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## Adjudicating the Reading Wars

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Reading improvement in multilingual Nigeria has been found to be plagued with problems of methodological confusion in the choice of methods of teaching beginning reading. This paper presents the report of a study conducted to determine the potency of the Phonics and look-and-say methods singly and in combination on the reading achievement of emergent readers. The Phonics + Look-and-say method has been established as being capable of enhancing fluency, and word recognition. The Phonics only method has proved superior in promoting word Analysis while the Look-and-say only has proved a superior method in the identification of high frequency words. These findings suggest that the use of Phonics or the Look-and-say methods singly do not make for efficiency in emergent reading. Each method has to supplement the other as revealed in settings like Nigeria. Specific deficiencies in reading can also be tackled using appropriate methods. The results of the study have profound implications for teachers, teacher trainers and curriculum planners who are at the centre of the teaching – learning enterprise.

### Introduction

Studies in developmental reading have uncovered a plethora of information on the programme components necessary to reduce reading failure and improve reading performance among students in the upper classes of primary and junior secondary classes. (Aileru, 1996; Aliyu, 1984; Ihebuzor 1997 Onukaogu 2001). Yet for more children the reading battle is lost in the lower primary classes. Admittedly the best place to search for remedies is to observe students who have difficulty reading in upper classes.

Experience, classroom observations and research (Falayajo, 1997; Wilkinsons, 1993) have shown that reading deficient children in the upper primary classes exhibit among others:

- Poor decoding skills (students struggle with too many individual words and don't know how to effectively tackle a new word)
- Weak vocabulary
- The inability to read strategically and actively
- Poor spelling
- Too few reading opportunities outside the school
- Poor motivation, lack of confidence or evidence behaviour all stemming from experiencing too much reading failure.

One thing that could be said about this rather long list of possible causes of reading problems is that this discovery is needed because reading is multifaceted and teaching children to read is the key to subsequent educational success. Therefore, it should be the most important priority of educators especially the elementary schools. Yet as Adams (1990) noted "reading

may be the most politicized topic in the field of education (p.13). He noted sadly that education has suffered greatly because of the excessive politicization of the subject.

The resultant effect of this excessive politicization is the emergence of the concept of "reading wars". This refers to the contentious debate principally putting phonics (bottom-up) against look-and-say (whole word or top down) as the best instructional approach. This was made popular in 1967 and 1982 (Chall 1983). In the latest incarnation of the Great Debate Auckerrman (1990) noted that it is the whole word movement that has strayed the furthest from empirical evidence.

Reading improvement in multilingual Nigeria has been found to be plagued with problems of methodological confusion in the choice of methods of teaching beginning reading. The phonics and look-and-say methods have been identified as methods appropriate for teaching such beginning readers (Abiri 1977, Unoh 1983). But Unoh (1983) noted that "we have as yet insufficient experimental data on the relative effectiveness of these methods in Nigeria where English is taught as a second language" (p.13). Liberman (1988) has lamented that the endless "reading wars" within education dissipate energy and confuse teachers. According to him, they endlessly put teacher against teacher and researcher against researcher in a battle in which we should all be standing on common ground.

One strategy for adjudicating this on going dispute is empirical evidence. This paper presents the report of a study conducted to determine the potency of these controversial methods on the reading achievement of emergent readers.

### **Research Design**

The study adopted a quasi experimental, pretest-posttest, non-randomized control group design. It was used to examine any possible effect of the four instructional methods (phonics, look-and-say, Look-and-say + phonics and phonics+ look-and-say) on the reading achievement of emergent readers.

### **Hypotheses**

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at a pre - set alpha level of 0.05. There is no significant difference in emergent readers' reading achievement as measured by:

- (a) Fluency
- (b) Word - by - word analysis
- (c) Word recognition/miscues
- (d) Identification of key words to literacy

When taught using the phonics and look - and - say methods, singly and in combination.

**Subjects** - 326 emergent readers in intact classes in eight selected schools participated in the study.

Their ages ranged between 4 and 6, enrolled in nursery 2 of private schools and primary 1 of public schools. The choice of classes was predicated on the beginning reading level of the children. These were children just beginning to learn how to read.

