

## EVALUATING PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' COMPETENCE IN USING PHONICS APPROACH TO READING TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY CRISIS IN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigated primary school teachers' competence in using a phonics approach to alleviate reading poverty crisis in the Gwer-East Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted for the study. One research question guided the study. The target population was all the English Language teachers in all the 156 public primary schools in Gwer-East Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The study sample was 136 English Language teachers randomly selected from public primary schools. The instruments for data collection were a researcher-made questionnaire*

*for teachers on teachers' competence in phonics teaching and on-the-spot observation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation to answer research questions. Results indicated that most of the primary school English Language teachers within the study area lack the needed competence to effectively and efficiently teach phonics. The study recommends that primary school teachers be trained to improve their competence in phonics teaching so as to improve primary school pupils' reading ability.*

**Key Words:** Competent Phonics Approach Reading Teachers

### INTRODUCTION

Reading is a crucial skill that forms the cornerstone of academic success and continuous learning. Amadi, (2018) views reading as an indispensable tool in education and the society at large which facilitates and promotes learning in different knowledge dimensions.

The significance of reading in education lies in its pervasive influence across the entire school curriculum, enabling the comprehension of various subjects. Regarded as an indispensable learning tool, the educational system heavily emphasizes the ability to read proficiently and fluently, using it as a yardstick to gauge intellectual prowess. Therefore, reading serves as the key to educational

achievements, as a child who possesses strong reading skills is expected to excel in all academic disciplines.

Conversely, a child lacking foundational reading skills is likely to struggle in other school subjects. In essence, a solid grounding in reading is indispensable for children to fully benefit from the enriching educational curriculum (Adedekun, 2019). Adedekun further avers that mastering the art of reading thoroughly and extensively benefits students both during their schooling years and beyond.

In acknowledging the fundamental role that reading plays in the lives of individuals and the overall development of the nation, the Federal Government of Nigeria, in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013), emphasizes two primary objectives of education: first, promoting literacy and value among pupils, and second, enhancing effective communication skills and manipulative skills among students in Nigeria.

It is expected that the development of literacy skills should commence from the moment a child begins formal education. However, research indicates that a significant number of children lack the necessary reading skills required for their literacy journey. Despite efforts to increase education access, reading poverty crisis persists, with a large number of primary school children in Nigeria struggling to acquire proficient reading skills.

Research indicates that Nigeria faces a significant reading poverty crisis, impacting academic achievement and socio-economic opportunities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) (2010) reports that Nigeria has one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world, with over 60 million illiterate adults.

Furthermore, the Nigerian Education Data Survey (NEDS), (2015) reveals that a substantial number of Nigerian primary school children are unable to read at the expected grade level. Reading poverty not only impacts academic achievement but also limits opportunities for personal growth and socio-economic advancement.

Individuals who struggle with reading face difficulties in accessing information, engaging in critical thinking, and participating in social and economic activities. Efforts to address this crisis include implementing various reading instructional approaches, with the phonics approach gaining recognition.

Phonics is an instructional approach that focuses on the correlation between sounds and letters and plays a vital role in developing reading fluency, expanding vocabulary, and enhancing comprehension.

The effectiveness of the phonics approach depends on the teachers' competence, especially in second language learning situations. Recognizing the

urgency of addressing reading poverty crisis, this study delved into the competence of primary school teachers in teaching phonics.

The term reading poverty crisis refers to the widespread inability to read and comprehend texts at a level necessary for everyday functioning and academic success, often due to a combination of socio-economic factors, inadequate educational resources and lack of access to books. World Bank (2019) defines reading poverty crisis as the inability of young learners to read and comprehend simple text and stories.

The consequence of reading poverty crisis is far-reaching, affecting individual's academic performance, employment opportunities and overall quality of life. This is to say that reading poverty crisis can hinder economic development and perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality in a society.

In Nigeria, the reading poverty crisis is a significant issue as most learners are unable to read and comprehend text (Otache, 2020). Despite efforts to improve literacy rates, children and adults still struggle with reading proficiency. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to evaluate primary school teachers' competence in using phonics approach to reading to alleviate the reading poverty crisis in Nigeria

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The main purpose of the study was to evaluate the competence possessed and utilized by teachers in teaching Phonics instruction in primary schools in Benue State, Nigeria.

