

## EFFECT OF SYNTHETIC PHONICS INSTRUCTION ON NIGERIAN ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' INTEREST IN READING

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### Abstract

*This study determines the effect of synthetic phonics on Nigerian primary school pupils' interest in reading. The study which was conducted in Enugu, South East Nigeria adopted the non equivalent, non randomized control group quasi-experimental design. The sample of the study consists of 118 primary one school pupils drawn from four public primary schools in Enugu, Nigeria through multi-stage sampling technique. The subjects of the study who were in intact classes were assigned to experimental and control groups and were pretested and post tested. The experimental group was instructed using synthetic phonics while the control group received instruction through analytic phonics. Data were collected using Reading Interest Inventory (RII). The collected data were analysed using Means, Standard Deviation and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Mean and Standard Deviation were used to answer the research question while ANCOVA was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ). The results of the study revealed that synthetic phonics prove to be more significant in enhancing pupils' interest in reading than analytic phonics. Based on the observations of the study, it was concluded that the use of synthetic phonics for reading instruction is capable of stimulating and sustaining pupils' interest in reading more than analytic phonics. It was therefore recommended that learners should be properly exposed to learning activities and methods such as synthetic phonics that can ignite and sustain their interest in reading.*

**Keywords:** Effect, interest in reading, synthetic phonics, reading instruction, Nigerian English.

### Introduction

Reading brings about pleasurable experience. Children who are proficient in reading are able to satisfy their emotional and intellectual needs through reading a wide range of books, magazines, and even cartoons. Reading thus introduces children to the world of prints and books which is capable of stimulating their imagination, arousing their interest and emotional responses. It gives them the opportunity to understand themselves, others and the world around them. Reading gives children the opportunity to have access to generations of ideas, stories, wide range of facts and images of the world that is far from their daily experiences. In this way, the child is able to appreciate other people's beliefs, culture and tradition. Aina, Ogungbeni, Adigun and Ogundipe (2011) thus affirm that humans have tools to transmit knowledge to each succeeding generation through reading.

As an indispensable tool in learning, reading plays a very important role in education and makes learning other subjects possible since it pervades through the entire school curriculum. The educational system which demands a lot of reading uses the ability to read proficiently and fluently as a benchmark for intellectual ability (Amadi & Offorma, 2019). Hence, reading is considered a key to educational achievement (Amadi, 2018). In other words, a child who has been exposed to the knowledge of print and has acquired the necessary basic reading skills is expected to make wonderful achievements in different school subjects. On the other hand, a child who is deficient in basic reading skills is not likely to succeed in other subjects. Without a basic foundation in reading, it may be difficult for children to access a rich and diverse curriculum provided in the educational system (Amadi, 2018). This may subsequently impinge on their ability to have interest in further reading.

Literature has revealed the prevalent poor reading culture among Nigerian primary pupils (Ainaet *al.*, 2011; Anyanwu, Obichere and Ossai-Onah, 2012; Igbokwe, Obidike and Ezeji, 2012). Poor reading culture predicates lack of interest in reading. One of the obvious causes of poor reading culture and lack of interest in reading revealed by research findings is the use of poor methods of teaching reading. Adeniji and Omale (2010) affirm that some English teachers are behind in their approach to teaching reading. Such teachers according to them, lack effective methods of imparting reading skills to the pupils. Ekpo, Udosen, Afangideh, Ekukinam and Ikorok, (2007) also lament that teachers worsen children's lack of reading readiness due to their incompetence in helping them master reading skills. Amadi, 2011 further notes that most Nigerian primary school teachers still cling to the traditional methods of teaching reading.

The problems associated with traditional methods of teaching reading coupled with the poor reading ability of Nigerian primary school pupils could be one of the reasons why the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) (2012) revised the Nigerian 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum. Phonics happens to be one of the new topics and skills introduced in the reading content of Nigerian primary English Studies curriculum (NERDC, 2012).

