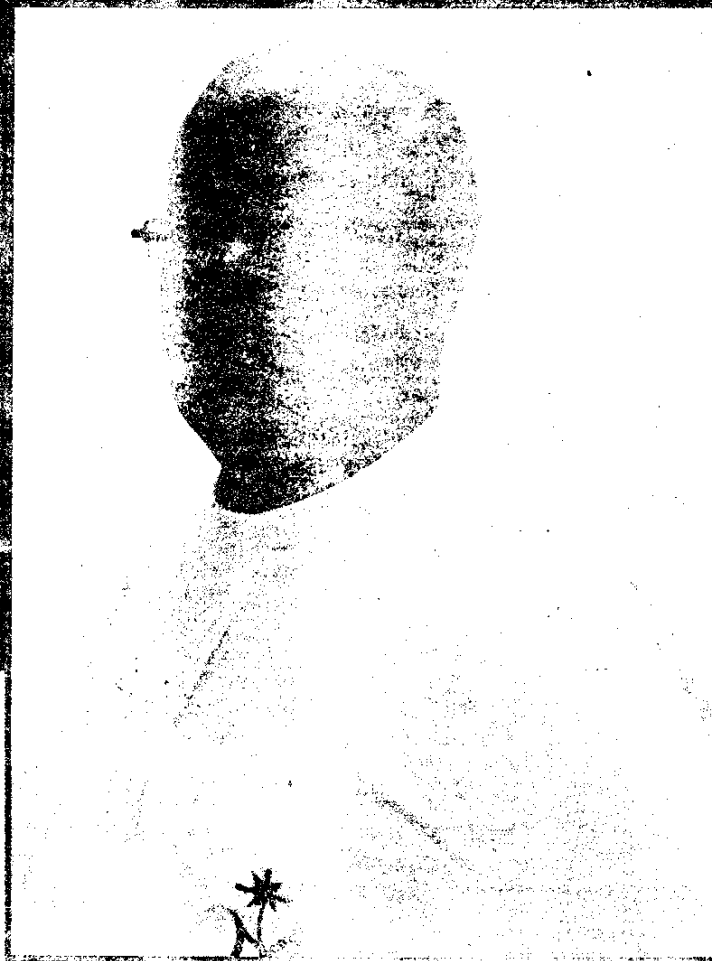


ISSUES IN LANGUAGE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

*A Festschrift for
Jerome Ikechukwu Okonkwo*



Edited by
Polycarp A. Anyanwu
and
Ifeoma Obuasi

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33 A Comparative Study of the Performance of Emergent Readers in Public and Private Schools

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Abstract

This study was conducted to compare the performance of emergent readers in public and private nursery/primary schools on fluency, word attack, and comprehension skills. One hundred and ninety six emergent readers - (100 from public and 96 from private schools) in intact classes were used as subjects for the study. The subjects were pretested on three reading tests after which they were exposed to instructional treatments. Means, Standard deviation and t-tests were used to compare the performance of the pupils. The results showed that private school pupils performed significantly better than their counterparts in public schools on all the measures. The pedagogic implications of the study were highlighted.

Introduction

Reading defined as the process of looking at and comprehending the meaning of written and printed words from the visual representation of symbols, involves recognition and sometimes verbalization of symbol which represents sounds in human speech. Reading takes place when the reader understands what has been encoded for decoding; hence, comprehension is at the center of reading. Reading facilitates the teaching and learning processes. It helps in the mastery of relevant subjects taught and studied. Reading is a vital means of acquisition of knowledge, skills and expression of thought especially in this modern world of Science and Technology which demands that one should be able to take an intelligent and informed interest in happenings within one's environment and the world at large.

Research and scholars of reading in Nigeria agree on the poor performance of students in Reading and Comprehension. Efforts to examine the etiology of the problem have been directed at the secondary level of the educational system. However, recent research has shown that the problems is traceable to when children first access school and are classified as emergent readers (Macauley, 1983; Ijaiya, 1997; Umolu and Okankwo 2000; Broline, 2002; Abel, 2003). Also, Medahunsi (1997) notes that reading at the primary school level is crucial

and that reading programme at the level of emergent readers "must be re-ordered to ensure success". The idea of emergent reading is closely linked with emergent literacy which is a stage in which children begin to think and learn about print and its meaning in their environment. These emergent readers are given opportunities, among others, to acquire alphabetic reading skills, that is, ability to read text written in an orthography (spelling).