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The study was guided by the objective to:

investigate the extent primary school teachers are competent in using phonics approach to alleviate reading poverty crisis in Nigeria.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The following research question guided the study:

*To what extent are primary school teachers competent in using the phonics approach to alleviate reading poverty crisis in Nigeria?*

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Concept of Reading and Challenges of Reading in Education**

Reading, one of several macro language skills, has been extensively studied and researched due to its far-reaching and dominant impact on all aspects of human society. It is a multifaceted, multidimensional, and interdisciplinary endeavor, encompassing various activities that facilitate the interpretation and comprehension of written texts.

The reading process involves deciphering the author's ideas. Muodumogu (2012) describes reading as a meaning-constructing process that

draws information from printed material using the reader's background knowledge.

Reading serves as a means of language acquisition and facilitates the exchange of information and ideas. It is a sophisticated cognitive process that entails decoding symbols to derive meaning. Comprehension stands as the primary objective in reading. In education, reading plays a vital role in communication, providing a wealth of information for teaching and learning activities (Aina, 2011).

Musa and Balami (2016) further explain that reading is about comprehending written texts, involving a complex interplay of perception and thought. This intricate system comprises various strategies encompassing the necessary reading skills pertinent to the reading process. Among these skills is the ability to perceive the relationship between written symbols (letters) and the sounds of spoken language, which aids in decoding unfamiliar words during the reading process.

The foundational role of reading skills in educational and societal development cannot be overstated. Reading proficiency is not only a fundamental academic skill but also a gateway to lifelong learning, employment opportunities, and full participation in a knowledge-based economy.

Several studies (e.g., Idogo, 2011; Aboho & Isa, 2014; Asonze, 2018; Amadi, 2018; Omile & Akabogu, 2021) have however revealed serious

reading difficulties among Nigerian primary school pupils across all levels of primary education.

Researchers have found that primary school pupils lack the essential foundational reading skills needed for successful learning. Buttrressing further, findings by these researches showed that primary school pupils encounter reading challenges during their reading process.

Reading difficulties may hinder their ability to read with ease and can result in difficulties comprehending various subjects taught in school. Additionally, children who experience these reading problems may struggle to grasp the information or messages conveyed in written or printed texts.

The analysis of the First School Leaving Certificate Examinations Results in Benue State from 2016 to 2022 further validates the researchers' claims about prevalent reading problems among Nigerian primary school pupils.

The 2017 report of the Area Education Office (AEO) in Benue State indicates that less than 38% of students obtained a credit pass in English Language in the First School Leaving Certificate Examinations. Additionally, the performance of pupils in English Language at the Common Entrance Examinations (CEE), both at the national and local levels, has been unsatisfactory.

The poor performance reported in the AEO (2017) report has been largely attributed to the reading

difficulties exhibited by primary school pupils. These reading challenges, also known as reading poverty crisis, refer to the inability to read with comprehension, which hinders academic progress and limits future opportunities for children (World Bank, 2019).

Reading poverty therefore exists where a significant portion of primary school students struggle with reading at their age-appropriate levels. This crisis has prompted educational researchers and policymakers to investigate effective methods to improve reading outcomes, with the phonics approach gaining substantial attention.

#### **OVERVIEW OF THE PHONICS APPROACH**

The phonics approach is an instructional approach that centers on the correlation between sounds and letters in reading education. Its primary goal is to provide students with a systematic and explicit understanding of how letters correspond to specific sounds, allowing them to both decode and encode words.

Eshiet (2014) affirms that phonics is a method for teaching elementary reading and spelling based on the phonetic interpretation of regular spelling. According to Singh (2011) phonics is the systematic teaching of the sounds conveyed by letters and groups of letters and includes teaching children to combine and blend the letters and sounds to read or write words.

Singh (2011) further explains that the alphabetic principle is of crucial importance because the majority of the information conveyed by letters concerns sounds, letters tell more than any other source of information. It instructs beginners to read and pronounce words by associating letters or groups of letters with their respective sounds.

Rowlingson (2010) emphasizes that phonics teaches beginners to read and pronounce words by comprehending the phonetic value of letters, letter groups, and syllables. The focus is on understanding sounds and the methodology of applying letters, letter groups, and syllables to phonetic values for beginners.

