

PHONICS AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOLERS IN RIVERS EAST SENATORIAL DISTRICT, NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

The study investigated phonics and language development of preschoolers in Rivers East Senatorial District. A pre-test post-test control group quasi-experimental research design was used. Two research questions and two corresponding hypotheses guided the study. The population of the study was 2,399 preschoolers. The sample of the study consisted of 90 preschoolers randomly selected and assigned to experimental and control groups. The sample was selected using simple random sampling technique and purposive sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was the researcher-designed observation checklist which was validated. The instrument had a reliability coefficient of 0.67. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation (SD) and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The findings of the study showed that the experimental group who were taught using the synthetic phonics and analytical instructional strategies performed better than those taught with the conventional method. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were made which include that teachers should be trained on the use of the synthetic phonics method which is among the current trends in helping children begin to read and write quite early.

Keywords: Phonics, language, speaking ability, analytic phonics, synthetic phonics

Introduction

Language is a multifaceted and a symbolic system that enables people to transmit their thoughts, emotions and wishes by using common sound and meaning elements and rules that a society has. Language development is an important part of this coordinated development and learning process that starts at birth and the foundations of language are laid between two-six years. Language development is first receptive, and then productive. Language learning involves both the receptive skills (listening and reading) and the productive skills (speaking and writing).

Naturally, the receptive skills should be learnt first. Children will learn to use language to communicate meaning as well as picking up new words and hearing grammatical structure of the English language, this they can do through play.

Language skills development has been a problem over the years and most children are yet to develop appropriate language skills. These language skills include listening, speaking, reading and writing. The development of these language skills is dependent on a number of factors which include the extent children play, socialize and learn. One of the ways the children develop the language skills is through phonics.

Phonics as a branch of linguistics that studies how human's produce and perceive sounds or in the case of sign languages, the equivalent aspect of sign phonics broadly deal with two aspects of human speech; production, which has to do with way which humans make sound and perception, which is the way speech is understood and communication skills are the abilities you use when giving and receiving different kinds of information-

Communication skills involve listening speaking- observing an emphasizing, children learn the foundation for spelling, the same way as they talk and use language. Language development in humans is a process starting early in life, infants start without knowing a language, yet by ten (10) months babies can distinguish speech sounds and engage in babbling.

Phonics instruction involves teaching learners to see the relationships between letters and sounds, and use this knowledge to recognize words when reading, and to spell words when writing. Phonics system of teaching and reading builds on alphabetic principle, a system by which the central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciation. The phonics instructional Strategy is of different types and they are the embedded phonics, analytic phonics, and synthetic phonics. Embedded phonics which is the least effective way to teach reading amongst the different phonics strategies. This is a very limited approach where limited amount of letters and sound relationships are taught during reading sessions.

Analytic phonics as the nature implies, is a phonics strategy that teaches children to read through analogy, through the learning of onsets and rimes where a learner learns unfamiliar words by organizing similarities between words. Onset is the beginning of words while rimes are the ending parts which follows the onset. Analytic phonics also called word analogy phonics emphasizes larger units of pronunciation. This approach refers to the teaching of reading in which the phonics associated with a particular sound are not pronounced in isolation. Waston and Watson (2004) define analytic phonics as children learning letter sounds in the context of words that they have been taught to recognize by sight.

As Johnston, et al., (2014) stated, that analytical phonics refers to teaching of reading in which the phonemes associated with particular graphemes are not pronounced in isolation. It means analytical phonics emphasizes the initial sound. According to Retnomurti, et al., (2019), analytic phonics starts with children analysing sounds in words, i.e. children begin with words and pick them apart. The analytical phonics approach is often referred to as the whole word approach, which impose upon children learning to recognized words instantaneously, without requiring to sound segment or decode the word (Gunning 2000). This is often referred. to as 'sight reading or rote reading words from flash cards.

Synthetic phonics is a method of teaching reading and spelling through decoding and encoding with systematic approach it relies upon teaching the individual sounds of the 44 phonemes in the English language sequentially and the letters that corresponds to them (Ehri et al., 2001). Once learners know some sounds, they can use this knowledge to read words via decoding, or write words via encoding, as they can build up and break words down. Explicit synthetic phonics encoding encourages early cipher reading, children processing all of the letters and sounds in words.

This method teaches children how to use their knowledge of the alphabetic code to decode unknown words, thus establishing an orthographic memory for such words. synthetic phonics as an approach associated with the teaching of reading in which phonemes (sounds) associated with particular graphemes (letters) are pronounced in isolation and blended together (synthesised). For instance, children are taught to take a single-syllable word such as *cat* apart into its three letters, pronounce a phoneme for each letter in turn, and blend the phonemes together to form a word.