Observations of classroom practices in both public and private schools in Nigeria, reveal a major visible difference in the level of oral English language development between the two groups of pupils. While majority of the pupils in private schools spoke English fluently, majority of their counterparts in public schools spoke their mother tongues and pidgin (Okebukola, 2004). This no doubt is directly or indirectly linked to the adoption of English as a medium of expression and instruction in the private schools as well as the fact that majority of the pupils spoke English at home. This is contrary to what obtains in the public schools where pidgin and the Nigerian Languages function as media. The pupils in the private schools are thus more exposed to the oral use of language.

No doubt, extensive use of language helps the development of concepts, things, places, people and situations and these give varied opportunities for oral language development, because the correct choice of words and the creative use of expressions are all avenues for developing oral language skills. This is relevant to reading because children learn to read what is said.

The multilingual status of Nigeria necessitates the adoption of English language as the official language while recognition is given to Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba which constitute the major languages (Federal Government of Nigeria 2004). To this end, the National Policy on Education (2004) stipulates that –

The medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the community and at a later stage English.

The implication of this recommendation is that children should be introduced to reading in a Nigerian Language (NL) first. This policy does not operate in all the schools due to the multi-lingua nature of the state. Observations of reading practices as far as the teaching of beginning reading is concerned in Lagos State (Okebukola, 2004) revealed that a separate medium policy is adopted at the discretion of the schools. While some teach beginning reading in both the Nigerian Language (NL) and Second Language (SL) simultaneously, some private schools teach reading in English as early as in nursery II while introduction to

reading in the NL begins in primary II. Most schools in Lagos are compelled to use English as a medium of instruction even at the lower primary school because in some cases the language of the teacher may be different from that of the class while in others there may not be a single Nigerian Language shared in common and understood by all pupils in the class.

In Nigeria, the worth of a primary school is judged by the fluency and effective use of the English language by its pupils. Hence, it is the belief in many quarters in Nigerian that, public school children neither receive high quality language and literacy instruction, nor have their levels of literacy achievement reached parity with children from elite homes (Okebukola, 2008). It is on this premise that this study sets out to examine the performance of primary one pupils' in Nigerian Public and Private Primary Schools in basic reading skills of fluency, word attack and comprehension. The choice of primary one is to ascertain whether or not the perceived disparity in reading achievement is largely a function of the school environment and the teachers' pedagogy or the level of children's preparedness as reported by teachers (Okebukola, 2004).

The following null hypotheses were tested at a preset alpha level of 0.05.

1. There will be no statistically significant difference in the performance of emergent readers in public and private schools in fluency.
2. There will be no statistically significant difference in the performance of emergent readers in public and private schools in word attack skills.
3. There will be no statistically significant difference in the performance of emergent readers in public and private schools in comprehension.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a quasi experimental pretest, post test, non randomized control group design. It was used to examine any possible effects of treatment on the literacy of emergent readers in public and private schools on the measures of fluency, word attack and comprehension skills.

Population

The target population for the study consists of emergent readers enrolled in Primary 1 of private and public schools in the 20 Local Government areas of Lagos State. Their ages range between 4 to 7 years.

Sample

200 pupils in intact classes from 4 randomly selected primary schools in Ojo Local Government areas of Lagos State participated in the study: 2 of the schools were private and 2 public. The sampled pupils were emergent readers, that is, pupils who were just beginning to learn how to read. Their ages range between 4 to 7 years, owing to attrition at the end of the data collection phase, data were finally collected from 196 pupils; 100 from public and 96 from private primary schools.

Instrumentation

The following instruments were used for data collection:

1. Questionnaire for Primary One Teachers.

This was designed to find out how reading is taught and assessed and how pupils perform in reading tasks. It is divided into 5 sections. The first part (Section A) sought demographic data of teachers, pupils and the school. The second part (Section B) designated the task probed into such issues as how many hours are allocated to the teaching of reading, the methods used in teaching reading, how children are taught to read and the specific skills taught in reading. The third part (Section C) was the teachers' assessment of the pupils as readers – their ability to read the letters of the alphabet, ability to form words, pupils' attitude to reading and parents' support. Section D provides information on how teachers assess their pupils' progress and how the records are kept. Section E sought information on the reading resources – what books are used in teaching reading, the availability of a reading corner or library and the general environment of the school. Section E provides the teachers self evaluation. Information sought include teachers objectives in the teaching of reading, the professional organizations they belong to, workshops and seminars attended, problems encountered as teachers of reading and how they think they can be helped. A total of 43 primary one teachers (twenty – one from public schools and twenty – two from private schools) responded twice to the instrument with two weeks between administrations. The scores on the two administrations were correlated using Pearson procedure. The instrument exhibited a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.81.