Phonics describes the relationship between letters and sounds of a language. It establishes the relationship that exists between written and spoken language. As a method of reading instruction, phonics is used to teach children letter-sound correspondence and how to use it in their reading and spelling activities. Phonics can be taught through either the analytic phonics or the synthetic phonics approach. Analytic phonics exposes children learning to read in English to associate sounds to letters based on already learned words. It uses the whole-to-part mode. In other words, analytic phonics uses whole words to teach the sounds of a spoken language. With this method of reading instruction, children are made to analyse the common sounds in a set of words to which they were already exposed.

Synthetic phonics on the other hand, uses a part-to-whole approach in teaching pupils to convert letters to sounds. This type of phonics instructional mode teaches children to first pronounce the sounds associated with specific letters and then combine them to form words in both the spoken and written language. Through synthetic phonics the pupils are made to understand that the letters of the alphabet are speech sounds which can be used to form words. Hence, it seems to improve beginning readers' alphabetic knowledge and word

reading skill. It enables the child to form, spell and pronounce new words independently. Improvement in word reading skills brings about successful achievement in reading which is expected to boost pupils' interest in the reading process. Studies of scholars such as Amadi, 2018; Amadi & Offorma, 2019; Dixon, Schagen & Seed house, 2011; Ekpo et al, 2007 & Eshiet, 2012 have shown that synthetic phonics improves/enhances pupils' achievement in reading. Since teaching reading with synthetic phonics method has proved to improve pupils' achievement in reading, the present study determined its effect on pupils' interest in reading.

Literature has shown that there is a close connection between the development of reading literacy and interest in reading Tubele (2010). Children who have interest in the reading process and the content of books are likely to learn to read faster and more successfully too. According to Tubele, they tend to read more books than children who lack interest in reading and do not like books. Hence, it seems obvious that increased interest may provoke more reading and better learning. This corroborates Bhatia's (2003) earlier view of interest as a powerful source of human motivation that is capable of arousing and sustaining concentrated effort in the learner. Interest therefore is a vital and valid precondition for mastering reading skills, which in effect ensures a successful learning process.

Though reading is a conscious effort geared towards acquiring information or aesthetic value, the need for an inner desire to read is very important. Literature has shown that reading of books has powerful competitors. As Hidi, (2001) observes, "The visual stimuli of the television are supplemented by the audible ones which together have much advantage over the text of a book" (p.193). In other words, televiewing and other social media activities are capable of drawing the child's attention and interest far away from the pages of the printed text. According to Hidi, the task therefore is to find out how to use various opportunities to evoke interest in reading so that children would read with an aim to learn more. To achieve this, teachers and parents (in some cases) should ensure that the choice of reading materials/texts is based on children's perception. They should also engage the children in repeated reading of the same text for training and improvement on already acquired reading skills (Tubele, 2010). This may build confidence in children and spur them to read more texts.

Apart from textbook selection and training in reading skills through repeated reading teachers have a great task at hand to be able to arouse children's interest at the initial stage of the reading process. This may be achieved through the use of methods that encourage drawing attention to reading and learning at some particular age. The teacher's instructional method may increase or decrease children's interest in the reading process. It may make them like or dislike reading. Hence, there is a need for an appropriate and effective method capable of arousing, boosting and sustaining children's interest in reading.

A lot of studies have been conducted on the effect of methods of teaching on students' interest in learning in different subject areas. The results of Ogboji's, (2013) study on the effects of local resources on students' interest in cultural and creative arts revealed that teaching approach was not significant on students' interest in the subject. Torty's (2010) study on the effects of collaborative learning method on secondary school students' achievement and interest in English language tenses however negated this study as it revealed that method was a significant factor in students' interest in English language tenses. Similarly, Egbe's (2015) study on the effects of integrative language teaching approach on secondary school students'

achievement and interest in English grammar also showed that integrative language teaching approach had significant effect on students' interest in English grammar. The study of Eshiet (2012) on synthetic phonics as a tool for improving the reading skills of Nigerian pupils which also specifically investigated the possible effect of the method on teachers' attitude towards its use in teaching reading further indicated that synthetic phonics led to an increase in teachers' interest in teaching reading.

