reading Skills Test for Preschool Children ($r=0.82$) and Home Environment Questionnaire for Preschool Children ($r=0.79$). Data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings from this study revealed that: there was a significant main effect of phonics on reading skill of preschool children, there was no significant interaction effect of phonics and home environment on reading skill of preschool children while there was also no significant interactive effect of phonics and gender on reading skill of preschool children. Based on the findings, it was concluded that phonics methods improved reading skills of preschool children regardless of their gender and home environment. Based on the conclusion, it was recommended that seminars and training should be organized to train teachers to adopt phonics methods in teaching reading skills.

Keywords: Children, Home environment, Phonics, Preschool,

Introduction

Reading forms the bedrock of children's educational success. Without strong reading skills, children are likely to face limitations not only in academics but also in their future economic, social, and emotional growth. Developing the ability to make meaning from printed or recorded information is therefore essential for lifelong success. Reading is a thinking process where readers actively engage with printed or written text to extract and construct meaning. It goes beyond simply recognizing words; it involves interpreting and making sense of the ideas represented by the text. Through reading, children interact with information, test their understanding, and use their language skills to build knowledge. Reading is like a conversation between the reader and the text, where meaning is created through active participation.

MacIver and Spitz (2020) described reading as the act of identifying the symbol and obtaining the meaning from the identified symbol. They went further to say that reading can only take place when a child or an individual is able to identify and differentiate between different symbols or letter and then obtain meaning from them. Marabyan (2024) and Zhang et al. (2024) in their joint study explained reading as a process that requires the use of complex thought processes to interpret printed symbols as meaningful units and comprehend them as a thought unit in order to understand a printed message.

According to Cameron et al. (2023), reading is an important skill that needs to be developed in children. Not only is it necessary for survival in the world of schools and (later on) universities, but in adult life as well. The ability to

learn about new subjects and find helpful information on anything from health problems and consumer protection to more academic research into science or the arts depends on the ability to read. Reading helps children learn from human knowledge and experience. Through reading, knowledge has greatly contributed to the growth of mankind. Reading is the fastest and simplest way to raise children's educational level. Reading is like opening a door to human's past, where it can serve as a looking glass for our present. Reading also stimulates the development of brain cells, reinforces language skills, enhances organisational abilities, improves one's temperament and poise, and provides strength to endure frustration. She further posited that reading is the best and only way of enabling humans to absorb new experience and replace old views. In the present information age children are expected to read text to learn. All text and examination requires their ability to read examination questions. Evidently, academic achievement of any kind is therefore closely tied to children's reading ability.

Reading opens doors to factual information about any subject on earth, practical or theoretical. Given the wealth of available resources such as Internet, libraries, schools and bookstores, if children can read well and if they see reading as a source of information, then for the rest of their lives they will have access to all of the accumulated knowledge of mankind, access to all of the great minds and ideas of the past and present. Through books, children can also learn about people and places from other parts of the world, improving their understanding of and concern for all of humanity. This, in turn, contributes towards our sense that we

truly live in a "global village" and may help us bring about a more peaceful future for everyone (Van Woudenberg, 2018; Rahmah and Pandjaitan, 2018)

Unfortunately despite all the importance of reading skills to children, many preschool children seem not to have good reading skills. Ecalfe et al. (2023b) had found in their joint study that most school covered in their study do not have functional school libraries. It was also discovered that some of the pupils from these schools do not have private libraries in their homes. In support of their findings, the factors mentioned could be the reason children do not have good reading skill. According to Wright group (2021) most children age 4 or younger cannot read any of the printed words in the texts they encounter in their environments unless the texts were read to them previously. In other countries, this problem has equally been observed. For instance, Ligembe (2014) in his research work stated that some primary school children in Tanzania complete their primary education without having acquired reading skills that would enable them to read and write in English. For example, in Shinyanga region, he reported that 120 children among 35,162 who were selected to join Form One in 2012 in that region were not able to read fluently in English. Similarly, 311 children in three wards in Shinyanga municipal primary schools were reported to lack reading skills in English. Syazreena et al. (2024) reported that many high school graduates do not have the basic literacy for today's high tech jobs.

When preschool children lack good reading skills, they receive poor grades in school, get easily distracted and frustrated, engage in anti-social behaviours, like delinquency, truancy, school violence, bullying, hacking computers and examination malpractices, receive poor grades at school, get easily distracted and frustrated, have behaviour problems, seem to dislike school, and often fail to develop to their full potential. (Goldfield et al., 2021). Hjetland et al. (2020) stated that poor reading reinforces feelings of inadequacy and frustration, social disapprovals which in the long run affects self-esteem. He also stated that a poor reader is thought to have a dull mind, deficient not only in reading but in other subject, he/she will prefer to remain unnoticed. He/she might resort to aggressive behaviour towards teachers, parents and other children, become a truant and delinquent because he/she tries to escape from an environment which seems uncomfortable to them where so much emphasis is placed on reading. A study carried out by Aina et al. (2011) showed that early in the primary grades, children who are struggling with literacy begin to experience failure and related negative effects in

interpersonal skills. These effects can include task-avoidance and acting out, lowered levels of personal regard, and seeking of personal validation in venues that are anti-social.

