IJAAR PUBLISHING®

International Journal of Research in Education and Sustainable Development | ISSN: 2782-7666
Vol. 5, Issue 1 (2025) | www.ijaar.org/ijresd

EFFECTS OF SYNTHETIC PHONICS STRATEGY ON BASIC EDUCATION LEVEL PUPILS' ACHIEVEMENT IN READING COMPREHENSION IN KAUGAMA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, JIGAWA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the Effects of Synthetic Phonics Strategy on Basic Education level pupils' Achievement in Reading Comprehension in Kaugama local Government Jigawa State, Nigeria. A quasi-experimental research design was used for the study. The target population of the study consisted of 6,592 of lower basic two pupils in Kaugama local government public schools; a sample size of 120 lower basic two pupils was used in the study. Sixty (60) pupils were sampled for experimental group and sixty (60) pupils were used as control group. The Experimental groups were taught reading comprehension using the synthetic phonics strategy while the control groups were taught using the conventional strategy. Data collected in the study were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. At descriptive level, mean and standard deviation were used to respond to the research questions while t-test of independent samples was used at inferential level to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The result revealed that the experimental group performed better than the control group in all the variables tested. The study concludes that pupils' achievement in reading comprehension considerably increased after being exposed to synthetic phonics in post-test. It was therefore recommended that teachers should include synthetic phonics strategy in teaching reading comprehension to enhance the understanding of the reading process.

Keywords: Phonic, Synthesis, Reading, Strategy

Ibrahim, U. M., & Muddassir, A. G. (2025). Effects of Synthetic Phonics Strategy on Basic Education Level Pupils' Achievement in Reading Comprehension in Kaugama Local Government Area, Jigawa State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Research in Education and Sustainable Development. 5*(1), 28-38. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14845562

INTRODUCTION

Reading is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them. It is the skill required to make progress in any field of human endeavours. This is because a good reader will automatically become a good writer as a result of vast experiences gained on formation of words, phrases, sentences and even expression of ideas. The goal of reading instruction at the primary school level is that each child should be functionally literate and be able to communicate effectively. Functional literacy means that individuals can read with understanding and be able to apply knowledge gained to solve life's problems.

Reading is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them. When we read, we use our eyes to receive written symbols (letters, punctuation marks and spaces) and we use our brain to convert them into words, sentences and paragraphs that communicate something to us. Reading can be silent (in our head) or aloud (so that other people can hear).

Reading was traditionally regarded as a "passive" skill; however, contemporary perspectives conceptualize it as an "interactive" process. As an interactive process, reading should be prioritized by language educators, given that reading comprehension constitutes a fundamental objective in teaching English as a foreign language. In many instances, despite concerted efforts by teachers to elicit correct responses to reading comprehension tasks, achieving perfect answers remains elusive. This necessitates a critical examination of the factors impeding accurate comprehension. One potential barrier is the reading text itself which may not align with the reader's proficiency level, often containing complex syntactic structures and unfamiliar lexical items. According to Ezeh (2019), another significant factor may stem from the reader's disposition. A lack of motivation or perceived necessity for reading significantly hampers success in comprehension.

Alderson & Urquhart (2017) proposed two theoretical perspectives on reading that elucidate the challenges associated with reading comprehension. The first is the "product-oriented approach," which posits that meaning resides within the text itself, with text-based elements, such as vocabulary and syntax, being the primary determinants of comprehension. Within this framework, reading activities predominantly focus on deciphering the meanings of unfamiliar words and unraveling complex sentence structures. Conversely, the "process-oriented approach" emphasises the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text, asserting that comprehension emerges from this interaction. This approach emphasises the significance of cognitive factors, such as background knowledge and schema, in constructing meaning. Nwosu (2022) argued that reading transcends a mechanical decoding process; it represents a reasoning activity where readers actively engage with textual cues to generate meaning. In this sense, reading is not merely reactive but interactive, characterized by an intellectual discourse between the author and the reader. Consequently, reading efficiency cannot solely be quantified by the volume of information in a text but by the extent to which the reader's prior knowledge facilitates understanding and the reader's objectives shape their engagement with the text.