Most of these studies sought to find out the effects of different teaching methods on students' interest in learning different aspects of English while the one that investigated the use of synthetic phonics only laid emphasis on its effect on teachers' attitude towards its use as a teaching method. Hence, the need for the present study which determined the effect of synthetic phonics instruction on pupils' interest in reading. It sought to find out whether the use of synthetic phonics for initial reading instruction would enhance or arouse pupils' interest in reading more than analytic phonics.

### **Research Questions**

The findings of the study answered the following research question:

1. What is the difference in the interest ratings of pupils taught reading using synthetic phonics and those taught using analytic phonics?

### **Hypothesis**

One hypothesis was formulated and tested at  $p < .05$  to guide the study:

H<sub>01</sub> There is no significant difference in the mean interest ratings of pupils taught reading using synthetic phonics and those taught using analytic phonics.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Sociocultural Theory**

The study aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which conceptualises learning and development as being influenced by participation in social interactions and organised cultural activities. The theory claims that knowledge is co-constructed by an interplay of social and individual processes. The chief proponent of the theory, Lev Vygotsky hypothesises that human activities operate in cultural contexts which are mediated by language and other symbol systems that can best be understood when examined based on their historical development. According to the theory, learners depend on more knowledgeable individuals when they newly engage in an activity which subsequently helps them to engage in more independent activities based. Rogoff (1990) refers to this type of interaction as guided participation. Hence, the more knowledgeable individual only serves as a guide to the child.

In his examination of the unity and interdependence of learning and development Vygotsky introduced the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) which proposes that those activities the learner can engage in without guidance represent his actual level of development while those he can accomplish when guided or assisted represent this potential level of development. In effect, the ZPD seems to portray the fact that a child's interaction with adults or more knowledgeable individuals, peers and other sociocultural symbols may lead to the development of his ultimate potentials.

In this study, the use of synthetic phonics for reading instruction provided a platform whereby children interacted with the teacher and their peers in the course of learning as stated in Vygotsky’s social cultural theory. Based on Rogoff’s (1990) proposition, the teacher only acted as a guide to introduce the learners to the letter sounds of phonics. This was done through the use of stories that were based on the pupils’ cultural context and their exposure to demonstrating the production of letter sounds in a playful way. The pupils further interacted and collaborated with their peers in small groups to identify letter sounds and blend them using magnetic letter sound cards. The method also exposed them to interact with language symbols (letter sounds) as well as literacy enriched environment capable of promoting independent reading. Hence, synthetic phonics incorporates both individualised and participatory learning activities which promote active participation of learners in the teaching/learning environment. Learning through these activities is expected to improve and promote pupils’ interest in reading which is the focus of this study.

### Method

The study adopted the non-equivalent non-randomized control group quasi-experimental design. The sample of the study comprised 118 pupils in four intact classes drawn from four public schools in Enugu East Local Government Area of Enugu State through multi stage sampling technique. The schools were assigned to experimental and control groups through tossing of coin while balloting was used to draw intact classes from the schools. The experimental group was taught with synthetic phonics while the control group was taught using analytic phonics. The instrument used for data collection was the Reading Interest Inventory (RII) which was constructed to test pupils’ interest in reading. The instrument which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.87 was administered as pretest and posttest before and after treatment. The post test was administered eight weeks after the subjects were taught with synthetic and analytic phonics. Data collected was analysed using Mean, Standard deviations and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Mean and Standard deviations were used to answer the research question while Analysis of Covariance was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### Results

#### Research Question One

What is the difference in the interest ratings of pupils taught reading using synthetic phonics and those taught using analytic phonics?

**Table 1:** Mean and Standard Deviation of Pupils’ Interest Ratings in Reading

Groups	Pretest		Post test		Gain Scores	Gain Scores Difference
	N	Mean	SD	Mean		
Synthetic Phonics	56	2.83	.19	3.29	.27	.46
Analytic Phonics	62	3.02	.26	3.08	.26	.06

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations of interest rating scores of pupils exposed to synthetic phonics approach (experimental group) and analytic phonics (control group). The table reveals that in the pretest, mean interest rating scores of 2.83 and 3.02 with standard deviations of .19 and .26 were recorded for pupils in experimental group and control group

respectively. Similarly, in the post test, mean interest rating scores of 3.29 and 3.08 with standard deviations of .27 and .26 were also recorded for the two groups respectively. The result further reveals a gain score difference of 0.4 between the two groups in favour of the synthetic phonics group. This implies that synthetic phonics is more effective compared to analytic phonics in enhancing/improving pupils' interest in reading.

