

Phonics and the Acquisition of Literacy Skills among Preschoolers in Early Childhood Education Centres in Rivers East Senatorial District

Ejekwu, Princewill Okechukwu (Ph.D)

*Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria*

Amadi, Joy Ogadi

*Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria*

Abstract. *This study examines phonics and the literacy skills acquisition of preschoolers in early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial Districts of Rivers State. The aim of the study was to examine the effect of phonics on the acquisition of literacy skills among preschoolers in early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State. The study adopted the pre-test and post-test control group quasi-experimental research. Two objectives and two hypotheses guided the study. The population of the study was 2,399 preschoolers. 66 preschoolers constituted the sample size for the study. The instrument for data collection was the research designed Preschoolers literacy skill acquisition Observation Checklist which was validated. The data generated from the study was analyzed using analysis of co-variance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 significant levels. The findings of the study revealed that there is a significant difference between the Synthetic Phonics instructional strategies and Conventional Method on the literacy skills development of preschoolers in public early childhood centers in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State. The study recommended among others that caregivers in the Early Childhood Centers should be encourage in the use of synthetic phonics instructional strategy by providing enabling environment for them.*

Key words: *Synthetic Phonics, Literacy, Early Childhood, Preschoolers.*

Introduction

Reading is essential to a child's success in education because it equips them with the skills needed to understand and enjoy a wide range of subjects, both in school and beyond. Its importance extends into everyday life, as strong reading skills influence a child's future choices in careers and further education. Because children deserve high-quality teaching, it is crucial to continue researching effective ways to develop reading and literacy skills. Learning to read and write is one of the most important foundations for a child's academic success at school and later in life. For this reason, reading instruction must be deliberate, clear, and well organized. While a small number of children learn to read easily with minimal instruction, they are the exception rather than the rule. Most children require explicit and systematic teaching of literacy skills, particularly phonics, alongside meaningful opportunities to practise reading and writing in real-life contexts. Literacy development strongly influences achievement in other subject areas, making it a cornerstone of learning.

Over the years, educators and researchers have debated the most effective way to teach reading. Teaching approaches have shifted between whole language and phonics-based methods (Little Village Literacy, 2022). Many modern reading programs fall under the category of balanced literacy, which attempts to combine both approaches. However, balanced literacy has not produced the desired outcomes, especially for children who struggle with reading. Research increasingly supports structured literacy as the most effective method. Structured literacy focuses on explicit, systematic instruction of all key literacy components, including foundational skills such as decoding and spelling, as well as higher-level skills like reading comprehension and written expression.

Literacy skills include awareness of speech sounds, understanding print, and recognizing the relationship between letters and sounds. Other key areas include vocabulary development, spelling, and comprehension (Bainbridge, 2020). The pace at which children develop these skills can be influenced by factors such as learning disabilities, vision or hearing challenges, and speech difficulties. It is therefore important to observe children closely and seek appropriate support when they struggle with basic literacy concepts. Several factors support the development of literacy skills, including communication, shared reading, and exposure to rhymes and sound play. Communication helps children improve their ability to speak, listen, and understand language as they grow. Reading to children from an early age not only builds a strong literacy foundation but also strengthens emotional bonds. Rhyming activities help children hear and distinguish sounds in words, supporting their understanding of how spoken language connects to written text.

Literacy skill acquisition refers to the process through which children learn sounds, words, and language in order to read and write confidently. Children progress through literacy stages at different rates depending on their level of understanding. For educators, understanding these stages is vital to supporting children effectively. When teachers are knowledgeable about literacy development and how to address each stage, both they and their learners are better positioned for success. Early literacy development is especially important for preschoolers, as children with strong reading skills tend to experience fewer academic challenges and display greater confidence in learning. These skills support independent learning and encourage continuous growth both inside and outside the classroom. Literacy also influences how preschoolers communicate, think, and solve problems, with strong literacy skills often linked to improved cognitive development.

There are five recognized stages of literacy development: emergent literacy, alphabetic fluency, word and pattern recognition, intermediate reading, and advanced reading. Each stage presents its own challenges and achievements, and a child's age does not always determine the stage they are in. Phonics-based instruction is particularly effective in supporting children as they move through these stages.

Phonics is a structured literacy approach designed to help children, especially preschoolers, learn to read and write efficiently. Unlike the traditional alphabet sequence, phonics follows a systematic and sequential pattern that teaches letter sounds in a fun, multisensory way. Children learn all 42 primary letter sounds and how to write them correctly, not just the basic alphabet sounds. They are then guided through blending sounds to form words and learning to identify sounds within spoken language and match them to written letters.