Although many children can read text, however, the act of reading and the act of comprehending what was read are two very different things. Reading requires the fluent parsing and blending of various phonetic sounds to create words. Reading Comprehension, on

the other hand, involves thinking about the words that were just read and deriving a meaning from them as well as from the text as a whole. When a person reads a text s/he engages in a complex array of cognitive processes. S/he is simultaneously using his or her awareness and understanding of phonemes (individual sound "pieces" in language), phonics (connection between letters and sounds and the relationship between sounds, letters and words) and ability to comprehend or construct meaning from the text. This last component of the act of reading is reading comprehension. It cannot occur independent of the other two elements of the process (Asonze, 2018).

Since comprehension is the heart and goal of reading, and the purpose of all reading is to gather meaning from the printed page, the fact remains that not all students read with comprehension. For example, if a student says words in a passage without gathering their meaning, one would hesitate to call that reading. Studies have found three common patterns (often termed profiles) of poor reading among students. These are specific word-reading difficulties (SWRD), specific reading comprehension difficulties (SRCD), and mixed reading difficulties (MRD). Children with SWRD have problems related specifically to reading words, not to core comprehension areas as vocabulary or background knowledge. Those with SRCD have the opposite pattern: poor reading comprehension despite at least average word-reading skills. And those with MRD have a combination of weaknesses in word-reading skills and core comprehension areas (Johnston, McGeown & Watson, in Otedolar 2021). Knowledge of these patterns is useful for helping pupils with many kinds of reading problems—not only those involving certain disabilities.

Therefore, synthetic phonics has being observed to be a fast track multisensory approach to teaching children reading and writing. It involves the use of many of the senses by the pupils. Children see the sounds, they listen to the pronunciation, they say the sounds and they handle the written forms on flashcards, magnetic letters, etc. Being such a multisensory approach, it is highly engaging for the children. Children need physical movement and activity as much as stimulation for their thinking. Synthetic phonics has been found to be not only a fast but also a highly effective method for teaching and learning to read. The method works by rapidly teaching the pupils, starting with the smallest units of speech – teaching them the sounds, and building up bigger units by blending the sounds together (Enhiri, 2022).

The primary programme used for this study is Jolly Phonics, a commercially available teaching programme designed by a teacher named Lloyd in 1992. It has been used with positive results in research on developing reading and writing skills by several researchers (Dixon, Schagen & Seedhouse, 2011). The Jolly Phonics programme uses five basic skills developed by Lloyd, Wenham and Jolly (Lloyd, 2013) to teach children using the synthetic phonics method. These are: 1) Learning the Letter sounds. 2) Letter formation. 3) Blending – for reading. 4) Identifying the sounds in words for writing. 5) Tricky words – irregular words. This programme is carefully planned thereby making them easy for teachers to use and for pupils to follow.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the effects of synthetic phonics strategy on Basic education Pupils' achievement in reading comprehension in Kaugama Local Government Area, Jigawa State, Nigeria. Two specific objectives are to be achieved by the study. These are:

1. To find out the mean achievement of male and female pupils in reading comprehension after exposition to synthetic phonics.
2. To ascertain the extent to which synthetic phonics strategy can improve basic education level pupils' pronunciation of words;

Two research questions raised to guide the study are:

1 What are the mean score achievements of male and female pupils in reading comprehension?
2 To what extent would the synthetic phonics strategy improve the pronunciation skill of Basic education level pupils?

The study formulated two hypothesis tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There will be no significant difference in post-test reading achievement mean scores of pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy and those who are not in the pronunciation skills.
2. There will be no significant difference between the male and female pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading is a process that involves recognizing words, leading to the development of comprehension. Several studies have shown that, reading is a process that negotiates the meaning between the text and its reader. According to Zare and Othman (2013), the reading process involves three stages: The first is the **pre-reading** stage, which allows the reader to activate background knowledge, preview the text, and develop a purpose for reading. A strategy for students to utilize during this stage is to look at the title of the selection and list all the information that comes to mind about the title. The second stage occurs **during reading**, when the reader makes predictions as they read and then confirms or revises the predictions. For example, a double-entry journal enables the reader to write the text from the reading on one side and their personal reaction on the other side. The final stage occurs **after reading** and allows the reader to retell the story, discuss the elements of a story, answer questions, and/or compare it to another text. For example, students can create summaries, where they take a huge selection and reduce it to its main points for more concise understanding.