2. Interview Guide for Headteachers and Proprietors

In order to obtain a complete picture of the schools' background, organization, method of work and underlying philosophy, an extended interview was arranged with twenty headteachers and twenty proprietors of primary schools. It took the form of a structured

discussion based on issues relating to the general aims and objectives for establishing the school, perceptions on the teaching of reading, language use and status in the National Policy on Education, the provision and availability of libraries, the medium of instruction and communication in the school, parental attitude and support for the schools, government's support for the school, general atmosphere and environment, suggestions for improvement.

Reliability was obtained by interviewing a sample (N=12) headteachers with similar characteristics as the sample of the study. The interview was conducted twice within two weeks between interviews. The responses on the two interview sessions were subjected to test-retest reliability using Pearson procedure. This yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.76.

3. Observation Schedule

An event sampling observation schedule was designed to record the various pre-reading activities which emergent readers engaged in to prepare them for the reading act. The methods their teachers employ, the language of teaching and general communication expression in the classroom.

Event sampling observation records the frequency of occurrence of an event during a class session regardless of the time during the lesson when the event occurs. This contrasts with time sampling e.g. Flanders Interaction Analysis System (FIACS) where any event that occurs within a specified time frame e.g. every minute is recorded. The reliability of the instrument is measured as agreement between raters (inter-rater correlation). The researcher and another rater who used the instrument reached the 0.80 level of agreement using the Pearson correlation procedure.

4. Test of Fluency through Oral Reading

Using Wide Span Reading Test (WSRT) developed by Brimer (1974) used to assess the oral reading skills of fluency, rate of reading, stress and intonation. The test was adapted to suit the status of the testees. The passage consisted of 62 words including those selected from New Oxford English course BK 1 by A. Banjo et al and Queen's primer by Nelson and sons. These are books prescribed for use in Nigerian primary schools. Other words adjudged suitable for the class level as well as the background of the pupils were also included, such as man, Ben, fact, cat, dog, mat, hen, egg, run, gun, box and sun. The children read to the researcher and class teacher individually. Children's' fluency that is, reading without long pauses and halting was scored as above average (8-10 marks) average (5-7 marks), below average (0-4 marks). The researcher and teacher scored each child independently and the

scores were compared, when the scores on a pupil differ, the average of the scores were calculated and awarded the pupils. In such cases, the scores fall within the same grade level.

The passage and test were validated by 2 experts in language education who were asked to identify words suitable in terms of language presentation, clarity of expression, class level, length and relevance of applicability to the investigation.

Test-retest reliability with one week interval yielded 0.69. This was obtained by carrying out Pearson correlation between the scores of the children on the first and second administrations.

5. Test of Word Attack (TWA)

Test of Word Attack (TWA) developed by the researcher using the prescribed reading text for Nigerian primary schools: New Oxford English course BK 1 by T. Nelson & Sons. The test was designed to assess the pupils' ability to use linguistic knowledge to discover the parts of a whole word. The test was diagnostic in nature. Children were given some three letter words with missing letters in meaningful sentences. They were required to use their linguistic knowledge to supply the missing parts in such a way that the sentences made sense. The method of scoring was such that the child received credit for a correct response to the missing part of the word e.g. c-at for cat. To establish the validity of the test of word Attack, the test items were examined by 2 experienced teachers in language Education.

The test was adjudged suitable in terms of clarity, language and class level. Reliability coefficient of 0.72 was obtained using the Kuder Richardson formula 21 [KR{21}] procedure.

6. Test of Comprehension (TOC)

Test of Comprehension (TOC) devised by the researcher using prescribed reading text for Nigerian primary schools – New Oxford English course skill by A. Banjo et al and Queen's Premier BK. 1 by T. nelson & Sons. The reading passage included words which are considered to be within pupils' academic level, social background and status as ESL learners. The reading of the passage was done orally to ensure that the children were actually decoding words. Most of the questions used in the comprehension text are at the literal level of comprehension that is, wh – type, who, where, what. The readability level of the text was determined in terms of its validity and reliability. It was validated by 3 experts in language education and reliability yielded reliability coefficient of 0.81 using KR (21) formula.

