

EFFECT OF PHONICS APPROACH ON ADULT LEARNERS' ACHIEVEMENT IN READING AT THE BASIC LITERACY LEVEL IN IBADAN

BY

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Abstract

Reading is an essential literacy skill that is necessary for the development of any adult learner in a knowledge-based economy. Many adult learners at the basic literacy level are struggling readers who cannot make adequate meaning from written items. With this level of frustration, they cannot be relevant in the world of work and general development. Proper pronunciation of words, building of meaning and fluency are basic reading skills that adult learners at the basic literacy level grapple with. This study, therefore, examined the effects of phonics approach (a combination of synthetic and analytic phonics) on the reading achievement of adult learners at the basic literacy level in Ibadan. The moderating effect of gender was also examined. The pretest-posttest, control group quasi experimental design was adopted. A total number of 40 adult participants were incorporated based on their reading deficiencies. Two hypotheses were raised and the quantitative data collected were analysed using the inferential statistic of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). From the findings, it was revealed that there was a significant effect of treatment on basic adult learners' achievement in reading ($F_{(1,38)} = 32.283, p < .05, \eta^2 = .545$). There was no significant effect of gender on learners' achievement in reading. ($F_{(1,38)} = .446, p < .05, \eta^2 = .016$). It is recommended, based on the finding of this study, that facilitators of adult learners at the basic literacy levels should adopt the phonics approach to teaching reading.

Keywords: Phonics approach, Achievement, Reading, Basic adult literacy.

Introduction

Education worldwide is considered a priceless asset and the cornerstone of human and national development. Adult education, as a discipline, provides literacy skills acquisition at different levels to enable adult learners to develop themselves and participate meaningfully in societal activities. Even though there is no universally accepted definition of literacy (since the notion of literacy is contextual), UNESCO's latest definition of literacy goes thus: "Literacy is the ability to use written language as a means of communication in a plurality of contexts" (Alidou and Glanz, 2015: p205). This definition of literacy emphasises the modern idea of "literacies" in which various forms of literacy like media literacy, science and technology literacy, religious and adolescent literacies exist. With the advent of "literacies", (Lawal, 2016: p7), adult learners are granted an opportune moment to gain mastery of different topics and activities that exist in the world of work. These literacies allow them to make sense of a range of written, visual and spoken texts, books, newspapers, magazines, DVD, television and radio programmes, signs, maps and various conventions.

According to Kalantzis and Cope (2012), literacy is made up of new basics and old basics. The old basics, though narrow and apparently simplistic, constitute fundamental life skills. They include the "3Rs" (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) with phonics as a prominent part of the reading curriculum. The old basics explore the use of primers to foster functional literacy too. The new basics stress literacies and multiliteracies in their various complexities either as adopted methodologies in the learning arena, characterised by multimodal communications or, as diverse topics and contents that reflect human activities. These multimodal approaches are utilisable at the basic literacy classes.

Basic Adult Literacy Education

Various levels of literacy skills acquisition exist in adult education out of which the basic literacy level is the first level. At the basic literacy level, fundamental life skills are taught and the learning internalised at this stage forms the needed foundation for other levels of learning. According to Ntta (1997: p35), “At its basic or rudimentary level, literacy has to do with the ability to read, write and compute in a given language. This basic level is followed by the functional literacy level which of course can be equated with lifelong learning. It has to do with transforming the theoretical learning acquired through the “3Rs” into practical living experiences as the needs arise. It is also described as survival literacy or reductionist literacy (Encyclopedia.com). The next level of literacy acquisition, the post literacy stage, is used in adult education to refer to literacy acquisition of neoliterates. Here, activities in the literacy classes are aimed at solidifying already acquired literacy skills to avoid relapses (UNESCO 2016). Advanced literacy, which is the highest level of literacy acquisition is cultivated from the secondary school level and beyond, to equip students for the 21st century knowledge-based economy. (Lesaux and Galloway, 2015). According to these authors, the practices needed for this level of literacy include reading of good quality texts, part of which are content area texts, carrying out rich interactions and discussions among learners, day-to-day writing activities and high utility vocabulary development.

