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Teachers Beliefs, Knowledge and Practices of Teaching Early Reading Using the Phonics Approach in Nigerian Primary Schools

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Abstract

Reading is viewed as an active process by which readers dynamically interact with the text. However, achieving early reading fluency in English language requires that pupils know the relationship between sounds and letter symbols. This can be achieved through the use of phonics. But a significant proportion of primary school children have different issues which emanate from their inability to read. This poor achievement in reading may be attributed to many factors but in this study it is being traced to teachers' knowledge, belief and practice of the phonics approach in teaching reading to early learners in Western Nigeria.

The study employs the use of multiple case-study design of the qualitative research approach. Multi-stage sampling procedure is adopted. Purposive sampling technique was used to select Zone IV of the Oyo Central Senatorial District: one of the three senatorial districts within Oyo State. Random sampling was used to select six (6) primary schools in three (3) Local Government Areas. This implies that Three (3) primary school teachers in rural areas and Three (3) primary school teachers located in urban areas were sampled. The Data collection methods employed in the study to gather data for the research objectives and research questions include the use of Interview, Classroom Observation, Document Analysis of lesson plan, and teaching materials. Interview schedule, Classroom observation protocol and Teachers knowledge test were the research instruments used.

The study found out that English teachers believe that phonics approach in teaching reading appropriate. They also believe that Cue cards and other visual aids help the understanding of correct pronunciation of words, and that teaching reading to primary school learners through the phonics approach improves pupils' fluency. Findings herein have also shown that despite the positive nature of teachers believe in teaching reading, their actual knowledge and practices betray their beliefs. Although there is a slim connection between what the teachers know and what they demonstrate in class, the teachers do not have adequate knowledge of sounds in words and therefore could not effectively teach the children on identifying sounds in words in the class room. The teachers considered inadequate teaching aids and equipment and little or no training on phonics as the contextual factors influencing their practices in implementing the phonics approach when teaching reading.

It was concluded that teachers stated believes does not match their knowledge and practices of teaching reading through the phonics approach. Therefore, it was recommended that Year one primary school teachers should be specifically trained on the phonics approach to teach reading. Primary school teachers should be trained and motivated to improvise materials and aids to teach reading to children.

Keywords: Knowledge, Belief, Practice, Phonics, Reading

1. Introduction

Ability to read is one of the basic ideas underlining the concept of literacy. It is worthy of note that gaining mastery in any language especially English language requires most importantly the ability to read, write, speak, and even listen so as to be able to properly communicate as well as socialize in any contemporary society. This informs the reason why literacy is well spelt out as the bed rock for further learning in both developed and developing nations of the world including Africa in general and

Nigeria in particular.

Reading, which is a form of literacy can be referred to as the fundamental human right which possesses the potential to change lives as well as serving as the basis for lifelong education (Tompkins, 2010; UNESCO, 2016).

Okewole, Oludele, Odejobi and Cecilia., (2020) note that, because it is a lifelong process, the significance attached to it is mostly observed in the efforts of all development-driven countries of the world. They further stated that the level to which children acquire literacy skills would be a strong indicator of their future educational attainment.

According to Adedokun and Kayode (2019), literacy skill such as reading could have substantial impacts on developing livelihood. It is beneficial at both the individual and community levels. It is a robust vital key to improving children's self-esteem, empowerment, creativity and critical reflection which are all considered very important to a better living. In the opinion of Adedokun and Odiaka (2018), literacy acquisition is essential to meet the economic, social, political and environmental needs of all and sundry in a country such as Nigeria. Literacy acquisition, accordingly yields a complete individual, one who is able to use his/her ability to read and write to solve any problem he/she might encounter in his/her everyday live (Adedokun & Kayode, 2019). The Federal Government of Nigeria also recognize the importance of literacy in its National Policy on Education 2013 edition when it states that one of the objectives of primary education is to inculcate permanent literacy as well as the ability to communicate effectively (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). However, Anna and Ossom (2018) were of the opinion that throughout language

development, children pick up skills that are central to the development of literacy. At this stage, literacy is categorized as emergent literacy, and bit by bit, children combine what they know about listening and speaking with what they know about print and become prepared to begin to read. Oyetunde, Ojo, Korb and Babudoh (2016), Ana (2020), Aryanti, Candra, and Elfiza (2020) all explained that reading is not an easy skill to deal with because it is an interface between the reader and the material in which all the schematic knowledge interact with the reader's social and background factors. It also requires the development of literacy skills such as oral skills, word recognition, and comprehension strategies. Reading is one of the four language skills, therefore if learners lack language competency, mastery or comprehension, it is because of their reading deficiency (Ayu, 2020). Reading is also known to be one of the most vital of the four core language skills which learners require so as to regularly improve (Nazarova, 2020).