Reading requires several activities. For Wrightslaw.com (2009, p.1), 'reading' is a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires: 1. The skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes, or speech sounds, are connected to print; 2. The ability to decode unfamiliar words; 3. The ability to read fluently; 4. Sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension; 5. The development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print and lastly, the skill of development and maintenance of a motivation to read'. The essential components of reading instruction he referred to as explicit and systematic instruction include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency (include oral reading skills) and reading comprehension strategies. Zare and Othman (2013, p.88) also observed that 'reading is a cognitive activity in which the reader takes part in a conversation with the author through text'. However, for the learner to read and comprehend, certain approach must be adopted in the teaching of reading and reading comprehension to pupils.

Synthetic phonics refers to "an approach to the teaching of reading in which the phonemes associated with particular graphemes are pronounced in isolation and blended together (synthesise)" (Okafor in Abimasal, 2020, p.27). The approach shows that teaching and learning starts with a single unit of sound. Specifically, Abimasal (2020), highlight that synthetic phonics involves the blending and segmenting of individual sounds for reading and spelling, this implies that sounding-out is employed in the process of instruction. Reading is taught by blending sounds to produce spoken words which learners should be able to identify.

Synthetic phonics is a fast track multisensory approach to teaching children reading and writing. It involves the use of many of the senses by the pupils. Children see the sounds, they listen to the pronunciation, they say the sounds and they handle the written forms on flashcards, magnetic letters, etc. Being such a multisensory approach, it is highly engaging for the children. Children "need physical movement and activity as much as stimulation for their thinking". The method works by rapidly teaching the pupils, starting with the smallest units of speech – teaching them the sounds, and building up bigger units by blending the sounds together. Synthetic phonics uses a part-to-whole approach by teaching children the phonemes associated with particular graphemes and then how to blend the phonemes together to form words e.g. /k/ /a/ /t/ *cat;* and how to segment words into their component sounds (Jollife, Waugh, and Carss, in Asonze 2018).

Ademola, Ekpo & Joy (2021) observed that "ability to read single words is only a part of reading skill; ultimately what is important is that children can comprehend what they read." They believe that phonics instruction benefits whole text reading as well as individual word reading. "The meta-analysis confirmed that for beginners, phonics instruction benefited reading comprehension as much as it benefited reading miscellaneous words and decoding pseudo words.**"** Shanahan believes **"**if a student lacks the phonemic awareness and phonics skills to translate written text into oral language, reading comprehension will be blocked no matter how well the student can think about the ideas" (Amadi, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning theories serve as the basis of this study and they are concerned with general methods of learning in the society. Among these theories and in line with the objectives of this study, the study adopted the Vygotsky Theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as its theoretical basis. The theory holds that human development must be viewed in the social context and that learning or development occurs in the place of interaction with more knowledgeable others or experts, i.e., parents, teachers, peers, who act as guides. The adult, as an older member of the community of knowledge is able to provide the child with the tools s/he needs to obtain knowledge. These tools are usually in the form of signs and symbols which the adult models. The child does not merely copy the adult but transforms and extends what the adult models to them by imitating the adults. Imitation leads to the creation of novel ideas resulting in greater expertise for the child (Lantolf and Poehner, 2008).

The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky believed everything is learned on two levels. First, through interaction with others, and then integrated into the individual's mental structure. Also, Vygotsky's theory is of the idea that the potential for cognitive development is limited to a "zone of proximal development" (ZPD): "the distance between the actual development levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential

development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". This "zone" is the area of exploration for which the student is cognitively prepared, but requires help and social interaction to fully develop. A teacher or more experienced peer is able to provide the learner with "scaffolding" to support the student's evolving understanding of knowledge domains or development of complex skills. In other words, collaborative learning, discourse, modeling, and scaffolding are strategies for supporting the intellectual knowledge and skills of learners and facilitating intentional learning (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

METHODS

The research design for this study was a quasi-experimental (specifically the non-randomized control group). This design was used because it allowed for the intact or natural groupings of the research subjects and teachers. The pupils used for the experiment were already in intact/natural classes. This provided quick information on the effects of synthetic phonics strategy within a short time, yet with high rate of accuracy. Studies have also shown that most research conducted in natural classroom setting always had more reliable results than those in which subjects were randomly selected and assigned to groups in artificial setting (Cresswell, 1994).