Basic literacy, which is an important aspect of this article, is characterised by certain practices. As the foundation of all literacy practices, particularly among adult learners, the teaching of the “3Rs” (Reading, Writing and arithmetic) is inevitable. In the reading curriculum, the word – both spoken and written – is given much emphasis before a gradual movement to larger structures like sentences and paragraphs. Simple computation tasks are

also done. According to Ojokheta (2007), alluding to Paulo Freire's literacy teaching methods, three stages are followed in treating words at the basic literacy level and they include:

- i) The study of the context: through informal discussions, words are elicited from people to determine the political, social and economic problems they battle with.
- ii) Selection of words from discovered vocabulary: highly emotional words and most frequently used words are picked. Such words can stimulate more discussions among learners.
- iii) Actual process of literacy training: this stage of literacy training is further divided into three different stages of motivational session, development of teaching materials and literacy training. At this third stage, words are broken down into syllables and many more syllables are generated from such syllables. For instance, monosyllables like "bar" /ba:/ can be rewritten or repronounced to accommodate other sounds to give items like /bi:/, /bai/, /bɔ:/ and /bet/. Many more words can be formed from these too.

From the examples above, there is the indication that the phonics approach is a prominent approach adopted at the basic literacy level. In the views of Adams (2010), phonics is the system of teaching reading that builds on alphabetic principle, a system of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations. Since spelling is not a guide to pronunciation in English language and even in most mother tongues, it becomes necessary that the relationships between sounds and letters are taught clearly at the basic literacy level to facilitate oral and silent reading respectively. For instance, using the phonics approach, an adult learner at the basic literacy level should be able to blend the sounds /k-e-m-i-s-t/ in order to produce the word "chemist". Various

approaches are adopted to ensure that learners internalise good pronunciations using the phonics approach.

Another important feature of the basic literacy level of adult education is the use of mother tongue in the teaching of language, particularly reading in the English language class as well as other content areas. In utilising mother tongue for teaching adult literacy, books, primers and manuals are produced in the mother tongue. In such books, the themes covered usually include marketing, gardening, agriculture, livestock – farming, health, proverbs and the history of communities (UNESCO, 2016). These books, no doubt, gradually introduce learners to functional literacy which opens doors to development. However, phonics teaching in English is given priority since English is the official language in Nigeria.

Finally, the basic adult literacy education level is replete with individuals that are heterogeneous in many respects. According to the New National Policy on Education (2013:p.30), section 4, item 67, it is stated thus:

The goals of Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education shall be to:

Provide functional basic education for adults and youths who have never had the advantage of formal education or who left school too early. The target groups include migrant folks, almajiri pupils, illiterate and semi-literate adults, youths and adolescents; persons who left the formal school systems early and are now willing to come back and continue schooling and other categories of disadvantaged group; who are unable to have access to the conventional educational system and therefore require other forms of educational programmes to cater for their particular/peculiar needs and circumstances.

From the quotation above, one can see that in a typical basic literacy centre, learners of various categories abound. Some, having left either primary or secondary school, relapse into illiteracy and tend to operate at a level that requires a fresh start. In order to prevent this ugly

situation, various methods like the conscientisation approach, phonics method, REFLECT and various forms of functional literacy are utilised. This paper examined the effect of phonics method on the oral and silent reading achievement of adult learners at the basic adult literacy centre in Ibadan metropolis. Some of the participants were early primary school leavers while some never attempted formal schooling.

Reading and Reading Comprehension

Reading as a language or literacy skill has been defined in various ways by different scholars. It is the oral or silent interpretation of a written expression. Quoting Ekpu (2005), Ogbonnaya-Iduma, (2016) defined reading as getting meaning from a text or from symbols that represent the language we speak. It is interacting with the language that has been coded into print. To be able to get this meaning, the previous knowledge internalised by the reader from various experiences (schemata) come into play. These experiences include the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary skills and discourse on various subjects or themes.

Leipzig (2001), in explaining the meaning of reading stated that it is a multifaceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency and motivation. Corroborating Leipzig's view on the meaning of reading, Odiaka (2002) explained that reading has the following subskills: word recognition, vocabulary and comprehension skills, reading speed and critical evaluation. Word recognition entails analysing phonemes, reconciling letters to phonemes and accumulating sight words – these practices formed part of the activities in the experimental group of this study.

