



Teachers' Awareness and Utilisation of Synthetic Phonics Method for Teaching Initial Literacy in Basic Schools in Kwara State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated teachers' awareness and utilisation of the synthetic phonics method for teaching initial literacy in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria. The research aimed to understand the basic school teachers' awareness and utilisation of the instructional approach. A qualitative method of research design was employed. A sample of 141 basic school teachers were interviewed and their responses were used to answer the three research questions formulated to guide the study. The data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed a moderate level of awareness among teachers regarding synthetic phonics, indicating the need for further professional development to enhance their understanding and implementation of this method. The utilisation of synthetic phonics in the classroom was found to be limited, influenced by factors such as inadequate instructional materials and limited training opportunities. It was found that the method was more utilised by female teachers and in private schools. The study emphasised the importance of professional development, access to high-quality resources and collaboration among stakeholders to support teachers in effectively integrating synthetic phonics into initial literacy instruction. Addressing these issues can contribute to improved literacy outcomes for students in basic schools in Kwara State and beyond.

Keywords: Initial literacy, Synthetic phonics, Alphabetic knowledge, Oral language, Phonological Awareness



Introduction

Human beings begin their lifelong education in the mother's womb; this gives credence to Lawal's (2020) submission that learning begins in the womb and ends in the tomb. Education, being the inevitable foundation for all-round development, implies more than learning and teaching or cultivating knowledge, skill and value; it entails an instrument for the growth, development and efficiency of individuals and community (Yusuf, 2021). This is why education is captured in the Nigerian National Policy on Education as the best tool for development. One can state that every conduct, behaviour and act, positive or negative is the product of education, hyper-education, non-education or miseducation (Yusuf, 2022). As paramount as education is, its basic level, known as early childhood education, is fundamental to the subsequent levels including middle-basic, upper-basic, secondary and tertiary education. Early childhood education is a requisite for the activation and development of the children's brain which, According to National Institute of Literacy (2011), develops faster between zero and three years of age. This is why it is important to start cultivating in children early education, such as the early stage of learning to read and write. It is evident that their initial literacy can be facilitated through synthetic phonics. Therefore, the study is set to assess teachers' awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics method in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria

Initial (reading) literacy is a part of early education which is a starting point for the literacy development of pupils or even people, especially adults who did not attend a formal school. It is the process of introducing pupils to literacy generally but to learning how to read specifically. Initial reading is a basic stage of introducing as well as initiating pupils or illiterate adults to print. Oyekanmi and Obi (2017) submitted that initial reading is the beginning reading which serves as a basic skill for pupils who should acquire it at the earliest stage in order to succeed in life. It deals with "learning to read" serving as a requisite skill for "reading to learn". It is a form of literacy that is fundamental to conventional literacy because it deals with the period where individuals, especially children at the early stage, are expected to learn the basic skills of reading, writing and counting (Mkandawire, 2015).



According to Lawal (2020), education inclusive of initial literacy begins from the womb to the tomb. It implies that a child begins to learn when he is in the womb. Ashish (2022) also established that babies start learning in the womb; they learn the voice of their mother and the sound of other voices in the environment; they also learn about taste and smell. The scholar explained that babies begin to learn when they are only four months old as foetuses in the womb though their brain is still underdeveloped; they hear the mother speaks because her speech ‘reverberates through her entire body’, thereby making the foetus easily hears her mother’s sound and become much more familiar with her voice. At seven months, the foetus acquires a sense of taste and smell and swallows whatever comes to him in the amniotic fluid through what the mother consumes. As reported by Molly McElroy (2023), a recent finding from Pacific Lutheran University, babies of several hours old can distinguish between sounds in their mother tongue or home language and those from other or foreign languages; in this regard, it is found that prenatally, foetus gets familiar with the specific speech sounds of a mother’s language.