Wibowo (2018) was of the opinion that reading is a means of expanding the frontiers of the knowledge of language. One of the reasons reading is important is because learners gain a lot of information from what they read as well as learning more about the language itself, especially when the learner is a second language learner. Wibowo also submitted that one of the vital goals of reading is to be able to comprehend, evaluate and use printed materials for one's needs. This implies that reading is fundamental to the children's cognitive development, because a child who is a poor reader would definitely be a poor learner (Kyauta & Musa, 2016). According to Lakhali (2020) reading is viewed as an active process by which readers dynamically interact with the text. Andres (2020, pg. 70) in his own words stated that;

Reading helps learners to be personally thoughtful and move from the traditional teacher-centered view to a more systematic and comprehensive view, learners are expected to enhance both productive (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (reading and listening) through reading. It also helps them to develop literacy which enables them to be more critical thinkers at the time of expressing their opinions.

Reading makes it possible for pupils to recognize written form, pronounce letters in a coherent manner, and identify syllables, words, sentence as well as comprehension (Morina & Elshani, 2015). Montgomery (2018) also expresses the idea that if any child would be able to read properly and would also be able to comprehend there would be an interplay between different brain functions working together to provide multiple layers of context and meaning. It enhances the ability of the mind for comprehension and help learners to understand the world and discover new things which allow for the development of imagination (Carlos & Maria, 2019). According to Yanti & Eliza (2020) reading will enhance pupils, vocabulary, speaking skills, knowledge, as well as their creativity. According to Muhid, Pesantren, and Chalim (2020) reading is a very important skill required for so many things especially in the learning process of children. Reading skills are quite important to lower primary school pupils since reading is needed as a basic skill for subsequent learning in other levels of education (Mwoma, 2019).

However, achieving early reading fluency in English language requires that pupils know the relationship between sounds and letter symbols. This can be achieved through the use of phonics. According to Dilla (2017), phonics strategy teaches letters-sound connotations and its usage in word reading. It helps students learn to read more efficiently than instruction without phonics. Phonics is important to spelling, reading, and comprehension in many readers. It also helps pupils with reading disabilities regardless of their age (Driesen, 2020). Phonics is a vital preparation to reading because it shows learners the association between letters and sounds (Mesmer & Griffith, 2006; Driesen, 2020). According to Ngamkiathajorn and Kanoksilapatham, (2018), Phonics is an efficient instruction which aims at establishing alphabetic knowledge by teaching letter and sound. Learners are taught to transform letters into sounds and blend them to form readable words when reading. It also helps them to identify the sounds in words before converting such sounds into letters correctly when writing. Phonics is primarily used to teach children how to read and can as well be used to teach pronunciation. It is intended to aid children comprehend, discriminate and blend letter sounds in spoken words, which then develop the learners' oral skills, as well as the ability to read at an earlier age (Shoaga *et al.*, 2017). Phonics strategy is one of the most significant ways of teaching reading and a way to recognize sound and spell words correctly (NRP, 2011; Mwoma, 2019).

Studies such as Chen, 2015, Prakosha *et al.*, (2018), Wendy, (2019), Amadi and Offorma, (2019), have all stressed the importance of phonics strategy in aiding reading comprehension. They also identified different types of phonics, which include implicit phonics, otherwise known as analytic phonics, explicit phonics, also known as synthetic phonics as well as embedded phonics. Implicit phonics or analytic phonics is a type of phonics which goes from whole

to part. When this type of phonics is used, it makes learners associate new word sounds to letters based on the previous knowledge of the already learned words (Amadi & Offorma, 2019). However, it is important to note that although phonics is being used in Nigerian primary school to teach reading, many pupils are still not able to read fluently. According to the report of Nigerian Education Data Survey (NEDS), (2015), there has been a poor reading achievement in all levels of primary education in many states in Nigeria. In the report, it was stated that

25% of primary one school pupils could read one or more words in 2010; and in 2015 the percentage was still below 30%.

Innocent (2020) reported that the reading culture among primary and secondary school pupils in Nigeria have been alarmingly poor. This is a serious problem, especially because the bedrock of all activities within the school is basically about reading and writing. So, if pupils cannot read, it is certain that they cannot understand or comprehend what they are taught. This may therefore be the reason why Nigeria is noted to have the highest number of school drop-out who are children. According to Amadi & Offorma, (2019), Majority of the problems associated with reading exhibited by pupils in Nigerian is known to be as an outcome of poor techniques of teaching reading. This poor achievement in reading may be attributed to many factors such as the learning environment, teaching techniques and other teacher related variables (Adedokun & Kayode, 2019). This thus place the teachers as the major deciding factor in achieving good reading attainment. According to Basturkmen (2012) and Borg (2006), teachers are the ones who translate policy into practice, and if curriculum reform would be effective, the role of teachers should be reviewed.

Most teachers have their own sets of pedagogical beliefs and have developed individual practices based on their experiences. Kuzborska, (2011) was of the opinion that teachers' beliefs affect their roles, patterns of class interaction, procedures, goals, students, and their pedagogy. This may be because teachers are decision makers who draw on personal, practical, contextual thoughts and believe, especially within the classroom (Borg, 2003). More so, studies such as Foote *et al.*, (2004); Lara-Cinisomo *et al.*, (2009) opined that teacher beliefs are relative to quality experiences, pedagogical practices as well as the ways children learn about literacy afterwards.