The population of the study comprised the 6,592 at lower basic two classes in Kaugama local government public schools in 2023/2024 session. Out of the total number, the male students stood at 3,436, while the remaining 3,156 students were female. Also, 889 of the students came from the urban area while 5,703 students reside in the rural area.

Table 1: Primary Schools in Each of the Inspectorate Cluster in Kaugama Local Government Area of Jigawa State

INSPECTORATE CLUSTER	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	BASIC TWO MALE	BASIC TWO FEMALE
Arbus	17	412	397
Dabuwaran	12	535	393
Dakayyawa	13	407	431
Hadin	12	329	261
Ja'e	13	334	362
Kaugama	12	441	448
Marke	12	510	435
Yalo	10	468	429
Total	**101**	**3,436**	**3,156**

Source: Kaugama Local Government Education Authority (LGEA 2023/2024 Session)

The sample for this study consisted of 120 lower basic two pupils in the 2023/2024 session in four (4) primary intact classes which were drawn from two (2) public primary schools and five teachers in Kaugama LGA Jigawa State.

To select the respondents for the study, purposive sampling technique was adopted. The following were the stages of the sampling: first, the 101 public primary schools in the LGA were stratified into urban and rural schools, resulting into fifteen (15) urban primary schools and eighty six (86) rural primary schools based on the classifications of Kaugama Local Government

Education Authority (LGEA). Second, using simple random sampling technique, one school was drawn from the urban location, while one school was also drawn from the rural location of the LGA for the study. One hundred and twenty (120) pupils in four (4) intact classes were used for the study. Balloting was used to assign schools to experimental group 1 and control group 2 in each location/school.

Table 2: Name of Schools, Location and Study Samples in Experimental and Control Groups

SCHOOL	LOCATION	EXPERIMENTAL CLASS		CONTROL CLASS	
Kaugama Special Primary School	Urban	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
		17	13	14	16
Unguwar-Jibril Primary School	Rural	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
		21	9	19	11
Total		**38**	**22**	**33**	**27**

Source: Kaugama Local Government Education Authority (LGEA 2023/2024 Session)

To achieve the objectives of the study, data for the study were collected through test and questionnaire. The test tagged Early Grade Reading Assessment Test (EGRAT) and Teachers' Attitude Questionnaire (TAQ). Content analysis was used to establish the validity and reliability of the research instruments as English Education experts determined the accuracy of the questions for eliciting the correct kind of information. After this, the experts scrutinized for content validity in view of the purpose and hypotheses of the study. Procedure for data collection involves the training of research assistants, administration of pretest, treatment and posttest.

The data obtained from both the pre-test and post-test were analysed to get the results for the study. Mean scores and standard deviation were used to answer research questions. Also, t-test of independent samples was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypotheses were rejected if their p-value was less than 0.05; otherwise the null hypotheses were accepted.

RESULTS

In order to answer the research questions and to test the hypotheses of the study, the results of data analysis are presented based on each research question and hypothesis.

Research Question 1: *What are the mean score achievements of male and female pupils in reading comprehension?*

Table 3: Descriptive statistics showing the achievements of male and female students in reading comprehension.

Male			Female		
Number	Mean	Standard Dev.	Number	Mean	Standard Dev.
80	17.95	17.64	40	15.50	14.14

Source: Field Data Analysis, 2024.

The table above shows clearly the mean scores and standard deviation of males and females students' achievements in reading comprehension. The mean score of the male students in reading comprehension is 17.95 (Std=17.64) while their female counterparts have a mean score

of 15.50 (Std=14.14). Based on these mean scores of the males and the females, the researcher can say there is no remarkable difference in their achievements in reading comprehension.

Research Question 2: *To what extent would the synthetic phonics strategy improve the pronunciation skill of Basic education level pupils?*

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of pupils' Achievement in pronunciation skills in reading comprehension.

		Experimental Group		Control Group	
	N	Mean	Standard Dev.	Mean	Standard Dev.
Pre-test	60	0.30	0.87	0.27	0.82
Post-test	60	10.37	5.75	0.33	0.84

Source: Field Data Analysis, 2024.