Procedure

The study began with an in-depth observation of classroom teaching and learning with a special focus on reading. This was followed by structured interviews and an event observation schedule. The aim of these observations was to provide an overall picture of current teaching and learning activities relating to reading. Note was made of the various problems teachers encounter in preparing pupils towards reading in English. After both public and private school pupils had been taught using the same scheme of work for seven weeks, WSRT, TWA, TWRS and TOC were then administered.

Findings

The mean scores of the public and private school subjects on the fluency, word attack, and comprehension measures were compared for the purpose of testing the four hypotheses of the study.

Table 1 shows the means and the standard deviation scores of pupils in public and private schools in fluency skill.

Table 1: T-test Comparison of Pupils Performance in Fluency Skill by School Type.

Group					N	X	
					S.D.		t-cal
t-tab					df	□	

Public 100	4.09	1.23	12.05	14.08	94	0.05	
Private 96	6.16	1.09					

The private school pupils had a significantly higher mean score on fluency (6.16) than public schools pupils (4.09). Since the T-test value was significant at p. 05, hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviation scores of pupils in public and private schools in word attack skill.

Table 2: T-test Comparison of Pupils' Performance in Word Attack Skill by School Type.

Group	N	X	SD	t-cal	t-tab	Df	A
Public	100	4.23	1.45	9.97	13.08	94	0.05
Private	96	6.03	2.01				

The private schools pupils had a significantly higher mean score on word attack skill (6.03) than public schools pupils (4.32). Since the T-test value was significant at p.05, hypothesis 2 was rejected.

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviation scores of pupils in public and private schools in comprehension skill.

Table 3: T-test Comparison of Pupils' Performance in Comprehensive Skill by School Ty

Group	N	X	S.D	t-cal	t-tab	Df	A
Public	100	10.98	2.13	26.44	32.37	94	0.05
Private	96	14.28	2.56				

The private school pupils had a significant higher mean score on comprehension (14.28) than public school pupils (10.98). Since the t-test value was significant at p.05, hypothesis 4 was rejected.

Discussion of Results

The findings of the study resulted in the rejection of the three hypotheses formulated to guide its conduct. The pupils in the private schools performed significantly better than their counterparts in the public schools on all measures. A probable explanation for these findings could be the favourable condition which a private school naturally enjoys much more than a public school in terms of class size, provision of materials, consistency in attendance and parental cooperation. The result of this study agrees with that of Umolu and Mallam (1983) which found that public schools in Plateau State did not begin to read until they were in primary 3. The pupils in the study finished primary six with mean reading level of primary one.

The fact that children who speak their mother tongue at home and in school had lower scores than their counterparts in private schools who use English as medium lends credence to the findings of (Macaulay, 1983; Okebukola, 2005) who notes that children in a bilingual

learning situation are faced with difficulties when they speak their mother tongue, but are forced to read in the second language. They note further that such a situation does not encourage early acquisition of reading skills.

On the other hand, this study has proved that when a Nigerian child is exposed to a second language early in a functional manner, learning to read in the language is enhanced. This is in agreement with the opinion strongly held in educational linguistics. Widdowson (1975) asserts that the best way to teach a language for communication is through its use in genuine communication.

Another probable contributory factor to the better performance of private school pupils in the reading skills can be traced to the opportunity this group of pupils have had in nursery class where they had been exposed to pre-reading activities in readiness for instruction in beginning reading. This agrees with the result of a study carried out by Broline (1977) in which primary one pupils who were taught by teachers who participated in a reading readiness instructional programme and who applied the concept and techniques for the programme in teaching readiness skills performed significantly better on reading tasks than those who were taught by teachers who had no knowledge of reading readiness skills.

The better performance of private school pupils in reading skills in comparison with their counterparts in the public schools as evidenced by the results of this study may not be alienated from the level of commitment of their teachers to duty. Although, some of the private school teachers interviewed express dismay at the horse driven nature of their jobs, but the fear of losing their jobs under the strict surveillance of proprietors keep them on their toes. The learning environment in the private schools is also more conducive to reading as revealed by the observations. Majority of the private schools visited have functional libraries.

Reading classes are also better organized in the private schools with fewer pupils in class. The entry behaviour of pupils also serve as encouragement for the teachers to the point that it becomes easy for them to build on the foundation these children have had in their oral language development having come from literate homes where the speaking of English is highly prized. Teachers in the public schools when interviewed expressed bias about the children's readiness and ability to learn English having come into school with little knowledge in the language.