Based on the evidence, it is beyond necessity to start cultivating in children knowledge, skill, value and right attitude right from their early childhood stage. National Institute for Literacy (2008) identified early literacy, which covers both precursor and conventional literacy skills, as a predictive power for later literacy as well as educational development of children. According to the National Institute for Literacy (2008), there are eleven main variables which constitute early literacy skills, they are:

1. alphabet knowledge (AK): understanding of the names and sounds of the printed letters
2. phonological awareness (PA): independent of meaning, the capacity to recognise, manipulate, or analyse the auditory components of spoken language, particularly the capacity to separate or classify words, syllables or phonemes
3. rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters or digits: the capacity to quickly name a series of randomly chosen letters or numbers



4. RAN of objects or colours: the capacity to quickly name a series of recurring random groupings of item or color images (for example, "car," "tree," "house" or "man")
5. writing or writing name: the capacity to write one's own name or individual letters on request.
6. phonological memory: the capacity for short-term retention of spoken information.
Other additional skills are:
7. concepts about print: understanding of print terms (such left-right, front-back, etc.) and concepts (like book cover, author and text)
8. print knowledge: a blend of AK components, print-related ideas, and early decoding
9. reading readiness: typically, a blend of AK, print concepts, vocabulary, memory and PA
10. oral language: the capacity for spoken language production or comprehension, including vocabulary and grammar
11. visual processing: the capacity to match or distinguish among symbols given visually.

Since children at this stage are highly efficient in terms of senses of hearing and sight, and then are only familiar to and possess oracy such as sound (of language) and colour, synthetic approach is an effective pedagogical principle for initiating the children to literacy community. This is because the approach befits their oral background of language and later exposure to the print. The approach, if efficiently employed, should enhance the accomplishment of the purpose of early childhood education part of which includes initial literacy.

According to Rodgers (2001), by origin, synthetic phonics was credited to Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician. He introduced it in 1655 as a method of teaching reading where sounds (phonemes) are connected to letters (graphemes), spoken in isolation, combined, and then spoken in groups. In teaching initial literacy, children are facilitated with single or monosyllabic word such as "cap". Such a word is divided into its three parts: "c", "a" and "p", each of its phonemes /k/, /æ/ and /t/ is pronounced and then the phonemes are blended together to form a word. Joseph Rice carried out a study on public schools in the United



States; he gave tests to a population of over 33, 000 children. He concluded that better performance in reading was achieved through phonics than word method, and the best spelling performance was recorded with the phonic method.

Synthetic phonics is based on phonics theory of teaching a language and it has to do with gradually developing larger units through the small unit of language such as letter. It is also known as systematic phonics (Lawal, 2020). It is an explicit phonics which requires children to synthesise or blend sounds in written words together in a sound-and-letter relationship. Wahyuni (2022) presented synthetic phonics as a way of teaching learners the alphabet code directly, systematically and discretely. Eric (2020), while explaining the reading instruction through phonics method, considered synthetic phonics better than either phonics or word reading and regarded systematic phonics or synthetic phonics as the practice which combines both letter-sound association/phonics and sight word/ wording reading. Eric (2020) added that the approach is valuable especially in teaching English tricky words.

Synthetic phonics is learner-centred participatory and multi-sensory as well as play-way method of teaching children initial literacy through sounds of the language. According to Solity (1996), synthetic phonics is a technique for teaching a language's sounds; for instance, the 44 English language sounds can be taught using the technique. It is a fun technique for facilitating children or young learners on how to read and write; the method is interactive, and multi-sensory in nature and engages learners actively in the course of learning a language. It is a simple and clear language instruction intended to draw learners' attention to the particular instructional objectives. This may implies displaying a big lower-case letter, for example "p", drawing the attention of the pupils to it and drilling them (Solity, 1996).