There is as great deal of evidence which suggests that synthetic phonics is the superior phonics approach and outperforms analytical phonics. First of all, it creates phonemic awareness, which is an essential component for learning to read and write. Crucially, synthetic phonics provides children with the ability to independently read unfamiliar words, without which it could not decipher enough words to make meaning from text in order to comprehend it (Shara, 1996). Thus, this approach can be seen as an antidote to the learning of analytical phonics, giving children the methods to solve reading problems autonomously. Research evidence also suggests that comprehension is greater in children who have learned through synthetic approaches than Analytical (Watson & Waston, 2005). The principles behind analytic phonics are quite different to those of synthetic phonics-the main principle of synthetic phonics is that it must be taught first and fast so that children know a method to read independently very early on (Johnson & Watson, 2004).

It is important that sounds are not taught through the whole word approach, so that sounding and blending for reading is uppermost in the children's minds. Ideally, synthetic phonics is taught before children are introduced .to books or reading. It involves teaching letter sounds very rapidly (the letter sounds which are initially taught are those which combine to make the greatest number of words. These letters sounds are taught in all positions of the word right from the start. This was the child method of decoding new words, through sounding and blending the constituent words. Explicit synthetic phonics. Teaching encourages early ciphers reading, children can process the letters and sounds in words. The method teaches children how to use their knowledge in alphabetic code to decode unknown words, thus establishing an orthographic memory for words. Synthetic phonics is a method that teaches children on how to convert graphemes (text) into phonemes (sound) and then blend together to conceive the use (National Reading Panel, 2000). This phonics approach also enhances the spelling abilities of students as well.

Early childhood is the most important period in the language development of the child. Children through interactions with their parents, siblings, and caregivers acquire language skills. Language development is an important tool for children because it forms the gateway to knowing the wider world and the environment. Reading can only be meaningful if it is understood. It is therefore important that all reading activity children are introduced to must make sense in print.

Written form of words will only have meaning for children if they are familiar with these words in speech. The ability of a reader to recognize words is the key to proficiency in reading for the second language learners. Since Nigerian preschool children are second language learners, knowledge of vocabulary and word recognition are problematic issues. Evidence also abounds that many children, especially at the preschool level read at a frustration level. Observation has also shown that most children, at the preschool age, are still deficient in the basic reading skills. Inability to express oneself in speaking or the use of correct or right pronunciation of words which makes for eloquent and fluent speaking is a major setback in language development of children. The poor foundations in the language of instruction have the tendency of affecting the communication skills in the pre-schoolers resulting in poor development of their language. This deficiency has been traced to a number of factors especially poor teaching methods where the caregivers often focus more on what is taught and not the learners. It is, therefore, imperative that an instructional method that will cater for the age and developmental needs of the children be utilized. One of such instructional methods in enhancing language development is the phonics method of instruction. The use of phonics as an effective strategy of getting young learners to master the skills of speaking and reading is a veritable tool in the early childhood education classroom. Hence, this study determined the effect of phonics on the language development of preschoolers in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using synthetic phonics strategy and those taught with conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State?
2. What is the mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using analytic phonics strategy and those taught using conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State?

Research Hypotheses

The study was further guided by the following null hypotheses:

1. There is no significant mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using synthetic phonics strategy and those taught using conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.
2. There is no significant mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using analytic phonics strategy and those taught using conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study was the pre-test post-test control group quasi-experimental research design. 2,399 preschoolers found in 246 early childhood centers in Rivers East Senatorial District constituted the population of the study. 90 preschoolers drawn from 3 intact classes constituted the sample size for the study. The three public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District were chosen using simple random sampling technique. Thereafter the purposive sampling technique was used to select the intact classes for the study. Out of the three schools chosen two were used for the experimental group; while the third school was used as the control group. The control class had 35 preschoolers exposed to the conventional approach, while 28 preschoolers were in the experimental class exposed to synthetic phonics instructional strategy and the second experimental class exposed to analytic phonics instructional strategy had 27 preschoolers. The instrument for data collection was the researcher designed observation checklist which was validated by two experts in the Department of Early Childhood/Primary Education. The instrument had a reliability coefficient of 0.67 which indicated that the instrument was reliable. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation (SD) to answer the research questions while analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question One: What is the mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using synthetic phonics strategy and those taught with conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Pre-Test and Post-Test mean scores in performance of preschoolers taught speaking using Synthetics Phonics and Conventional Method.

Instructional strategies	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean gain score
		\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	
Synthetic phonics	28	24.32	12.32	38.62	16.52	14.30
Conventional method	35	22.41	11.16	26.41	13.71	4.01

Entries in Table 1 show that the preschoolers taught with synthetic phonics instructional strategies had pre-test – post-test mean difference of 14.30. While those taught with conventional method had 4.01. This observation shows that preschoolers taught with synthetic phonics instructional strategies performed better in speaking abilities than their counterparts under conventional method of instruction.

Research Question two: What is the mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using analytic phonics strategy and those taught using conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Pre-Test and Post-Test mean scores in performance of preschoolers taught speaking using analytic Phonics and Conventional Method.