Consequently, phonics equips children with the knowledge of letter-sound combinations in English language. This understanding equips the learners with effective strategies for decoding new words, a critical pre-requisite to comprehending written texts.

Danladi (2013) notes the significance of phonics by stating that the more letter-sound combinations a pupil knows, the better they can establish connections when encountering unfamiliar words. Having a strong foundation in letter-sound associations makes it easier for children to learn new words. Ultimately, the phonics approach plays a vital role in developing reading fluency, expanding vocabulary, and enhancing overall reading comprehension among children.

## **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE SUPPORTING PHONICS INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH**

Numerous empirical investigations have substantiated the efficacy of phonics instruction in enhancing reading skills among primary school pupils. A comprehensive review by the National Reading Panel (2000) scrutinized existing research on reading instruction, revealing compelling empirical support for the effectiveness of systematic and explicit phonics instruction, particularly in decoding and word recognition skills during early reading development. This seminal study laid a foundational evidence base affirming the pivotal role of phonics in reading instruction.

Moreover, Yusuf and Enesi (2012) conducted a study on sound utilization in early childhood education for reading instruction, comparing schools implementing jolly phonics with those adopting a strategy involving teaching handwriting, reading, and spelling skills. The findings demonstrated a significant performance advantage for learners instructed using jolly phonics over those employing the alternative teaching strategy.

In another investigation Bing, Bingxia, Jinfen, and Hui (2015) explored the impact of phonological awareness training on the reading performance of Chinese EFL learners. The study involved eight-grade one Chinese children, and the results indicated superior post-test reading and phonological awareness measures in the treatment class compared to the control class.

Bing et al. (2015) study further underscored the positive correlation between phonological awareness and early reading performance, with phoneme tasks emerging as robust predictors of EFL learners' reading proficiency.

A recent empirical study by Omile and Akabogu (2021) examined the reading achievements of primary school pupils using a phonics instructional approach. The investigation revealed consistent outperformance of learners instructed through phonics, suggesting a sustained association between early phonics exposure and reading success.

The empirical evidence in Omile and Akabogu (2021) study accentuates the significance of implementing phonics-based approaches in primary schools as a strategic response to the reading poverty crisis.

Omile and Akabogu (2021) research emphasized also the need for additional investigation into the subtleties of teachers' competency and its pivotal role in successful phonics instruction. This study thus sought to fill this gap in the existing research landscape.

## **COMPETENCE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN PHONICS INSTRUCTION**

One key factor in addressing the reading poverty crisis is the competency of primary school teachers in implementing effective phonics instruction. The significance of a teacher's competence in the realm

of teaching and learning cannot be overstated, as it directly influences the success of a teaching session.

The teacher's skill and wisdom in managing learning activities play a crucial role in engaging students actively in the learning process. Consequently, fostering positive attitudes and developing teachers' competencies emerge as a key agenda to fortify the teaching profession and enhance the overall quality of education worldwide.

The term 'competency in teaching' refers to a teacher's capacity to demonstrate on-the-job skills and knowledge acquired through training (Adodo, 2013). These skills and knowledge, carefully outlined in the learning program, are thoughtfully designed by curriculum planners to align with and contribute to the accomplishment of desired educational objectives.

In teaching phonics, primary school teachers hold a crucial position in effectively implementing phonics instruction. Their role entails delivering logical and clear-cut phonics lessons, furnishing ample opportunities for practice, and delivering targeted feedback to students. A deep grasp of phonics principles, instructional techniques, and assessment methods is imperative for teachers to successfully carry out phonics instruction.

Research affirms that teachers' knowledge and proficiency in phonics instruction significantly impact students' reading outcomes. Those equipped

with strong phonics knowledge and pedagogical skills can adeptly scaffold students' learning, identify areas of difficulty, and provide appropriate interventions.

Furthermore, a supportive and engaging learning environment crafted by teachers plays a vital role in nurturing students' motivation and confidence in applying phonics skills. Umezinwa and Udogu (2018) emphasize the pivotal role teachers play in facilitating children's reading skills, where their competence in utilizing the phonics approach becomes crucial for ensuring effective reading instruction and combating reading poverty crises.