The alphabetic concept is the foundation of Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP). Students are taught the relationship between letters and the spoken sounds they represent using this systematic, cumulative, multisensory, and evidence-based way of teaching reading. (Nishanimut, Johnston, Joshi, Thomas & Padakannaya, 2013). The pupils are introduced to the language sound first and then to the letter name facilitated from the simple to complex ones; for instance, in



English, letter “a” sounds /æ/ as in bat, hat, sat, tap, pat, cat, gap, etc.; ‘b’ as in bat, big, bulb, rub, rubber, etc. (Johnston & Watson, 2004). Pupils should be taught that each letter has its own unique sound. For instance, the sound /a/ in bad, bag, bat, ban, sat, etc. is associated to letter ‘a’. teacher should familiarise learners with a combination of letters that makes a new sound e.g. ‘ar’ /aa/ as in part, ‘au’ /a/ as in laugh, ‘ea’ /ee/ as in read, ‘ph’/f/ as in phone, graph and laugh, etc. and that a sound can be represented in many ways e.g. /ee/ sound is represented by seat, beach, he, tree, etc. The teacher should lead pupils to identify each sound in sentences, having drilled them using rhyming words or alliteration/assonance. Using the synthetic phonics, the teacher is expected to introduce the speech sounds by, maybe, showing an audio-visual clip of the content or singing a nursery rhyme related to the learning objective and asking the pupils to sing after him (Adeoye, 2019).

Considering the features of synthetic phonics method, the study is set to determine the teachers’ awareness and utilisation of this method for teaching initial literacy in basic schools. Hence, the following research questions were raised to foreground the scope of the study:

1. What is the level of teachers’ awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics method for teaching initial literacy in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria?
2. Does school type create a difference in the level of teachers’ awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics method for teaching initial literacy in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria?
3. Does gender create a difference in the level of teachers’ awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics method for teaching initial literacy in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria?

Theoretical Background

This study is anchored on some theories and principles of teaching, especially that are related to children’s language/literacy development; they include Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, Lev Vygotsky’s social constructivism, Brian Cambourne’s theory of the conditions of learning, and Maria Montessori’s theories about children’s learning. Mielonen and Paterson (2009) cited these four theorists who believed that children learn through



their interaction with the world surrounding them and stated the invaluable importance of play in facilitating child's literacy development based on the premise of the four theories and his research findings. Mielonen and Paterson (2009) found that children developed literacy skills through social interaction within the context of a home setting. The method of synthetic phonics is ground on the four theories because it is a child play-centred way of facilitating initial literacy. Synthetic phonics is related to the four theories on the premise that it is also learner-centred.

Synthetic phonics leans credence to the psychological theory of behaviourism places a strong emphasis on the influence of environmental cues and reactions on learning outcomes (Cherry, 2022; Ng'andu, Hambullo, Haambokoma & Tomaída, 2013; Skinner, 1968). This hypothesis is supported by the synthetic phonics technique, which offers explicit and organized phonics education. Learners develop the essential decoding and encoding skills by breaking words down into phonemes and graphemes and clearly teaching the rules and patterns controlling their interaction. The development of precise and automatic reading and spelling skills is facilitated by the explicit method of teaching, which enables unambiguous feedback and reinforcement.

Synthetic phonics is also situated within the scope of constructivism and cognitive development. According to theories of cognitive development put forward by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, learners actively construct their own knowledge and understanding (Kurt, 2021; Jia, 2010; Wilburg, 2010; Sassonian, 2009; Yilmaz, 2008). By giving students a strong basis for comprehending the alphabetic principle and the structure of written language, the synthetic phonics approach aids cognitive development. Through phonemic analysis and synthesis activities, students actively create mental models of phonemes and graphemes that they may use to independently decode and encode words.