Teacher's choice of method is one of the main factors of poor performance in student's achievement in reading. The lack of basic reading skills in preschool children can be blamed on teachers use of conventional method of teaching that do not give way for children to acquire reading skills in the appropriate way. Some English teachers are lagging behind in their approach to teaching. The effect is poor performance among children. These teachers lack methods of imparting reading skills to children. The condition is so bad that some children find it difficult to read and understand a simple sentence (Syazreena et al., 2024). Although direct teaching is one of the most widely used teaching strategies for teaching reading, it has been criticized as ineffective and scorned as the teaching method chosen by teachers who are not prepared. Fifty percent of reading difficulties are believed to be preventable if students are given effective language development experiences in preschool and kindergarten and effective reading instruction in the primary grades (Stockard et al., 2018).

It is important to mention that some researchers have equally noticed this same problem and have put in one effort or the other. For instance, Nursina (2021) carried out a research on phonic methods on increasing reading ability in children with visual impairments, the study revealed that phonics methods significantly enhance the early reading skills of pupils with visual impairment. Also a research work carried out by Mohammadi (2022) on the effectiveness of phonics and whole-word techniques on improving English reading skills of dyslexic students. The results reported that the effectiveness of phonics and whole-word techniques positively improved the English reading skills of dyslexic students. In an article investigating the effects of phonics training based on phonological and morphological awareness on reading and writing abilities in children with reading difficulties, the study revealed that children with low reading proficiency benefit greatly from phonics intervention programs, which include morphological awareness training, in terms of their reading comprehension and fluency (Byun et al., 2024). The study adopted an experimental research approach using elementary school children, revealing that phonics methods enhances the reading abilities of kids in the experimental group compared to the control group.

Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE) is the care, protection,

stimulation and learning promoted in children from age 0-4 in a crèche or nursery (NPE 2013). It can further be defined as the care and education given to children in an educational setting prior to their entry into primary school, this can be synonymously used with preschool. Preschool is a school for children who are between the ages of about zero to five years old. Cambridge University Press (2019) described preschool as relating to, or constituting the period in a child's life that ordinarily precedes attendance at elementary school. This period is a very important period in a child's life because it is the foundation on which other levels of education will be built. Therefore, reading at this stage is necessary and should be taught systematically in such a way that it enhances fluency in the future.

Gender factor has continued to be a relevant predicting variable in the academic achievement of learners at all level. It is the state of being either male or female. Gender factor as examined by Amadi (2019) who investigated the gender differences and interest in reading: examining the literacy acquisition of Nigerian learners of English as a second language. The study focuses on 118 basic one pupils, the research design use was quasi experimental research, the findings revealed that pupils' interest in reading was not significantly impacted by the combination of gender and teaching method, which implies that both male and female pupils have same disposition towards language learning regardless of their gender. Akpojotor (2013) observes and believes that girls acquire language proficiency than boys and that gender related differences in verbal abilities appear very early as children begin to talk. She further posited that girls have more positive attitude towards language learning than boys as they tend to perform better than boys in language learning, reading and verbal skills.

Another variable of interest in this study is pupils home environment, It has been suggested that one of the most important factors influencing a child's reading development is the home (Georgiou et al., 2021 & Zhang et al., 2024) There is no doubt that the educational advantage of a home will be highly influenced by the urban and rural location. In Nigeria most rural homes are poor and this no doubt adversely affects the academic performance especially the reading ability of children. A rich home environment is an environment that encourages early language development through the use of educational materials like charts, toys and other electronic gadgets that helps to enhance reading ability in children. So many studies have

been carried out on how to improve reading skill in pre-primary school children however, these studies did not make use of phonics to improve preschool children's reading skill. Besides, they have not been carried out in Ilorin West Local Government Area.

Learning to read during preschool age is a very crucial part of preschoolers' activities because it serves as a foundation for lifelong learning but it is rather very unfortunate that most preschool children's reading skill is poor. Though efforts have been by many researchers to address this issue but the use of phonics instructional method to improve reading skills has not received much attention. This study therefore investigated the effect of phonics method on the reading skills of preschool children in Ilorin West Local Government Area. The study also examined the moderating effect of home environment and gender on reading skill of the preschool children.