Reading comprehension (the building of meaning) is a subskill of reading (Odiaka, 2002; Leipzig, 2001). As a subskill of reading, it has got its own subskills which include word skills, identification of main ideas and details, identification of thought patterns, author's

mood, opinions, facts, and making inferences, among others. Reading comprehension therefore requires that a reader should be able to bring out a reasonable degree of meaning from what is read. The basic adult learners used as participants in this study were tested based on their understanding of short sentences as well as oral reading of such sentences. In some instances, they were allowed to translate these sentences to prove that they understood them.

Approaches to Phonics

Phonics is the study of sound-symbol relationship in order to make reading and writing possible. It is an essential approach to the teaching of literacy, particularly among basic adult learners. According to Adams (2010), phonics approach utilises the alphabetic principle whereby the links between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations are pointed out or taught. The effectiveness of phonics approach, especially among children has been attested to, over the years, despite the “reading wars” that have been in existence for decades. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), studies have shown that creating phonemic awareness and ensuring letter knowledge constituted the best prediction of children’s good performance in reading (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2007). Sitthitikul (2014) defined phonemic awareness as the ability to focus on, and manipulate phonemes in spoken words. Anyone who has adequate phonemic awareness would easily see when the meaning of a word is bound to change if a phoneme is displaced, deleted or mispronounced. It is in this sense that beginning reading by focusing on phonemic awareness creates a good foundation. Two important approaches are used in teaching phonics and they are:

- i) **The Synthetic Approach:** Just as the word “synthetic” is used here, this approach (a building up approach) involves “synthesising” or “blending” the phonemes that make up a word by sounding them out sequentially as in /p/ - /i/ - /t/ to produce the word

“pit”. Before exposing learners to the stage described above, a phonemic awareness is first created in which learners are made to produce the sounds in English and identify their orthographic representations. They are also exposed to irregularities in English spelling and their unique pronunciations. According to Wyse and Godswami (2008), in a reviewed study, it was shown that systematic tuition on phonics enhanced reading among children. Also Genishi, Yung-Chan and Stires (2000) reported that phonemic awareness instruction increased children’s interest and learning in English Language class.

- ii) **The Analytic Approach:** In the analytic approach to teaching or studying phonics, sounds are identified as they commonly occur in a list of words. Unlike the blending of phonemes that is characteristic of the synthetic approach, the analytic approach involves dismantling the phonemic contents of words for proper pronunciation and spelling. According to Udosen and Ekpe (2003), in utilising this approach, target words are selected from a reading passage and teachers, together with their students discuss the phonemic content of such words, noting their similarities and differences. Other methods of teaching phonics include the eclectic method and the embedded phonics among others. In this research, only the synthetic and the analytic approaches were used among the adult participants. Only the literal and interpretive levels of comprehension were tested since the participants were struggling readers.

Gender and Reading Comprehension

Different findings have been arrived at, on whether or not gender affects reading comprehension. According to Odiaka, (2002), there is the general belief that girls perform

better than boys in language tests. However, in a study carried out by Odiaka on students' reading comprehension at the Junior Secondary School level, it was observed that there was no significant effect of gender on students' achievement in reading comprehension. However, findings by Junaid (2015) and Lynn and Mikk (2009) showed that there were significant sex differences in the achievement of students in reading comprehension tests. Lynn and Mikk reported that in a world-wide measurement of reading ability done by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational achievement in a study known as Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) done in 35 countries using fourth grade students, girls achieved significantly higher than boys in reading. Several reasons were given for this discrepancy ranging from the fact that boys pay much attention to videos, recorded items and audio-visuals while most girls had reading tables and more time devoted to reading. This assertion corroborates an earlier assertion by Carrol (1975) that researches in the past observed a more positive attitude to language learning among female students compared to their male counterparts. Johnson (1976) attributed such differences to cultural factors. In this research, the effect of gender on reading achievement was examined.

Statement of the Problem

Adult learners at the basic literacy level are struggling readers who manifest so many errors in their pronunciations, oral reading exercises as well as written exercises. Some of them get frightened when given long passages to read since they have to battle with having to construct meaning from the sentences contained in such paragraphs. Part of the causes of these reading problems is the fact that they lack required phonemic awareness and the phonics skills needed to tackle reading and reading comprehension effectively. Having dropped out from schools, some of them have lost touch with adequate pronunciation and reading skills. This

study therefore aims at examining the effect of phonics approach on basic adult learners' reading achievement.