The approach is also hinged on language acquisition and linguistic theories, which emphasise the inevitable role of innate faculty such as "Language Acquisition Device-LAD" activated by hearing speech (White, 2014; Hamann, 2002). By emphasising the significance of phonological awareness and phonemic knowledge in language



acquisition, linguistic theories, notably those of Noam Chomsky, contribute to the theoretical underpinning of synthetic phonics. Reading and spelling skills depend on phonological awareness, the capacity to manipulate and recognise sounds in spoken language. Synthetic phonics promotes phonological awareness and speeds up language acquisition by directly teaching students the letter-sound correspondences and language sounds (Lawal, 2020).

According to the cognitive load theory, learning is most effective when instructional materials are delivered in a way that makes the most of students' cognitive abilities (Reese, Pawluk & Taylor, 2016). Synthetic phonics, which offers a planned and methodical approach to teaching phonics skills, is in line with this philosophy. By dividing reading down into manageable levels, students can concentrate their cognitive energy on understanding and using phonics rules without feeling overburdened.

According to connectionist theory, reading includes the activation of interconnected brain networks that connect phonological (sound) representations with orthographic (written) information. Some fundamental guiding principles on the nature of mental representations are the foundation of the connectionist approach to language (Islam, 2015; Joannis & McClelland, 2015). By giving students consistent practice matching letters to their associated sounds, synthetic phonics teaching encourages the growth of these linkages. Children improve their ability to decode and recognise words by enlarging these brain networks. The relationship between letters and sounds in written language is predictable and constant, according to the alphabetic principle. By clearly teaching pupils how particular letters and letter combinations reflect particular phonemes or sounds, synthetic phonics adheres to this idea. Children may decode and read words accurately and fluently by grasping these relationships.

Methodology

In order to get a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences and viewpoints on synthetic phonics method, the qualitative research method was adopted, thereby giving room for using interviews for data collection. A multi-stage sampling technique was used for sample selection. First, Kwara State's basic schools were divided into private



and public. Then, schools from each stratum were chosen at random. Finally, a purposeful sample of teachers from the selected schools was taken. Based on the scope and research design adopted in this study, a sample size of 141 basic school teachers was selected for interviews. Semi-structured interviews on awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics method were held with the sample. The qualitative technique was used, because it offered in-depth explanations and enabled the investigation of new issues. To determine how many teachers were aware of and using synthetic phonics, frequency and percentages were used. The responses through the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. To capture the subtleties of teachers' awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics, the data were coded and categorised, and themes were found. All participants provided their informed consent to ensure their voluntary participation and the privacy of their answers.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' Awareness and Utilisation of Synthetic Phonics Method for Teaching Initial Literacy in Basic Schools in Kwara State

Based on the quantitative analysis, the finding shows that 42 (30%) out of 141 respondents interviewed were not aware of the synthetic phonics approach; 48 (34%) were aware of the method but did not use it; and 51 (36%) were aware and they utilised it. 99 (70%) of the respondents were aware of the method; hence, a majority of the respondents were aware of the synthetic phonics method. 51 (36%) out the respondents utilised it, that is 90 (64%) of them did not use it; therefore, a majority of the respondents did not utilise the synthetic phonics method to teach pupils initial literacy.

The finding revealed that some of the respondents claimed they were not aware of the synthetic phonics method; hence, they did not utilise it for teaching initial literacy in their school. However, some other respondents were aware of the method but they did not use it on the premise that they were used to the only alphabetic/traditional method, and others were aware and used it. So, the respondents were grouped into three, the first group were not aware; the second were aware but not using it and the third and last were aware of it and used it.

For the first group, they cannot apply what they do not know. The finding is hinged on the theory of constructivism which places a



strong emphasis on how students actively develop their own knowledge and understanding. If the teachers in this group had been aware of the synthetic phonics, they would have taught pupils how to connect letters with sounds, which they (pupils) have been familiar with and making as their oracy feature. Understanding the constructivist framework for teaching requires appreciating how crucial it is to involve students in worthwhile and genuine learning experiences. It emphasises the use of teaching strategies including problem-solving, inquiry-based learning, and group projects that encourage students' active participation in creating their knowledge.