Many children find reading challenging because words appear as unfamiliar symbols. Phonics helps simplify this process by breaking words down into sounds. Although English has only 26 letters, it uses 42 sounds to form words. Children first learn one way to represent each sound, and later explore alternative spellings, such as /ai/ in "train" and /ay/ in "day."

Children learn best when lessons involve movement and sensory engagement. Phonics instruction uses all five senses through actions and activities linked to each sound, making learning enjoyable and memorable. The pace of introducing sounds depends on the child's age and level of understanding. Because some sounds are represented by combinations of letters, children are taught digraphs (such as /sh/ and /ee/) and trigraphs (such as /ear/ and /igh/), which are different from blends.

Developing a love for reading is most effective when reading is enjoyable rather than forced. Phonics supports this by making learning playful and engaging. When children can confidently encode and

decode written language, they are considered to have mastered phonics. As a result, phonics has become one of the most widely used methods for teaching reading worldwide.

There are four main types of phonics: synthetic, analytic, analogy, and embedded phonics (Machin, McNally & Viarengo, 2018). Synthetic phonics focuses on teaching individual sounds and blending them to form words. Analytic phonics begins with whole words and breaks them down into sounds. Analogy phonics groups similar words to expand reading vocabulary, while embedded phonics teaches sounds as they naturally appear in reading contexts.

Phonics methods vary in how structured they are and how closely they connect sounds to real texts. Synthetic phonics is the most structured but least contextualized. Preschool age, typically between 3 and 5 years, is a critical period for building strong language and literacy foundations. Early exposure to rich language experiences supports listening, speaking, and vocabulary development, preparing children for long-term academic success.

Preschoolers are expected to understand complex sentences, follow simple instructions, ask questions, express their needs and feelings, and engage in basic problem-solving (Megan, 2020). Reading books is an effective way to combine phonics instruction with literacy development, as it introduces children to new vocabulary, grammar, and concepts. Research consistently shows that children taught using phonics achieve better literacy outcomes than those taught through other methods. Against this background, the present study examines the role of phonics in the acquisition of literacy skills among preschoolers in early childhood centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Literacy activities in preschool play a vital role in developing children's vocabulary, communication, and early writing skills. These activities include letter combinations, word pronunciation, scribbling, copying environmental print, and role-play. Strong literacy development depends on the experiences children have during their early years. However, increasing pressure from parents and educators to achieve academic success has led to the use of developmentally inappropriate teaching methods in early childhood settings.

Research shows that literacy development is strongly influenced by social interaction and access to appropriate learning materials. Children benefit most from environments rich in language, where they are encouraged to listen, speak, and explore literacy through play. Unfortunately, rote learning has become common in preschool classrooms, often replacing playful, engaging approaches such as phonics. Children are sometimes required to complete academic tasks during periods meant for play, limiting opportunities for meaningful learning.

Although the National Policy on Education emphasize learning through play in early childhood education, rote learning continues to dominate classroom practices. This approach does not support effective literacy development, as it restricts active engagement and skill acquisition. Phonics, despite its proven effectiveness, is not being adequately implemented in many preschools. It is within this context that this study seeks to investigate the effect of phonics on literacy skill acquisition among preschoolers in public Early Childhood Centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Aims and Objectives of the Study.

The aim of the study was to examine phonics and the acquisition of literacy skills among preschoolers in early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Determine the mean difference in the acquisition of literacy skills of preschoolers taught using Synthetic phonics and those taught using the conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District.
2. Examine the mean difference in the acquisition of literacy skills of preschoolers taught using Synthetic phonics and those taught using the conventional method with respect to gender.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses null hypotheses were tested to guide the study at 0.05 level of significance:

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the acquisition of literacy skills of preschoolers taught with synthetic phonics and those taught with the conventional method in public early childhood centres in Rivers East Senatorial District.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the acquisition of literacy skills of preschoolers taught with synthetic phonics and those taught with the conventional method given their gender in public early childhood centres in Rivers East Senatorial District.

Methodology

The study adopted quasi-experimental research design. 2,399 preschoolers consisting of 1,172 male preschoolers and 1,227 female preschoolers found in 246 early childhood centres in Rivers East Senatorial District constituted the population of the study. 66 preschoolers drawn from two intact classes constituted the sample size for the study. The instrument used for data collection in this study was an observation checklist titled “Literacy Skill Acquisition Observation Checklist (LSAOC)”. Which was validated and had a reliability index of 0.88. Permission was obtained from the head teachers of the sampled preschools before proceeding. On the first day of the actual experiment, two intact classes in each of the sampled centres were randomly assigned to the experimental group and control group respectively. The experimental group was taught reading using phonics instructional method while the control group was taught reading using Look and Say instructional method. The instrument for data collection (LSAOC) for the pre-test was administered to the two groups in the sampled schools the same day. Also, due to the cognitive level of the respondents (preschoolers) the research assistants guided them properly in responding to the interest inventory. The actual experiment was conducted by the regular caregivers of the sampled schools trained for the experiment. The experiment lasted for five weeks. The trained caregivers used the lesson plans provided by the researcher to teach the subjects in the two groups. After the five weeks lesson period, the post-test was administered to the preschoolers in the experimental and the control groups. The Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 significant levels.

