

## **Promoting Pupils' Interest in Reading Activities in English Using Synthetic Phonics-Based Instruction**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigated effects of synthetic phonics-based instruction on pupils' interest in reading in English. The study adopted quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group research design. The population of the study is all the 4,820 primary one pupils in Anyigba Education Zone of Kogi State. Simple random sampling technique was used to draw 82 pupils (40 males and 42 females) from four primary one intact classes. Instrument for data collection was a researcher-made English Reading Interest Scale (ERIS) which was validated by experts in Language Education and Measurement and Evaluation from Kogi State University, Anyigba. The internal consistency, using Cronbach alpha, was ascertained which yielded a coefficient of 0.96. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05alpha level of significance. The findings of the study revealed that synthetic phonics-based instruction has significant effect on pupils' interest ( $F_{(1,80)}=24.844;p<0.05$ ) while gender has no influence on pupils' interest in reading in English when taught with synthetic phonics ( $F_{(1,80)}=2.236;p>0.05$ ). Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that using synthetic phonics-based instruction is effective in enhancing pupils' interest in reading in English more than the conventional method hence it was recommended, among others, that synthetic phonics instruction should be incorporated in English studies curriculum at the primary school level.*

**Keywords:** Synthetic phonics, reading, interest, English studies

### **Introduction**

Reading is the process of looking at written symbols and getting meanings from them. It is a cognitive process that involves decoding symbols to arrive at meaning. Grab (2009) describes reading as a thinking process which allows the readers to use what they may already know (prior knowledge) to arrive at a definite meaning. According to Kirchner and Mostert (2017), reading is a cognitive process in which we decode symbols in order to extract meaning from them. During this processing of information, the reader uses strategies to understand what he is reading, uses themes to organize ideas, and uses textual clues to find meanings of new words (Nuttal, 2005).

Leipzig (2001) sees reading as a multifaceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation. According to Leipzig, in making meaning from print, it requires that a reader:

- Identify the words in print a process called word recognition
- Construct an understanding from them a process called comprehension
- Coordinate identifying words and making meaning so that reading is automatic and accurate an achievement called fluency

Reading along with listening is a receptive skill. This means that we do not need to produce information when we read but receive it and comprehend it. It is one of the four basic language skills that have enjoyed progressive and unending research due to its pervasive and overriding influence and role in every aspect of human society (Amadi & Offorma, 2019). Research findings have shown that many children in primary schools have low interest in reading; the low interest has always led to poor performance in schools (Nigeria Education Data Survey, 2015). This poor performance in reading could be as a result of poor methods of teaching reading. Amadi and Olajide (2011) observe that traditional methods of teaching initial reading are still very much in use among primary school teachers to the neglect of phonics method.

Phonics is a method of teaching reading based on the sounds of letters, groups of letters, and syllables (Zakine, (2017). In practice, phonics refers to several different but generally overlapping methods of instruction. Some of these methods are analytical phonics, linguistics phonics, embedded phonics, and synthetic phonics. The focus of this study is the synthetic phonics.

Synthetic phonics is based on the premise that ability to decode words early brings about later success in reading. In a synthetic phonics instruction, pupils are taught to decode new words by retrieving from memory the sound that each letter, or combination of letters, in a word represents and blending the sounds into recognizable word (Gaskin, 2011). Synthetic phonics seems to improve beginning readers' alphabetic knowledge and word reading skills (Amadi & Offorma, 2019). Through synthetic phonics, pupils interest could be stimulated to read well in English; they could be gingered to spell and pronounce new words without assistance from the teacher. Unfamiliar words could also be recognized, read and interpreted in new contexts.

Interest is a motivational variable which determines the vigour of a learner in tackling educational activities. Interest guides and encourages learners to think critically and to keep trying until success is achieved (Omachonu, Akanya & Unwaha, 2019). Interest and achievement correlate in teaching and learning processes. High interest improves students' achievement while high achievement promotes interest. On the other hand, low interest retards learning and results to poor achievement. Omachonu (2018) reported that

students' interest can be influenced by innovative teaching methods such as synthetic phonics-based instruction. This study therefore sets out to find out whether synthetic phonics-based instruction could lead to better interest in reading in English among primary school pupils. Primary school pupils consists males and females. The phenomenon of male and female in research all over the world point to the issue of gender. The influence of gender on pupils' interest using synthetic phonics-based instruction in reading in English appears to have received little or no attention in educational research in Kogi State.

Gender is the range of physical, biological, mental and behavioural characteristics pertaining to and differentiating between masculinity and femininity (Ajai, 2018). The term involves the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of being male or female (Ewumi, 2012). According to Alordiah, Akpakada and Ovigbodu (2015), the socialization patterns in Nigeria and most African settings which places enormous restrictions and a higher input of daily domestic labour on the females than the males automatically schemes females out from any considerations for serious professional discipline, even in cases where a female appears to be more brilliant than her male counterpart.

Gender differences in academic performance in language have been an issue of controversy and have generated a considerable interest in educational research over the years. Considerable literature exists in reporting attempts to explain gender differences in language (Offorma, 2004; Azikiwe, 2005). While Abdullahi and Bichi (2015) found that females achieved higher than males in English language, Musa, Dauda and Umar (2016) reported that there was no significant difference in the achievement of males and females in English language. Since there seems to be no consensus on which gender achieves higher than the other in English, further investigation is needed in diverse areas of the English language with regard to gender and achievement. Hence, this study looked at the influence of gender in promoting pupils' interest in reading activities in English using synthetic phonics-based instruction as one of the variables of interest.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are the mean interest rating scores of pupils taught reading in English using synthetic phonics-based instruction and those taught with the conventional method?
2. What is the influence of gender on pupils' interest in reading in English using synthetic phonics-based instruction?