Such teachers could not design and facilitate initial literacy in accordance with cognitive load theory which advocates that efficient teaching techniques should reduce cognitive burden by structuring the presentation of information to maximize learning. According to this idea, the cognitive load placed on pupils affects their awareness of a teacher's approaches. If the teachers in this category were aware of the synthetic phonics, they would understand instructional strategies, such as chunking material, give explicit explanations, and apply the synthetic phonics method, which increase the cognitive load and then improve learning outcome, which is a key component of effective teaching.

Some of the respondents in the second group claimed to be aware of the synthetic method but they did not utilise it on the premise that the basic resources to actualise its use were not provided. According to one of them, he was familiar with the synthetic phonics method but the condition under which they taught in his school did not encourage utilising it. He added that the class was too large to support the effective use of the method and no basic materials appealing to the multi-sensual ability of the pupils were provided. Other respondents in the group claimed they were only ware of the method but they did not possess techniques involved in utilising it; they thus appeared to have interest in using the method if they were equipped with knowledge and skills on how to use it.

Based on the Self-efficacy Theory which is concerned with how learners perceive their chances of success in particular activities or learning scenarios, the teacher, who are also indirectly learners, can only succeed in the task of teaching based on their belief and ability. The self-



efficacy framework's definition of teaching method awareness includes identifying and assessing the efficacy of various instructional approaches and strategies. Learners/pupils who are to be motivated, persevere despite difficulties, and achieve beneficial learning outcomes remain at the losing end because their teachers cannot use the methods of teaching considered appropriate due to their mere awareness of the methods and/or lack of resources to facilitate the use of the methods. In effect, (both teacher and) pupils are not able to actively construct their own knowledge and understanding, thereby defying the principle of constructivism.

The third and last group are the respondents who were familiar with the synthetic phonics method and utilised it to facilitate initial literacy in basic schools. It was gathered from their responses that they tended to prefer using the synthetic phonics to any other ones, especially the conventional method and even whole word approach while facilitating initial literacy. They stated that pupils more easily develop initial reading when taught with the synthetic method than they do with other methods. The finding aligns with the connectionist theory, which posits that reading involves the activation of interconnected brain networks that link phonological (sound) representations with orthographic (written) information. This emphasizes the importance of providing learners with consistent practice in matching letters to their associated sounds. The outcome corroborates that of Asonze (2018), Wyse and Goswami (2008), Johnston and Watson (2004), and confirms Lawal's (2020) submission that synthetic phonics promotes phonological awareness and speeds up language acquisition by directly teaching students the letter-sound correspondences and language sounds.

Homer and Orr (2022), literacy clinic specialists, the effectiveness of sound-letter literacy instruction on struggling learners; they cited the literacy difficulty of Terry, one of their learners who struggled with phonics, had poor handwriting skills, and wrote slowly while struggling with pencil to sketch something on paper. Asonze (2018) carried out a study on the impact of the synthetic phonics method on pupils' reading achievement in English language in FCT and found that the approach was effective because the pupils taught with synthetic



phonics performed greater in sentence reading than those taught with the conventional method. Asonze (2018) therefore recommended the use of synthetic phonics in schools to enhance children's literacy skills.

Factors Differentiating Teachers' Awareness and Utilisation of Synthetic Phonics Method for Teaching Initial Literacy in Basic Schools in Kwara State

The qualitative analysis of the data shows that school type tends to create a difference in the level of teachers' awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics method for teaching initial literacy in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria. The majority of teachers who were aware and utilised the method was in private basic schools; 53 out 99 (70%) of the respondents who were aware of the method were teachers of private basic schools and 31 out 51 (36%) who were aware and utilised it were teachers of private basic schools. The reason for the difference may be attributed to the management variance of the schools based on ownership.