All these achievements depend on the abilities, skills, knowledge, and attitudes possessed by language teachers in phonics instruction. Phonics instruction is a step-by-step process, starting with introducing letter sounds and blending diagraphs and graphemes, leading to fluent reading.

English language teachers, especially early-childhood educators, hold the responsibility to teach appropriate sound systems to their learners. Phonics is even more critical in second language learning situations. A strong grasp of phonics in English significantly impacts the learning of reading.

To prepare primary school teachers for this role, it is crucial for researchers and policymakers to understand the teachers' competence in teaching

phonics to enhance reading outcomes in Nigerian primary schools.

While the significance of phonics is recognized, the competency of teachers to deliver it successfully is a subject of ongoing investigation. A gap may exist between the recommended pedagogical approaches and the actual implementation in classrooms.

It is against this background that this study sought to investigate the competence possessed by primary school teachers in teaching phonics instruction. The ultimate goal of the study was to enhance effective reading instruction in Nigeria's primary schools towards alleviating reading poverty crisis.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The present study aligns with Vygotsky's theory of language development, a foundational framework emphasizing the significance of social interactions, cultural context, and the influence of more knowledgeable individuals in acquiring language and literacy skills. Vygotsky (1978) posits that children's learning and development unfold within a sociocultural context, with language playing a central role.

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), introduced by Vygotsky, underscores the space between a learner's independent capabilities and what they can achieve with the guidance of a more knowledgeable person, such as a teacher. In the realm of literacy development, Vygotsky's

theory implies that teachers play a crucial role in supporting and facilitating the acquisition of reading and writing skills.

Vygotsky's theory finds practical application in the teaching of reading and language through the phonics approach. The phonics approach centers on systematically instructing letter-sound relationships, foundational elements for reading and writing. When applying Vygotsky's theory to phonics instruction, key principles such as social interaction, scaffolding, cultural context, and language development come into play.

Educators, by recognizing the dynamic interplay between social interaction, culture, and language development, can enhance their ability to effectively teach reading and address the challenges posed by the reading poverty crisis.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study used a cross-sectional survey research design. The study was conducted in Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The population of the study comprised all the English Language teachers in all the 156 public primary schools in Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria.

The sample size for the study consisted of 136 (F=96; M=40) English Language teachers. The simple random sampling technique was used to select the teachers from 45 public primary schools.

This consists of 22% of the entire population. More female teachers were sampled due to the fact that they consist of about 73% of the entire population of the study.

The instrument for data collection was a researcher-made questionnaire (See Appendix A). The questionnaire was used to elicit information from the teachers on their competence in using phonics approach to alleviate reading poverty crisis.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections: A and B. Section A was used to obtain teachers personal data while Section B was made of 15 items with four-point rating scale of strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1).

The questionnaire was validated in terms of adequate coverage and clarity of items by two

English Language lecturers and, one measurement and evaluation expert from the Faculty of Education, Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria. The reliability coefficient index of the

instrument was calculated to be 0.87 using Cronbach Alpha.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation to answer research questions. Benchmark mean score for answering the research questions was obtained by adding the response weights and dividing by 4 (i.e.  $4+3+2+1 = 10/4 = 2.50$ ). Mean scores of 2.50 and above were considered 'competent'/high extent and mean scores of 2.49 and below were regarded as not 'not competent'/low extent. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 aided the researchers in conducting the analysis.

#### **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The study sought to answer the question: To what extent are primary school teachers competent in using phonics approach to alleviate reading poverty crisis? The findings of the study based on the data collected from the field in response to the main research question are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Mean and Standard Deviation on Extent Primary School Teachers are Competent in Using Phonics Approach to Alleviate Reading Poverty Crisis**