Hypotheses

Based on the problem stated, the following null hypotheses will guide this study:

Ho₁: There is no significant main effect of treatment (phonics) on achievement in reading of adult learners at the basic literacy level.

Ho₂: There is no significant main effect of gender on the reading achievement of adult learners at the basic literacy level.

Methodology

The pretest-posttest quasi experimental design of a 2x2 factorial matrix was adopted in this study. The participants were adult learners at the basic literacy level of a literacy centre attached to the University of Ibadan. Fifty adult learners started the study but forty were consistent till the end, having been randomly distributed to both experimental and control groups. There were twenty adult learners in each group. Two instruments were used for the study – Adult Learners' Achievement Test in Reading (ALATR) $r=.90$ and facilitator's instructional guide on phonics approaches. Both synthetic and analytic phonics approaches were used. The researchers and a group of trained research assistants administered the pretest and posttest while the research assistants carried out the treatments. Data collected were analysed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) at 0.05 level of significance.

Results and Discussion

In this section, participants' demographic variables, analysis and interpretation of data collected as well as discussion of finding are presented.

Demographic variables

Table 1: Distribution of the Respondents by Treatment Groups

Treatment Group	Frequency	Percentage
Experimental	20	50.0
Control	20	50.0
Total	40	100.0

Table 1 shows that 20 (50.0%) of the respondents were in the experimental group while 20 (50.0%) were in the control group. Total number of participants was 40.

Table 2: Distribution of the Respondents by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	14	35.0
Female	26	65.0
Total	40	100.0

Table 2 shows that male participants were 14 while female participants were 26 in number.

Table 3: Distribution of the Respondents by Educational Background

Educational Background	Frequency	Percentage
None (No schooling)	7	17.0
Primary School Leavers	21	52.5
Early school leavers (drop outs)	12	30.0
Total	40	100.0

Table 3 shows that 7 (17.5%) of the respondents had no formal education, 21 (52.5%) had primary school certificates and 12 (30.0%) were early secondary school leavers.

H₀₁: There is no significant main effect of treatment (phonics approaches) on basic adult learners' achievement in reading.

Table 4: Estimated Marginal means of Treatment Groups on Reading Achievement of Adult Learners

Treatment Group	Number	Mean	Std. Error
Experimental	20	84.487	2.622
Control	20	61.113	2.622

Table 5: Summary of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the Effect of Phonics Approaches on Basic Adult Learners' Achievement in Reading

Source	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig	Eta
Corrected Model	5843.110	2	2921.555	22.838	.000	.552
Pretest	35.010	1	35.010	.274	.604	.007
Treatment group	4570.478	1	4750.478	37.134	.000	.501
Error	4733.290	37	127.927			
Corrected Total	10576.400	39				

Table 4 above shows that the estimated marginal mean score of learners in the experimental group was 84.487 while the estimated mean score for the control group was 61.113. This means that adult learners in the experimental group had higher achievement in reading than those in the control group.

The result on Table 5 shows that there was a significant main effect of treatment (phonics approaches – synthetic and analytic) on basic adult learners' achievement in reading ($F_{(1,38)} = 37.134, p < .05, \eta^2 = .501$). 4750.478 was mean square (variance) for treatment group and 127.927 was the mean square for error. An F ratio of 37.134 was obtained which is significant at 0.05 level of significance using 1 and 39 degrees of freedom. Based on this, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant main effect of treatment on basic adult

learners' reading achievement was rejected. Phonics approaches (synthetic and analytic) therefore improved basic adult learners' achievement in reading.

H₀₂: There is no significant effect of gender on achievement in reading among adult learners in the basic adult literacy class.

Table 6: Estimated Marginal Means of Gender on Reading Achievement of Adult Learners in the Basic Literacy Class

Gender	Number	Mean	Std. Error
Male	14	75.690	4.246
Control	26	71.244	3.113

Table 7: ANOVA showing the Effect of Gender on the Reading Achievement of Adult Learners in Basic Literacy class.

Source	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig. P	Eta
Corrected Model	1271.487	2	635.743	2.528	.094	.120
Pretest	1153.262	1	1153.262	4.586	.039	.110
Treatment group	178.855	1	178.855	.711	.404	.019
Error	9304.91	37	251.484			
Corrected Total	10576.400	39				

Table 6 shows the estimated marginal mean score of gender on adult learners' achievement. The male participants had a mean score of 75.690 while the female participants had a mean score of 71.244. This means that the male adult learners performed better than their female counterparts.