Research Hypotheses

To give the study a guide, the following hypotheses were tested:

HO₁: There is no significant main effect of phonics on the reading skill of preschool children

HO₂: There is no significant interaction effect of phonics and home environment on the reading skill of preschool children

HO₃: There is no significant interaction effect of phonics and gender on the reading skill of preschool children

Methodology

The research design employed was the quasi-experimental design. Here, there was a no randomization of the pupils because they were in their intact classes. The design is found suitable in establishing possible cause and effect relationship. It is a non-equivalent control group design. Hence a factorial design of 2x2x2 was adopted to test the null hypotheses for this study. The first two factorial levels were the experimental group (phonics) and the control group. The second factorial level was gender occurring in either male (M) or female (F), while the third factorial design is the home environment occurring in either rich or poor home environment, this design allowed for the experimental group to receive treatment while the control group did not receive treatment, although the control groups were also taught the same topics as the experimental group using the conventional method of teaching. However, both the experimental and control groups received the pre-tests and post-tests.

This is symbolically represented as follows:

Figure 2: factorial design on phonics teaching methods with a control group.**Keys:**

VARIABLES	GENDER		HOME ENVIRONMENT	
	MALE	FEMALE	RICH	POOR
	PRE-TEST	TREATMENT	POST-TEST	
EXPERIMENTAL GROUP	O ₁	X ₁	O ₂	
CONTROL GROUP	O ₃	-	O ₄	

O₁ = Pre-test of the experimental group (phonics)X₁ = Treatment of the experimental group (phonics)O₂ = Post-test of the experimental group (phonics)O₃ = Pre-test of the control groupO₄ = Post-test of the control group

The population for this study were all the nursery school pupils in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State. The target population was all the nursery two pupils. Simple random sampling technique was adopted. Two schools were chosen randomly one as the experimental group and the other as the control group. Afterwards, the nursery two pupils of these schools were the selected samples for the experimental group as well as the control group. Three research instruments were used for the study **Home Environment Questionnaire for Preschool Children (HEQPC)**, **Instructional package for phonics (IPP)** and **Reading Skill Test for Preschool Children (RSTPC)**

The face and content validated was done by selected teachers of nursery two pupils, and the lecturers in the department of Primary Education Studies, University of Ilorin. RSTPC and HEQPC was tested for reliability using the test-retest method

and the reliability coefficients of 0.82 and 0.79 was established while the data collections lasted for 4 weeks

The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation, while the research hypotheses were tested using Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Analysis of co-variance (ANCOVA) in conjunction with Scheffe's post hoc analyses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Hypotheses Testing

The hypotheses formulated in this study were tested using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 level of significance.

HO₁: There is no significant main effect of phonics on the reading skill of preschool children.

Table 1a: Summary of ANCOVA Analysis Showing Effect of Phonics on Reading Skill of Preschool Children

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	265.187 ^a	2	132.594	30.621	.000
Intercept	139.987	1	139.987	32.328	.000
Pretest	150.937	1	150.937	34.857	.000
Phonics methods	96.683	1	96.683	22.328	.000
Error	73.613	17	4.330		
Total	2502.000	20			
Corrected Total	338.800	19			

^a **P<0.05

The outcome of table 1 reveals the effect of phonics method on reading skill of preschool children. As

shown above, the calculated significance value of 0.000 is less than the chosen 0.05 alpha level, hence

the null hypothesis is rejected. Thus, there is a significant main effect of treatment on reading skill of preschool children in Ilorin West Local

Government Area of Kwara State. This means that phonics method has significant impact on reading skill of preschool children.

Table 1b: Descriptive Statistics of the Teaching Methods

	Teaching methods	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Performance	Phonics	13	12.15	3.38	.94
	Conventional	7	7.14	3.80	1.44

Sequel to the significant effect observed above, further analysis of the data indicates that phonics method of teaching had higher contribution to the reading skill of preschool children than the conventional teaching method. This implies that phonics method of teaching has more impact on

reading skill of preschool children.

HO₁: There is no significant interaction effect of phonics and home environment on the reading skill of preschool children

Table 2: Summary of ANCOVA Analysis Showing Interactive Effect of Treatment and Home Environment on Reading Skill of Preschool Children

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	287.682 ^a	8	35.960	7.738	.001
Intercept	78.124	1	78.124	16.811	.002
Pretest	96.049	1	96.049	20.669	.001
Phonics methods	73.427	1	73.427	15.801	.002
Home environment	19.837	4	4.959	1.067	.418
Phonics * Home environment	2.284	2	1.142	.246	.786
Error	51.118	11	4.647		
Total	2502.000	20			
Corrected Total	338.800	19			

^a**P>0.05

The result of table 2 shows the interactive effect of treatment and home environment on reading skill of preschool children. As shown above, the calculated significance value of 0.786 is greater than the chosen 0.05 alpha level, hence the null hypothesis is not rejected. Thus, there is no significant interactive effect of treatment and home environment on reading skill of preschool children in Ilorin West

Local Government Area of Kwara State. This implies that combination of phonics method and home environment does not have effect on reading skill of preschool children.