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	I like using phonics approach as an instructional approach to improve learners reading.	2.81	0.76	High Extent
2.	I like to explain the relationship between letters and sounds to learners.	1.79	0.75	Low Extent
3.	I often like to incorporate phonics activities into my lessons.	2.21	0.76	Low Extent
4.	I believe the four steps of phonics approach are effective in promoting phonics skills.	1.91	0.70	Low Extent
5.	I like to provide explicit instructions in letter sound relationship	2.19	0.98	Low Extent
6.	I like to take learners through blending activities.	1.81	0.60	Low Extent
7.	I like to start blending activities with CVC	1.99	0.64	Low Extent
8.	I like to teach CCVC words after CVC words.	1.80	0.61	Low Extent
9.	I often like to follow up with CVC words after the CCVC words.	1.80	0.40	Low Extent
10.	I like to teach diagraph to learners.	2.00	0.78	Low Extent
11.	I like to teach consonant diagraphs, examples; ch, sh, ng etc.	2.30	0.77	Low Extent
12.	I like to teach vowel diagraphs examples; ea, oo, ai	2.90	0.71	High Extent
13.	I like to teach graphemes to learners.	2.10	0.55	Low Extent
14.	I like to teach learners that one sound can be represented by different graphemes	2.92	0.83	High Extent
15.	I like to use worksheets, rhyming games, cards and matching games to teach phonics to learners.	2.71	0.65	High Extent
<b>Overall mean and Standard Deviation</b>		<b>2.22</b>	<b>0.28</b>	<b>Low Extent</b>

The result in Table 1 shows that items 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 13 which have mean scores of 1.79, 2.21, 1.91, 2.19, 1.81, 1.99, 1.80, 1.80, 2.00, 2.30 and 2.10 respectively were to a high extent because the mean scores were above the 2.50 cut-off point. Whereas, items 1, 12, 14 and 15 which have mean scores below the cut-off point of 2.50 were to a low extent. Moreover, the overall mean and standard deviation scores of 2.22 and 0.28 were obtained.

words such as sit, pan, tap etc

The result of the study indicates that the primary school teachers in Benue State, Nigeria are to a low extent competent in using phonics approach to alleviate reading poverty crisis.

Moreover, the findings show that use of phonics approach improve learners’ reading and by implication alleviates the reading poverty crisis among primary school pupils. Therefore, primary school teachers who employ the phonics approach

demonstrate a competence that contributes positively to addressing the reading poverty crisis.

The findings may be due to the low knowledge on the use of phonics approach among primary school teachers and lack of language laboratory in the both universities and primary schools in Benue State.

Phonics is recognized as a foundational approach in teaching reading, focusing on the relationship between letters and their corresponding sounds, hence its usage can alleviate the reading poverty crisis among pupils.

The findings are in line with Vygotsky's (1978) theory which acknowledges the dynamic interplay between social interaction which is in phonics approach and language development which can enhance pupils' ability to effectively read and address the challenges posed by the reading poverty crisis.

The results align with that of that of Tabe (2023) who shows teachers' lack of competence in key issues in phonics such as sound blending, sound segmentation and sound identification and counting.

The findings of this study corroborate those of Kiptoo, Ongeti and Too (2017) which shows teachers lack of the necessary competence in using the phonics approach as their competency in English language phonology was below average.

Also, the findings of the study align with those of Omile and Akabogo (2018) who highlights the effectiveness of phonics in enhancing early reading skills. The finding also agrees with Bing, Bingxia, Jinfen, and Hui (2015) who shows a positive correlation between phonological awareness and early reading performance and reading proficiency.

Similarly, the findings of Punyapet and Laohawiriyanon (2014) which indicates that systematic remedial phonics instruction could help improve the learners' pronunciation, spelling and reading comprehension skills is in line with that of the present study.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study has established that primary school teachers do not possess the necessary competence in utilizing the phonics approach to effectively address the reading poverty crisis among primary school pupils.

These findings suggest that promoting the implementation of phonics-based strategies within primary education could be a key step towards addressing reading challenges and fostering literacy among learners.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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

1. Educational institutions and policy makers should focus on providing further training

and support for primary school teachers in implementing the phonics approach.

2. The use of phonics approach should be adopted by primary school teachers to reading poverty crisis among primary school pupils.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Given the pivotal role of teachers in phonics instruction, future research should:

- i. Delve into the specific competencies that enhance or hinder effective phonics teaching.
- ii. Examine the correlation between teacher training, experience, and the outcomes of phonics instruction can provide insights into the professional development needs of educators in this domain.
- iii. Be longitudinal to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the enduring effects of phonics instruction.
- iv. Investigate learners' reading proficiency over an extended period will provide insights into the long-term implications of early phonics interventions.

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