From table 7, however, it could be deduced that there was no significant effect of gender on the reading achievement of basic adult learners' ($F_{(1,39)} = .711$ $p > .05$ $\eta^2 = .019$). From the table, the mean square for treatment group is 178.855 and the mean square for error

is 281.484 yielding an F ratio of .711 under 1 and 39 degrees of freedom. This value is insignificant at 0.05 level of significance. Based on this, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant effect of gender on achievement in reading among adult learners in the basic adult literacy class was therefore accepted. It therefore means that gender did not affect the performance of adult learners' reading significantly.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the effect of the use of phonic approaches (synthetic and analytic) on the reading achievement of adult learners at the basic literacy class. Fluency and reading comprehension of series of declarative sentences were majorly assessed to grade the reading achievement of these struggling readers. The moderating effect of gender on the reading achievement of these participants was also examined. From the findings, it was revealed that phonics approaches had significant effect on the reading achievement of adult learners at the basic literacy level. The estimated means for both the experimental and control groups are 84.487 and 61.113 respectively. Apart from this, with the mean square of 4750.478 and error variance of 127.927 yielding an F value of 37.134, there is a reflection of a significant impact of treatment on the dependent variable. The null hypothesis which had it that there is no significant effect of phonics approach on adult learners' reading achievement was therefore rejected. The experimental group performed better than the control group in the reading skills tested – fluency and reading comprehension.

The finding on phonics and reading achievement corroborates the finding by Wyse and Godswami (2008) who found out from their study that students exposed to phonemic awareness systematically performed excellently in their reading achievement. Also Genishi, Yung-Chan and Stires (2000) reported that students exposed to phonemic awareness had

accelerated interest in reading and also performed well in learning English generally. This therefore points to the fact that beginning adult language learning with the teaching of phonics can yield positive results in different aspects of English language learning.

From the finding of this study, gender did not have significant effect on the reading achievement of adult learners at the basic literacy level. The estimated marginal means of male participants is 71.244 giving the impression that male participants achieved better than female participants. Even though this difference is not significant from the ANOVA table, one could adduce some reasons for this. Female adults at this level appear to be over-burdened with a lot of roles, making it difficult for them to participate fully in adult learning like their male counterparts. After the days work, the male learners have ample time to go through their homework thoroughly. Previous studies on impact of gender on reading have always favoured girls above boys. From the ANOVA table, the mean square for treatment group is 178.855 and the mean square for error is 251.484 yielding an F ratio of .711 at 0.05 level of significance. This shows that gender did not have effect on the reading achievement of participants in this study. The null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant effect of gender on adult learners reading achievement was therefore accepted.

The finding of this study did not uphold the findings by Lynn and Mikk (2009) and Junaid (2015) with regard to the effect of gender on reading comprehension. These authors found out that there were significant sex differences on the reading performance of students in an international study. However, the finding on gender and reading achievement is in alignment with Odiaka's (2002) finding. In her study, gender did not significantly affect the reading achievement of Junior Secondary School students. It can be deduced that findings on

reading achievement and gender have remained controversial. More studies can be carried out to verify the effect of gender on adolescents' children's and adults' reading achievement.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Reading as a complex literacy skill has remained a huge challenge to many adult learners, particularly at the basic literacy level. Majority of them have this challenge because phonological skills and phonemic awareness were never part of their learning: some of them were never taught these skills. This study has demonstrated the need for, and the effectiveness of exposing adult learners to phonological skills and phonemic awareness instructions. This particular study has proved that fluency and the building of meaning (comprehension) among struggling adult readers can be made possible by using phonics – synthetic and analytic approaches. This study therefore recommends as follows:

- 1) At the basic literacy level, the use of phonics should be adopted to make reading skills properly learnt by adults.
- 2) Good grounding in phonological skills, phonemic awareness and phonics approaches should constitute a course for potential facilitators so that adult learners can find reading interesting.
- 3) Multiplicity of literacy materials including audio tapes and videos should be provided so that adult learners can listen to model sounds and examples and apply same to their speeches.

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