Result and Findings

Hypothesis One: There is no significant mean difference in the development of literacy skills of preschoolers taught with synthetic phonics strategy and those taught with conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State.

Table 1: Summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on the difference between Synthetic instructional strategies and Conventional Method on the literacy skills

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: POSTTEST1					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p-value
Corrected Model	2901.227 ^a	2	1450.613	11.321	.000
Intercept	18578.270	1	18578.270	119.375	.000
Pretest(covariate)	811.381	1	811.381	5.214	.027
Main Effect	2300.912	1	2300.912	16.585	.000
Error	6847.710	63	155.630		
Total	148100.000	66			
Corrected Total	9748.936	65			

a. R Squared = .298 (Adjusted R Squared = .266)

Table 2 shows the summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on the difference between the Synthetic phonics instructional strategy and Conventional Method on the literacy skills of preschoolers in public early childhood centers in Rivers East Senatorial district of Rivers State. The result showed that there is a significant difference between the Synthetic phonics instructional

strategy and Conventional Method on the literacy skill development of preschoolers in public early childhood centers in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State ($F_{1, 63}=16.585, p<.05$). The null hypothesis was rejected at 0.05 alpha level.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant mean difference in the literacy skills development of preschoolers taught with synthetic phonics strategy and those taught with conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State with respect to gender.

Table 2: Summary of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) of preschoolers' post-test score classified by treatment groups and gender with Pre-test as covariate

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre- Test	3330.710 ^a	2	1665.355	9.560	.000
Treatment	25867.210	1	25867.210	146.487	.000
Gender	6.420	1	6.420	.037	.849
Treatment * Gender	3330.590	1	3330.590	21.219	.000
Error	7665.035	63	174.205	-	-
Total	135600.000	66	-	-	-
Corrected Total	10995.745	65	-	-	-

In Table 2 the calculated F-ratio for the effect of instructional strategies on the literacy skills development of preschoolers with df 1,63 is 146.487 while its corresponding calculated level of significance is .00 alpha level. The F-cal 21.219 is greater than the F-crit3.09 at .05 alpha, indicating that instructional strategies used had statistically significant effect on the literacy skills development of preschoolers given their gender. Hence hypothesis two which assumed a no significant difference in the literacy skills development of preschoolers taught with synthetic phonics strategy and those taught with conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State with respect to gender is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The finding in table 1 reveals that there is a significant difference between the Synthetic phonics instructional strategy and Conventional Method on the literacy skills development of preschoolers in public early childhood centers in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State. The finding is in agreement with finding of Resnick (2005) who found out that phonics reading strategy teaches children to sound out new words. It enables them to learn what a letter stands for and then learn to associate the sound and the letter to specific words. The finding of the study is also in line with the views of Vacca (1998) who explains that phonics strategy is most appropriate for pupils in primary schools when it comes to language development. Furthermore, the finding of the study corroborates the findings of Putri and Zaitun (2020) who carried out a study to determine the effect of synthetic phonics on the development of students reading aloud skills and found that synthetic phonics significantly effects students' reading aloud skills.

The finding in table 2 shows that there is a significant mean difference in the literacy skills development of preschoolers taught with synthetic phonics strategy and those taught with conventional method in public early childhood education centres in Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State with respect to gender. The finding of the study supports the finding of Johnston and Watson (2003) who carried out a large-scale study investigating the effects of synthetic phonics on reading and spelling in school-aged children found that boys have a more phonological approach to reading. On the contrary, the finding of the study is in variance with the finding of Farokhbakht (2015) who sought to investigate the effect of adopting a synthetic multisensory phonics (i.e. phonics) for teaching early English literacy skills on literacy learning and reading motivation of Iranian EFL young learners and found that synthetic multisensory phonics instruction did not have any significant effect on male and female learners' literacy attainment.

Conclusions

Preschoolers learn and master skills better when appropriate teaching methods are used for instruction. The adoption of the phonics reading strategy will greatly improve literacy skills development of preschool children. Thus, preschoolers taught using phonics reading strategy achieved significantly higher in literacy skills development than those who were not taught using conventional method.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Caregivers in the Early Childhood Centers should be encouraged in the use of synthetic phonics instructional strategy by providing enabling environment for them.
2. Caregivers should vary their instructional methods in the classroom to stimulate the interest of the preschoolers in the teaching/learning environment.

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