Studies have reported that there are different school of thought on children's early literacy development and how children should be taught phonics among early childhood teachers (Lynch, 2009; Campbell, 2015; Lynch and Owston, 2015). This may be in recognition of the teacher's different educational background, experience, interest and even personal development. In Nigeria however, no study has been found to investigate teachers' belief on teaching reading through the phonics approach. Apart from belief, teachers' knowledge of the subject matter, which involves their teaching of reading through the phonics approach is also a vital point of this investigation.

Although, Kagan (1992) opined that "teachers' knowledge is an important precursor to a belief system that is personalised, and may eventually shape the individual's perception, judgement and behaviour" yet some studies have identified some teachers' lack of knowledge about explicit decoding

instruction resulting in inaccurate methods of phonics instruction.

According to Carlisle, *et al.*, (2009); McCutchen, *et al.*, (2009), teachers' knowledge often affect pupils' reading performance. This implies that, the result of the systematic phonics instruction depends on teachers' phonics knowledge and perceptions to a large extent (Piasta, *et al.*, 2009). This may be because pupils are bound to be affected negatively when their teachers have insufficient and unsystematic phonics knowledge (Piasta, *et al.*, 2009; Yi, 2013; Chen, and Seng, 2020).

Research has shown that teachers' knowledge and beliefs are unmistakably intertwined. It is believed that the teachers beliefs can be linked with both content knowledge and qualifications (McMullen and Alat, 2002; Han and Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010; Seng, 2020). According to Shaffe (2019) "teachers' knowledge is usually gained through teacher education and in-service training, but their beliefs about how to apply the knowledge are often personally developed through experiences as teachers."

Campbell (2018) also believes that early childhood teachers' beliefs and knowledge about phonics are interwoven, but both belief and knowledge can influence classroom practice. Although it is obvious that teachers' beliefs serve as a foundation for action and influence classroom practices (Borg, 2011), the relationship between both is complex (Li, 2013; Zheng, 2013). Several researchers have come to the conclusion that there is not only a linear relationship between both constructs but also that they are mutually informing and they can also become disconnected from one another (Phipps & Borg, 2007; Buehl & Beck, 2015). Thus, teachers' beliefs should not be assessed only on the basis of what they claim to believe, but it also should be complement by observing what they actually do in the classroom (Borg, 2006; Shaffer, 2019).

In practice, the most popular way reading is being taught in Nigeria is through jolly phonics. Jolly Phonics is a fun and child-centred approach to teaching literacy which has actions for each of the 42 letter sounds of English and teaches five key skills for reading and writing by using a synthetic multisensory approach (Abiata, 2020). The Jolly Phonics also has a simple lesson structure. In Jolly Phonics, each of the 42 letter sounds is introduced with the same 8 steps: (1) Story, (2) Action, (3) Flashcards, (4) Formation, (5) Blending, (6) Sounding, (7) Dictation, and (8) Jolly Song. (Counihan, Humble, Gittins & Dixon, 2021). Jolly Phonics is a fun and child-centred approach to teaching literacy which has actions for each of the 42 letter sounds of English and teaches five key skills for reading and writing by using a synthetic multisensory approach (Abiata, 2020).

However, in terms of the importance of jolly phonics, a research conducted by Watson and Johnston (2005) establish the fact that Jolly Phonics has a long lasting effect because the skills of blending and sounding taught to the children early resulted in their ability to handle unfamiliar words even years after they were taught using the method. Despite being a broad consensus that the teaching of phonics is fundamental, others have identified a significance lack of teacher training in affective literacy teaching strategies, particularly with regards to phonics (Adamu *et al.*, 2020), but in order to verify this claim it becomes imperative to investigate the teachers belief, knowledge and how these influence their practice, hence this study.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Studies on early reading in Uganda (Fontana, *et al.*, 2020), South Africa (Cillians & Bloch, 2018; Cronje, 2021), Algeria (Yakoub & Lemzert, 2020), Namibia (Ithindi, 2019) and Nigeria (Amadi & Offorma, 2019; Counihan *et al.*, 2022) generally noted that a large number of children who are currently in or have completed primary education are grossly lacking in basic reading ability vital to their future learning despite their exposure to different reading instruction. They often find it difficult to read words on the syllabic level.

It is important to note that of the 20 million children worldwide who were out-of-school in 2017, about 10.5 million of them are children from Nigeria (Umoru, 2017). One serious problem currently facing primary education in Nigeria is illiteracy. A significant proportion of primary school children have different issues which emanate from their inability to read (Aliyu, *et al.*, 2011; Oyetunde, 2015; Oyetunde *et al.*, 2016). Adeniran, Ishaku, and Olawale (2020) also found out that performance in literacy is consistently lower in Nigeria.

The implication of this is that reading achievement has only seen marginal increase of 5%, which indicates seriousness of the problem. Studies such as Fontana *et al.* (2020); Medadi *et al.* (2019); Elashhab (2018) attributed these failures to the multilingual nature of the language policies of the country. Researches have argued that a disconnection between the cultural context of bilingual ESL pupils and the adoption of English as the language of instruction create a gap in reading fluency of the pupils. This implies that trying to learn how to read in a new language presents a huge problem to the pupils and even to the teachers who try to find a balance between the Mother tongue and the L2.

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