The table above shows clearly the mean scores and standard deviation of the experimental group and the control Group. The mean scores of students based on their assessment on pronunciation skills in reading comprehension showed that at pre-test, the experimental group had a mean score of 0.30(Std=0.87) while the control group had a mean score of 0.27(Std=0.82). After the treatment, the mean score of the experimental group increased to 10.37(Std=5.75) while the control group had no improvement as their mean score was 0.33 (Std=0.84). This showed that the treatment was effective because there was a remarkable increase to a large extent of the students' performance in pronunciation skills in reading comprehension. From the same table, it can be deduced that there was no remarkable improvement in the control group that were not exposed to the treatment. Hence, we can say the treatment was responsible for the improvement in the performance of the experimental group.

Hypothesis 1

H_0: There will be no significant difference in post-test reading achievement mean scores of pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy and those who are not in the pronunciation skills.

Table 5: **t-test Statistic for post-test reading achievement mean scores of pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy and those not taught in the pronunciation skills.**

GROUP	N	MEAN	Std	Df	t-calculated	*p*-value	Decision
EXPERIMENT	60	10.37	5.75	118	13.378	0.000	***Reject H0***
CONTROL	60	0.33	0.84				

Source: Field Data Analysis, 2024.

The table above shows that by comparing the *p*-value with the level of significance of 0.05, the *p*-value is a significant value since it's less than 0.05, hence the null hypothesis H_{01} is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant difference in post-test reading achievement mean scores of pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy and those who are not in the pronunciation skills. This shows that the treatment was effective to help the pupils develop their pronunciation skills as against their counterparts in the control group that were not exposed to the treatment.

Hypothesis 2:

H_0: There will be no significant difference between the male and female pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy.

Table 6: t-test Statistic for difference between the male and female pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy.

Exp. Group	N	MEAN	Std	Df	t-calculated	*p*-value	Decision
Males	80	17.95	17.64	118	0.763	0.447	***Accept H0***
Females	40	15.50	14.14				

Source: Field Data Analysis, 2024.

The table above shows that by comparing the *p*-value with the level of significance of 0.05, the p-value is not a significant value since it's larger than 0.05, hence the null hypothesis H_{02} is accepted. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the male and female pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy. This shows that there is no difference based on gender of the students exposed to reading using the synthetic phonics strategy.

DISCUSSION

Findings from research question two showed that there is no remarkable difference in the mean score performance of male and female pupils exposed to the synthetic phonics strategy. This research question was further tested at the hypothesis level to check whether the mean differences were significant. It was discovered that there is no significant difference between the male and female pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy. Counihan (2017) observed similar findings in his research on the effects of synthetic phonic intervention in rural low cost private schools in Ghana.

Similarly, the findings from research question three showed that there is a remarkable improvement in the achievement of the pupils exposed to synthetic phonics strategy in their pronunciation skills than those who were not exposed to the treatment. This research question was further tested at the hypothesis level to check whether the mean differences are significant. This research question was further tested at the hypothesis level to check whether the mean differences are significant. It was discovered that there is a significant difference in post-test reading achievement mean scores of pupils taught with the synthetic phonics strategy and those who were not in the pronunciation skills. This finding is not far from what Callinan and Van der zee (2010) discovered about the effectiveness of synthetic phonics in pupils in word reading and spellings far above their chronological age. This shows that this method is very good in teaching pupils reading as it was effect in improving their reading and pronunciation ability even above their chronological age.

CONCLUSION

The result of this study has largely shown that synthetic phonics strategy has significant effects on pupils' achievement in reading comprehension. With the persistent higher post-test mean achievement scores for pupils in all groups than in pre-test, the efficacy and efficiency of synthetic phonics as a reading comprehension strategy that English teachers can use to effectively teach reading comprehension has been empirically established. The findings show that pupils' achievement in reading comprehension considerably increased after being exposed to synthetic phonics in post-test. With this, the superiority of synthetic phonics as a reading comprehension strategy over the old conventional strategies currently being used in primary schools in Jigawa state is exposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations, among others, are made:

1 English language teachers should adapt the strategy as an alternative to the conventional strategies in teaching reading comprehension in primary schools since it has been proved to improve and accelerate pupils' achievement in reading comprehension.
2 Jigawa Educational Research Development Council (JERDC) should incorporate synthetic phonics as an effective strategy in teaching reading comprehension in English for lower basic schools (primary).

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