The finding tallies with the hypothesis of resource disparity that children' educational experiences and outcomes are impacted by the gap in resources and support provided by public and private schools. According to the argument, private schools typically have the freedom to design specific programmes and curricula that are appropriate for the needs and preferences of their students. The ability to adapt the curriculum and include fresh ideas could lead to a more engaging and in-depth educational experience. Despite adhering to standardised curriculum frameworks, public schools may not have as much flexibility to offer specialised programmes or to modify the educational experience to suit the needs of each individual student. One may conclude that teachers of private schools were aware of and used the synthetic method because they (private teachers) tended to attend some special educational programmes more than their counterparts in public schools. This is in line with Destin, Hanselman, Buontempo, Tipton and Yeager's (2019) submission that theoretically socioeconomic indicators such as school type, location, life experience, neighbourhood and social network are crucial when it comes to academic activities, especially achievement.

The outcome reveals that gender created a difference in the level of teachers' awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics method for



teaching initial literacy in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria. Proportionately, female teachers were more aware of and utilised the synthetic method than their male counterparts. The finding is related to the thesis put forward by Acker (1995) cited by Tašner, Mihelič & Čeplak (2017) that the fact that women continue to predominate in teaching careers can be attributed to a number of demographic, economic, political, and cultural factors, including the need for teachers due to changing demographics, the accessibility of education, meritocracy, employment opportunities in general, the ability to balance work and family obligations, the regulation of maternity and paternity leaves, and others. With the notion that these professions, to some part, reflect an extension of the work women usually do at home, feminist analyses explain the predominance of women in most of the lower stages of education and teaching.

Tašner, Mihelič & Čeplak (2017) stated that it therefore seems that the teaching profession will continue to be dominated by women for quite some time, which does not represent a social problem. It could, however, become a problem if it is an enforced choice for women, an emergency exit, if such jobs are evaluated with a low symbolic value and if the working conditions deteriorate. Without prejudice to gender difference, modern educators are now expected to address challenges like the globalisation of society, the rise in cultural diversity, and the fast-changing nature of communication as they relate to the entire learning process (Newman & Obed, 2015).

Conclusion and Implication

This study investigated teachers' awareness and utilisation of the synthetic phonics method for teaching initial literacy in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria. The findings shed light on teachers' current practices, awareness and utilisation of synthetic phonics method. It was concluded that there was a moderate level of awareness among teachers regarding the synthetic phonics method for teaching initial literacy. While many teachers had heard of synthetic phonics, a significant number were not fully aware of its principles and strategies. Also, the utilisation of synthetic phonics in literacy instruction varied among teachers. Some teachers had integrated synthetic phonics into their teaching practices, while others relied on traditional methods identifying



inadequate instructional materials and limited training opportunities as some factors hindering its adoption. Furthermore, female teachers more than male integrated synthetic phonics into their literacy instruction; teachers of private basic schools were aware of the method and utilised it more than their counterparts in public schools. The implication of this study is the need for comprehensive and targeted efforts to raise awareness, provide adequate resources, and offer professional development opportunities to empower teachers in utilising synthetic phonics effectively.

Recommendations

Overall, this study emphasises how critical it is to improve teachers' knowledge and use of the synthetic phonics approach to teaching initial literacy. It is possible to improve the quality of literacy instruction in basic schools in Kwara State, Nigeria, and support better results for pupils/learners in their early literacy development by enhancing teachers' knowledge, abilities, and resources. Also, educational policymakers, school administrators, and other stakeholders should be well involved and informed about synthetic phonics method in order to promote awareness and support its implementation and foster a more conducive setting for its adoption in basic schools.

To maximise the impact of synthetic phonics instruction, it is essential to provide teachers with constant professional development and resources structured to their specific needs. This includes access to high-quality instructional materials, training programmes, mentoring, and collaboration opportunities. Furthermore, to maintain and broaden the use of synthetic phonics throughout the educational system and ultimately increase reading levels and educational opportunities for all kids, more research and cooperation amongst stakeholders are required.

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