### Hypothesis One

There is no significant difference in the mean interest ratings of pupils taught reading using synthetic phonics and those taught using analytic phonics.

**Table 2:** Summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of Pupils' Mean Interest Scores in Reading when exposed to Synthetic Phonics Method and Analytic Phonics Method

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3.219 <sup>a</sup>	8	.402	6.781	.000
Intercept	7.505	1	7.505	126.481	.000
Pretest	.003	1	.003	.056	.813
Method	.403	1	.403	6.796	.010
Gender	.091	1	.091	1.541	.217
Location	1.183	1	1.183	19.941	.000
Method * Gender	2.212	1	2.212	.000	.985
Method * Location	.112	1	.112	1.895	.171
Error	6.467	109	.059		
Total	1202.271	118			
Corrected Total	9.686	117			

The results of the analysis in Table 2 shows that  $F(1, 109) = 6.796, p = .010$ . The null hypothesis is rejected since the probability value (.010) is less than the level of significance set at 0.05, ( $p < 0.05$ ). Hence, there is a significant difference in the mean interest ratings of pupils taught reading using synthetic phonics and those taught with analytic phonics in favour of the synthetic phonics group. This means that synthetic phonics is capable of improving/boosting pupils' interest in reading more than analytic phonics.

### Discussion

The result in Table 1 showed that pupils taught with synthetic phonics had higher mean interest rating score than those taught with analytic phonics. The difference in the mean interest rating scores was further strengthened by Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) in Table 2 which was used to test hypothesis one. The result revealed that synthetic phonics had a significant effect on pupils' interest in reading more than analytic phonics. This finding justified Bhatia's (2003) view of interest as a powerful source of human motivation that is capable of arousing and sustaining concentrated effort in the learner. In other words, synthetic phonics was able to enhance/improve pupils' interest in reading more than analytic phonics. Hence, interest is a very vital trait in learning which plays a key role in learners' achievement in a particular task or subject.

The findings of the study also agree with Tubele's (2010) view of a close connection between the development of reading literacy and interest in reading. Tubele believed that children who have interest in the reading process are likely to learn to read faster and more successfully. Interest in reading therefore, tends to facilitate the acquisition of reading skills and such interest can be motivated by effective instructional approaches. The fun-filled activity based tasks involved in the use of synthetic phonics in this study might have facilitated and enhanced pupils' interest better than those taught with the analytic phonics. This is in consonance with Ekpo et al's (2007) assertion that the teaching materials involved in jolly phonics were able to captivate children's imagination as well as enhance their reading skills.

The results of this study also corroborate Eshiet (2012) who reported that synthetic phonics method led to improved reading achievement of pupils and also brought out a new interest in reading. This is suggestive of the fact that synthetic phonics not only enhances pupils' achievement in reading but also stimulates their interest in learning to read. The interactive and friendly forum created by the method during the teaching/learning process might be another reason for the new positive interest ignited in the learners. Synthetic phonics therefore stimulates and promotes pupils' interest in the reading process more than analytic phonics.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Synthetic phonics as shown in this study significantly enhanced pupils' interest in reading more than analytic phonics. Hence, the use of the method would produce positive effect in stimulating and sustaining pupils' interest in reading more than analytic phonics. In this study, there is a close connection between interest and achievement in reading. Interest in reading can influence achievement in reading while achievement in reading on the other hand can provoke interest in reading. The two variables are therefore interdependent. Therefore, the adoption of effective and innovative teaching methods such as synthetic phonics that would better improve pupils' interest in reading is recommended. Government should properly expose pre and in service teachers to the techniques and activities involved in synthetic phonics and adequately monitor the proper implementation of the method for effective reading instruction.

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