### **Instrumentation**

Three standardized tests and two researcher-developed tests validated by three English Language experts were used. The instruments were:

- (a) Test of Key words to Literacy (TKWL) developed by McNally and Murray (1962) modified by the researcher to suit the level of pupils. The pilot study use of TKWL with a sample of Nigerian students gave a KR (21) reliability coefficient of 0.81. The scoring scheme of the test is shown below.

Words right or wrong (tick)	Is	A	This	The	On	For	That	Has	In	It
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- (b) Test of fluency through oral Reading using Wide Span Reading Test (TOF) developed by Brimer (1972) modified by researcher. Test – retest reliability with one week interval = 69. The scoring scheme of the test is shown below.

Fluency	8-10 above Average	5-7 Average	0-4 Below Average
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- (c) Test of Word Recognition Skill (TWRS) Goodman (1965) modified by the researcher. The scoring scheme of the test is shown below.

C	F	M	R	H	E	B	P	B	K	D	B	H	G	R	F
A	A	A	E	E	G	E	I	I	I	O	O	O	U	U	U
T	T	T	D	N	G	N	G	G	D	G	X	T	N	N	N

Tick miscues as wrong X

Total No. of words = 16

Score =  $80 - \frac{\text{Total error committed}}{\text{Total No. of words}} \times 100$ .

- (d) Test of Word Analysis developed by the researcher.  
Fill in the gaps with the missing letters

(1) c\_\_t      (2) re\_\_      (3) \_\_en      (4) e\_\_g      (5) ha\_\_

Form 5 words from these letters: a, b, d, o, u, e, l, s, h, B, c, t

Every meaningful word formed attracts a score of 1 while a wrongly spelt word is scored zero.

### Procedure

Three hundred and twenty – six pupils and four teachers in eight schools participated in the quasi – experiment. The pupils were those found to be emergent readers just beginning to learn how to read. Four of the schools were private and four were public. A teacher who taught using a particular method, e.g. Phonics, taught the class using this method in both the public and the private school. The classes were randomly assigned to the four teachers.

The experiment began by the administration of TKWL, TOF, TWRS and TOWA to the pupils in all classes as pretest. This was followed by the treatment using the scheme shown below.

Phonics Only Class: used the Phonics method throughout the duration of treatment.  
Look-and-Say.

Only Class used the look-and-say method throughout the duration of treatment.

Phonics + Look-and-Say class began each lesson with Phonics and followed with look-and-say.

Look-and-say + Phonics class began the lesson with look-and-say and followed with phonics.

Treatment lasted for nine weeks after which TKWL, TOF, TWRS, TOWRS and TOWA were given as posttest.

**Teaching Observation Schedule:** This guided the process of teaching. Highlights of the instructional sequence for each of the four methods are given below.

#### **Teaching Using the Phonics Method**

1. Learn the letters
2. Learn the sounds of the letters.
3. Sound out parts of the words
4. Sound out whole words
5. Read the words.
6. Read sentences.
7. Write down words.

#### **Teaching Using the Look – and – Say Method**

1. Learn words from flash cards.
2. Associate words with symbols through pictures
3. Read picture to explain sentences.
4. Read sentences
5. Write down words.

#### **Teaching Using the Phonics + Look – and – Say Method**

1. Learn the letters and their sounds.
2. Sound out parts of the word.
3. Sound out whole words.
4. Read words from flash cards.
5. Associate words with pictures.
6. Read pictures and sentences.
7. Write down words.

#### **Teaching Using the Look – and – Say + Phonics Method**

1. Learn words from flash cards.
2. Associate words with pictures.
3. Read pictures and sentences.
4. Learn the letters and their sounds.
5. Sound out parts of the word.
6. Sound out whole words.
7. Read sentences.
8. Write down words.

#### **Data Analysis and Results**

The hypotheses were tested using one – way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on the relevant posttest scores with pretest scores as covariate.

### **Discussion of Results**

The findings of the study are described by considering the hypotheses tested.