Although, literature on comparative studies of the reading performance of pupils in public and private schools is sparse, there is enough evidence to show that the reading performance of pupils in public primary schools is at a low ebb (Ijaiya, 1997; Medahunsi, 1997; Dubey, 1982; Gumut, 1985; Abiri, 1977; Walsh, 1984). This comparative study is a

further attestation to the findings of these research efforts. It has probed deeper into the problems of poor reading achievement in public primary schools.

This comparison has established a case-that given improvement in the prevailing circumstances, children in public schools can be helped to improve their performances, after all they all are Nigerian children living on the soil of Nigeria and taught by Nigerians. It has also been established that if public school teachers could have suitable books, materials and good conditions of service like those in private schools, it should be possible for them to have as much success as those in private schools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study have revealed that emergent readers in private schools proved to be superior to those in public schools in their performance in beginning reading skills of fluency, word attack and comprehension. Among the factors responsible for this wide gap as evidenced by the findings of the study are: the cooperation the schools gain from parents, teacher's motivation and attitude to work, provision of relevant materials and books as well as the entry behaviour of the pupils.

These findings have implications for the teachers, curriculum planners, government and parents. There is an urgent need to rescue the public primary schools from total collapse. The Nigerian public primary schools are just a caricature of schools when compared with the private schools. This accounts for the upsurge of private schools in every nook and crannies of Lagos State. Parents seem to have lost confidence in the services offered so much that those who can afford the money send their children to private schools while the less privileged bemoan their lot and resign to fate. It is unfortunate however that majority of Nigerian emergent readers are the children of the latter group.

Recommendations and suggestions for improvement in the teaching of beginning reading instruction in Nigeria have been given by numerous workers who have researched into these problems (Ijaiya, 1997; Medahunsi, 1997; Dubey, 1982; Taiwo, 1980; Walsh, 1984). There is, therefore, an obvious need for improvement in teacher training to make teachers more sensitive to the process by which children learn to read and to enable them select their strategies for teaching. Teachers need to be given the opportunity to attend seminars, and conferences to keep abreast of new developments in teaching. Emergent readers should be grouped into classes according to their level of readiness for reading. Those with little knowledge in the language need to be exposed to a well structured and sequential programme or reading readiness activities for 2 or 3 terms depending on the progress being made. At this time attention should be paid to their oral language development. Since language is primarily

speech, a child should be made to first acquire the language to some extent before being exposed to the rudiments of reading thereby giving precedence to listening and speaking before reading and writing. The verbal language is widely recognized as the foundation of reading.

Another area of focus in teaching beginning reading in the public primary school is supervision in the implementation of the methods of teaching reading. It is noted that headteachers have little time for detailed classroom supervision in these schools unlike the private schools, which is commercial and profit making oriented. Indeed, what the public school teachers need is adequate supervision. There is the need to set up a monitoring unit by Local Education Districts who should pay periodic visits to the schools to see that teachers do what they are supposed to do when their needs are met at least reasonably.

By and large, the problems of under-achievement in the reading skills as exhibited by emergent readers in public schools arose from the complexity of the language situation, unmanageable numbers of pupils in the face of acute shortage of teachers and classroom space, teachers limited knowledge of teaching methods, lack of suitable materials and poor learning environment.

The International Reading Association (IRA) in collaboration with local chapters has a role to play in ameliorating these problems. They can help in the following ways:

- Supporting African countries to build capacity of literacy teachers to enhance relevance and efficiency.
- Conducting research in various aspects of literacy programmes with a view to understanding, appreciating and addressing challenges to literacy in Africa.
- Encouraging innovative ideas in literacy and support to African countries. Also
- Government should control pre-primary education by establishing nursery schools especially in the rural areas. Through pre-primary education children are expected to pre-reading activities which have been found to enhance children's reading ability (Spector, 1995).

Perhaps it is time for local chapters of International Reading Association to rise up to the challenge of popularizing the research efforts of its members by proposing and ensuring the membership of schools in the association. This will enable teachers in such schools to develop themselves academically, acquire new methodologies and benefit from the growing knowledge in the field of research and teaching pedagogies. It should be noted that beginning reading is important in the development of life-long competence in and attitude toward

reading to be left to chance on the whims and caprice of individual teachers and parents. It should be realized that only those who have successfully learnt to read can read to learn.

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