HO₃: There is no significant interaction effect of phonics and gender on the reading skill of preschool children.

Table 3: Summary of ANCOVA Analysis Showing Interactive Effect of Phonics and Gender on Reading Skill of Preschool Children

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	280.052 ^a	4	70.013	17.876	.000
Intercept	124.931	1	124.931	31.898	.000
Pretest	116.319	1	116.319	29.700	.000
Phonics methods	55.980	1	55.980	14.293	.002
Gender	4.653	1	4.653	1.188	.293
Phonics methods * Gender	7.082	1	7.082	1.808	.199
Error	58.748	15	3.917		
Total	2502.000	20			
Corrected Total	338.800	19			

The result of table 3 shows the interactive effect of treatment and gender on reading skill of preschool children. As shown above, the calculated significance value of 0.199 is greater than the chosen 0.05 alpha level, hence the null hypothesis is not rejected. Thus, there is no significant interactive effect of treatment and gender on reading skill of preschool children in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State. This implies that combination of phonics method and gender does not have effect on reading skill of preschool children.

Discussion of Findings

The finding of the study revealed that there was a significant main effect of phonics methods on reading skill of preschool children in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State. Also, the result indicated that phonics method of teaching had higher contribution to the reading skill of preschool children than the conventional teaching method. This means that phonics method has significant impact on reading skill of preschool children. This finding is in line with Nursina (2021) who investigated phonic methods on the reading ability of children with visual impairments. The study revealed that phonics methods significantly enhance the early reading skills of pupils with visual impairment. Similarly Mohammadi (2022) who reported that the effectiveness of phonics and whole-word techniques positively improved the English reading skills of dyslexic students. This concur with the submissions of Byun, et al. (2024) who revealed that children with low reading proficiency benefit greatly from phonics intervention programs, which include morphological awareness training, in terms of their reading comprehension and fluency. The study is not in consonance with Rahmah and Pandjaitan (2018) who investigated the effectivity of phonics method in improving reading ability of 1st grade elementary school pupils the study revealed that phonics methods does not significantly improve reading fluency of 1st grade elementary school pupils. The variance in the results could be as a results of variance in population, methodology adopted or research environment.

The outcome of the study also indicated that there was no significant interaction effect of phonic and home environment on reading skill of preschool children in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State. This implies that combination of phonics method and home environment does not have effect on reading skill of preschool children. This is not consistent with Liu, et al (2017) who posited that Chinese children's emerging literacy skills and word reading are greatly influenced by

their home literacy environment, parents' expectations, and the financial condition of their household. Similarly, Georgiouet al. (2021) revealed that children's reading skills are favorably predicted by literacy activities at home, but early reading skills are only predicted by child-rated reading interest, not the other way around. This is also in line with the submission of Zhang, et al (2024) also revealed that children's home environments were experienced differently and significantly impacted children's reading skills. The likely reason for non-significant interaction effect of phonics method and home environment observed is that parents at home may not know much about phonics which will help children to learn how to read better.

The finding of the study revealed also revealed that there was no significant interactive effect of phonics and gender on reading skill of preschool children in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State. This implies that combination of phonics method and gender does not have effect on reading skill of preschool children. This is in line with the submissions of Amadi (2019) who revealed that pupils' interest in reading was not significantly impacted by the combination of gender and teaching method. Also, Ibenegbu, (2021) compared adult-generated images, children's illustrations are more effective at teaching phonics, and there is no discernible difference in the achievement of male and female students. This finding disagrees with Reilly et al (2018) who investigated gender differences in reading and writing skills among leaners, the findings revealed that female students often outperform their male counterpart in a reading and writing assessment. This suggests that reading skills of preschool children can be improved with the combination of phonics with other methods rather gender of the pupils.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that phonics methods improved the reading skill of preschool children in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State, regardless of pupils' gender and home environment.

Recommendations

1. Preschool children should be exposed more to the phonics method of teaching to improve their reading skills. Early exposure to phonics will significantly help children develop better reading abilities.
2. Preschool teachers should consistently use phonics methods in teaching reading, as research shows it greatly enhances

3. children's reading development. Seminars and workshops should be organized regularly for teachers and caregivers in preschool and basic schools to update them on the latest developments in phonics instruction, equipping them with effective strategies to teach reading.
4. Parents should be educated on simple phonics strategies through workshops, school meetings, or community programs to help reinforce reading skills at home.
5. Schools should provide age-appropriate phonics-based instructional materials, storybooks, and teaching aids to make phonics instruction engaging and effective for preschool children.

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