#### **Influence of Treatment on Pupils' Achievement in Fluency**

The result of the study revealed significant difference among the four groups on the measure of fluency ( $F(3, 325) = 115.49, p < .001$ ). This result does not provide support for hypothesis 1 (a) suggesting significant difference and hence the null hypothesis was rejected. Children who were taught using the phonics + look – and say method had the highest mean in the test of fluency (7.1) followed by look and say only (6.9). The phonics group had the lowest means (3.2).

The result of this study support earlier findings in this area (e.g. Dar, 1998; Potter, 1996; Pressley, 1998; Gregg, 1997; Routman, 1996). The superior performance of the phonic + look – and say group on the measure of fluency probably derives from the prior knowledge of the letters of the alphabets which the pupils brought into the primary one class. This probably provided the necessary schemata on which the new experience could be built. As noted by Albert (1993) who in his inquiry into learning to read found out that phonics is the more natural way to teach beginning reading. Instead of requiring the learner to memorize whole words, phonics shows the learner the process by which alphabetic writing is converted into speech. Thus, when children are learning to read, they need to be shown the process for using the ABCs to match speech they know.

English is alphabetic, so having prior knowledge of the alphabets probably provided a ground on which the learning of the sound of the alphabet could be developed. Following this up with the look-and-say method which emphasizes the wholeness of the words as well as their use in sentences would probably have helped the pupils become fluent readers since fluency has to do with reading without long pauses. It is worthy of note however that pupils taught using phonics alone had the least mean score in fluency (3.2). This agrees with the findings of Smith, (1979); Goodman, (1996); weaver, (1994); and Stahl & Miller, (1989).

A probable explanation for the poor performance of the phonics group in fluency test could be premised on the usefulness of phonics in helping readers to figure out the pronunciation of unknown words. Smith (1979) noted that good readers routinely recognize words without sounding them out and that sounding out words as is done by phonics slows down reading. A child who is taught to read by the phonics method alone stands the risk of spending time in deciphering the letters of the words, trying to sound them out. Such reading is thereby interrupted with long pauses and hence fluency is impaired. Also, Weaver (1994) expressed the view that phonics instruction will lead children to 'sound out' words so much that fluency is lost.

#### **Influence of Treatment on Pupils' Achievement in Word Analysis.**

The result shows that there is a significant difference among children in the four groups ( $F(3, 325) = 25.45; p < .05$ ). Pupils who were taught using the phonics only had the highest mean (7.1) followed by phonics + look and say (6.5). The look and say only had the lowest mean (3.2). Based on these findings, the null hypothesis (1b) was rejected. These results give empirical support to the findings of Abiri (1983); Albert (1993); Folarin (1977); Gregg (1997); Harrison (1998); Kerth and Roger (1997); Unoh (1984) Pressley 1998). These experts are agreed on the fact that the phonics method is used in training in independent word attack skills.

Also Albert (1993) noted that research of neuroscientists indicates that the brain visually processes words rather than recalls them from memory. He concluded by saying that



### **Influence of Treatment on Pupils' Achievement in the identification of key Words to Literacy**

The study reveals significant difference among children in the four groups  $\{F(3,192) = 32.74; P < .001\}$ . Hence hypothesis 1d was rejected. The result showed that children who were taught using the look-and-say method had the highest mean (6.87) followed by look-and-say + phonics (6.74) phonics had the lowest mean (3.74). This result probably shows evidence of the limitation of phonics in teaching only the words with regular patterns – words like cat, mat, rat, hat, hen, Ben, red. The irregular words like the, on, these, upon are best taught using the look-and-say method. The result tallies with the findings of Folarin (1977) who noted in a similar study that some categories of words with irregular patterns were easily learned using the look-and-say method.

The incapability of the phonics method in teaching words with irregular patterns was expressed by Goodman (1996) when he concluded that phonics should not be taught because it does not need to be taught since it cannot cater for all words in the English language. He believes that children can discover letter – sound irregularities from experiencing actual print and doing real writing through the look-and-say method.