Instructional strategies	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean score	gain
		\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD		
Analytic phonics instructional strategy	27	31.51	18.32	47.59	20.71	16.08	
Conventional method	35	29.47	16.05	37.64	15.13	8.10	

The result in Table 2 show that the preschoolers taught with analytic phonics instructional strategies had pre-test – post-test mean difference of 16.08. While those taught with conventional method had 8.10. This observation shows that preschoolers taught with analytic phonics instructional strategies performed better in speaking abilities than their counterparts under conventional method of instruction.

Testing of null hypotheses

Hypothesis one: There is no significant mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using synthetic phonics strategy and those taught using conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Table 3: Summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on the difference between Synthetic instructional strategies and Conventional Method on the speaking abilities

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	.371 ^a	2	.186	.799	.455
Intercept	15.980	1	15.980	68.752	.000
Main Effect	.371	2	.186	.799	.455
Error	13.946	60	.232		
Total	457.000	63			
Corrected Total	14.317	62			

a. R Squared = .026 (Adjusted R Squared = -.007)

Table 3 shows the summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on the difference between the Synthetic phonics instructional strategies and Conventional Method on the speaking abilities of preschoolers in public early childhood centers in Rivers East Senatorial district of Rivers State. The result showed that there is a significant difference between the Synthetic phonics instructional strategies and Conventional Method on the speaking abilities of preschoolers in public early childhood centers in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State ($F_{2, 60}=68.752, p=.000<.05$). The null hypothesis was rejected at 0.05 alpha level.

Hypothesis two: There is no significant mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using analytic phonics strategy and those taught using conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Table 4: Summary of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) of pupil's post-test score classified by treatment groups and instructional strategies with Pre-test as covariate

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3.294 ^a	2	1.647	3.018	.056
Intercept	14.468	1	14.468	26.518	.000
Main Effect	3.294	2	1.647	3.018	.056
Error	32.190	59	.546		
Total	788.000	62			
Corrected Total	35.484	61			

a. R Squared = .093 (Adjusted R Squared = .062)

In Table 4 the calculated F-ratio for the effect of instructional strategies on the speaking abilities of preschoolers with df 2,59 is 26.518; while its corresponding calculated level of significance is .000 alpha level. Since the p-value (.000) is less than the significant level of 0.05, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected, indicating that instructional strategies used had statistically significant effect on the speaking abilities of preschoolers when taught using analytic phonics instructional strategies in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Discussion of finding

The finding in Table 3 reveals that there is a significant difference between the Synthetic phonics instructional strategies and Conventional Method on the speaking abilities of preschoolers in public early childhood centers in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State. The finding is in agreement with finding of Resnick (2005) who found out that phonics reading strategy teaches children to sound out new words. It enables them to learn what a letter stands for and then learn to associate the sound and the letter to specific words. The finding of the study is also in line with the views of Vacca (1998) who explains that phonics strategy is most appropriate for pupils in primary schools when it comes to language development. Furthermore, the finding of the study corroborates the findings of Putri and Zaitun (2020) who carried out a study to determine the effect of synthetic phonics on the development of students reading aloud skills and found that synthetic phonics significantly effects students' reading aloud skills. Additionally, the finding of the study supports the findings of Farokhbakht (2015) who sought to investigate the effect of adopting a synthetic multisensory phonics (i.e. Jolly Phonics) for teaching early English literacy skills on literacy learning and reading motivation of Iranian EFL young learners and found that synthetic multisensory phonics had effect on the reading and spelling tests as well as a higher motivation in early English reading skills.

The finding in Table 4 shows that there is a significant mean difference in the speaking abilities of preschoolers taught using synthetic phonics strategy and those taught using conventional method with respect to gender in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State. The finding of the study supports the finding of Johnston and Watson (2003) who carried out a large scale study investigating the effects of synthetic phonics on reading and spelling in school-aged children found that boys have a more phonological approach to reading. On the contrary, the finding of the study is in variance with the finding of Farokhbakht (2015) who sought to investigate the effect of adopting a synthetic multisensory phonics (i.e. Jolly Phonics) for teaching early English literacy skills on literacy learning and reading motivation of Iranian EFL young learners and found that synthetic multisensory phonics instruction did not have any significant effect on male and female learners' literacy attainment.

Conclusion

Preschoolers learn faster and master skills better when appropriate teaching methods are used for instruction. The adoption of the phonics reading strategy in conjunction with other teaching methods will greatly improve language skills development of preschool children, particularly in word recognition. Thus, preschoolers taught word recognition using phonics reading strategy achieved significantly higher than those who were not taught using phonics. Female preschoolers taught word recognition using phonics reading strategy achieved significantly higher than their male counterparts.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Pre-school teachers in Rivers East Senatorial District should be adequately trained on the use of phonics reading strategy to teach word recognition.

2. Qualified teachers of English language should be employed by government to teach reading to preschoolers in early childhood education centres.

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