### **Implications of the Study**

This study has provided empirical proof of the potency of two methods of teaching beginning reading – Phonics and Look-and-say singly and in combination on the improvement of reading achievement as measured by such important skills associated with beginning reading institution. The Phonics + Look-and-say method has been established as being capable of enhancing fluency and word recognition. The Phonics only method has proved superior in promoting Word analysis while the Look-and-say only has proved a superior method in the identification of Key Words to Literacy.

These findings suggest that the use of Phonics or the Look-and-say methods singly do not make for efficiency in emergent reading. Each method has to supplement the other as revealed in settings like Nigeria. As emergent readers learn to decode through phonics, thereby facilitating pronunciation and Word Recognition, the Look-and-say enables them to relate the concept with its meaning through pictures. By so doing, children come to realize that reading has to do with meaning from the very early stages.

This result has also shown that accompanying phonics with look-and-say provides the ESL learner the experiences needed to promote language development. For instance a Yoruba child sees a tree and recognizes it immediately as 'igi' because he naturally thinks in his mother tongue. For such a child who is beginning to learn to read in English, he needs to be able to label that symbol as 'a tree'. The teaching of reading is thus carried out within the context of meaningful language learning so that subsequent reading skills are built on solid foundations of communicative and linguistic competence.

The results of the study have profound implications for teachers, teacher trainers and curriculum planners who are at the center of the teaching – learning enterprise. There is need for the adequate preparation of teachers to face the challenges of the times. In Nigeria at present, inadequate preparation of teachers has been adduced as one of the problems plaguing beginning reading (Onukaogu 2002). He also noted that Primary school teachers including professionally trained ones have had little or no guidance in the teaching of English reading. This found support in Dakur's study (1983) of an investigation into reading instruction. The study showed that many of the teachers in primary schools lack knowledge of different aspects of beginning and development reading instruction. 95% of the teachers taught no word recognition skills, only 15% of them helped pupils with word attack skills. This was

probably due to the fact that these teachers lack the knowledge of the methods of teaching reading.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby advanced.

1. To Policy makers, Teacher Trainers and Teachers.- Phonics + Look-and-say method has proven to be a viable instructional method which could be used to promote the acquisition of basic reading skills of fluency, decoding, word attack and word recognition. Words with irregular pattern have been proved to be better taught using the look-and-say method.
2. There is 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 better strategies for teaching. Teachers need to be given the opportunity to attend Conferences to keep abreast of new developments in teaching beginning reading.
3. There is the need for an evaluation and overhauling of the Teacher Training syllabus at all levels of our educational system. Five main areas of reading instruction that need attention are:
  - a. The theory of reading and reading instruction
  - b. Pre-reading skills
  - c. Methods of teaching beginning reading – Phonics, the Look-and-say, language experience approach.
  - d. Individualization of reading instruction
  - e. Beginning reading skills – Fluency, Word Analysis, Word Recognition. Identification of Key Words to Literacy.
  - f. Developmental Reading and study skills.
4. Teacher training institutions including Universities should expose prospective teachers to these areas of reading instruction. This will help them assess, diagnose and identify individual's strengths and weaknesses. They will be able to use different methods in different learning situations. In order to make the teachers more aware of their work, the syllabus should be well planned to take care of these areas so that the teachers will be able to perform well at whatever level they find themselves – primary or post primary.
5. There is need to remedy the reading problems already created by inadequate training of the existing teachers. Organizing In-service training can do this for them in the form of Seminars and Workshops. The Reading Association of Nigeria should be commended for the good work it is doing through its members' researches, suggestions and recommendations for implementation of adequate programmes in our different institutions. They should rise up to the challenge and go a step further in organizing the much-needed Seminars and Workshops to help our teachers out of their predicament.
6. The methodology of teaching reading should come under the General English Programme in Teacher Training Institutions since the course cuts across all the disciplines. All prospective teachers will be adequately prepared for teaching reading at any level. The present situation in which graduates of Home Economics for example are made to teach English in the Primary and Secondary Schools does not augur well for the system. One does not foresee a change in this trend because of the shortage of English Language

teachers. The better thing to do therefore will be to get all teachers trained in the teaching of this all-important subject matter.

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