The following null hypotheses were generated for the study:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean interest rating scores of pupils taught reading in English using synthetic phonics-based instruction and those taught with the conventional method.

2. There is no significant difference the mean rating interest scores of males and females taught reading using phonics-based instruction.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted the quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group research design. Specifically, it is a non-randomized control group design. The population of the study is all the 4,820 primary one pupils in Anyigba Education Zone of Kogi State in the 2019/2020 academic session. 2,352 of the pupils are males while 2,468 are females according to the statistics obtained from the Kogi State Ministry of Education Zonal Office, Dekina. The simple random sampling technique was used to draw 82 pupils (40 males and 42 females) from four intact classes. The instrument for data collection was a researcher-made English Reading Interest Scale (ERIS). The instrument was validated by three experts, two in Language Education and one in Measurement and Evaluation, all from Kogi State University, Anyigba. The internal consistency of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach alpha which yielded a coefficient of 0.96. The instrument was administered as pre-test to the 82 subjects sampled for the study and the result kept. The actual experiment was the teaching of reading using the synthetic phonics-based instruction. This was carried out using the regular English language teachers in the intact classes sampled for the study. These teachers were trained as research assistants and the lesson plans prepared by the researcher was handed over to them. The experimental groups were taught using the phonics-based instruction while the control groups were taught using the conventional lecture method. After four weeks of teaching, the instrument was re-administered as post-test. The data gathered from both pre-test and post-test were analyzed. Mean scores and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level of significance.

### **Results**

**Research Question 1:** What are the mean interest rating scores of pupils taught reading in English using synthetic phonics-based instruction and those taught with the conventional method?

**Table 1:**  
Mean and standard deviation of pupils' interest score in reading in English

Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Gain Score
		X	SD	X	SD	X
Experimental Group	38	8.23	2.63	25.08	86.76	16.85
Control Group	44	7.56	2.36	18.78	7.74	11.22

The results on table 1 show that the mean interest rating score of the experimental group in the pre-test is 8.23 and a post-test mean interest rating score of 25.08. The control group had a pre-test mean interest rating score of 7.56 and a post-test mean interest rating score of 18.78. The experimental group had a mean interest gain score of 16.85 while the control group had a mean interest gain score of 11.22. The implication of this result is that the experimental group with the higher mean interest gain score of 16.85 achieved higher than their counterparts in the control group with the mean interest gain score of 11.22.

**Research Question 2:** What is the influence of gender on pupils' interest in reading in English using synthetic phonics-based instruction?

**Table 2:**

Mean and standard deviation of males and females' interest score in reading in English

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Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Gain Score
		X	SD	X	SD	X
Males	18	7.81	2.52	24.13	7.53	16.32
Females	20	7.94	2.51	19.71	7.71	11.77

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The results on table 2 show that the males' pre-test mean interest rating score is 7.81 with a post-test mean interest rating score of 24.13. The pre-test mean interest rating score of the females is 7.94 and a post-test mean interest rating score of 19.71. The mean interest gain score of the males is 16.32 while that of the females is 11.77. This result indicates that the males with the higher mean interest gain score have higher interest in reading when exposed to synthetic phonics-based instruction than their female counterparts.

HO<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant difference in the mean interest rating scores of pupils taught reading in English using synthetic phonics-based instruction and those taught with the conventional method.

**Table 3:**  
Analysis of covariance of pupils' mean interest score in reading in English

Sources of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Decision
Corrected model	3521.287	8	440.161	10.702	.000	
Intercept	3219.841	1	3219.841	78.289	.000	
Pre-test	482.005	1	482.0051	1.720	.001	
Treatment	1021.753	1	1021.753	24.844	.000	*S
Gender	91.980	1	91.980	2.236	.137	*NS
Error	5757.840	80	41.127			
Total	79994.000	82				
Corrected total	9279.128	81				

\*S=Significant

\*NS=Not significant

The results on table 3 reveal that the F-value for treatment is 24.84 which is significant at 0.00. Since 0.00 is less than 0.05, that is ( $p = 0.00$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, the null-hypothesis claiming no significant difference is rejected. This result indicates that there was a significant difference in the mean interest rating score of pupils taught reading in English using the synthetic phonics-based instruction and those taught with the conventional method. The result is in favour of those taught with synthetic phonics instruction.

**Hypothesis 2** sought to know if there was a significant difference in the mean rating interest scores of males and females taught reading in English using phonics-based instruction. The results show that the F-value for gender is 91.98 which is significant at 0.13. Since 0.13 is more than 0.05, that is ( $p = 0.13$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, the null-hypothesis of no significant difference is accepted. This result indicates that there is no significant difference in the mean interest rating score of males and females taught reading using the synthetic phonics-based instruction.

## Discussion

The results on table 1 show that the pupils exposed to synthetic phonics-based instruction have higher mean interest score than those not exposed to it. Similarly, table 3 revealed that there is a significant difference in the mean interest rating score of pupils in the two groups. Considering the results on tables 1 and 3, these results favoured the experimental group. These findings are in agreement with Amadi and Offorma (2019) who found that pupils exposed to synthetic phonics achieved higher than those exposed to analytical

phonics. The reason for the higher mean interest rating score of the pupils exposed to synthetic phonics-based instruction may be attributed to the fact that the synthetic phonics-based instruction activities adequately exposed pupils to the knowledge of letter sounds which they then build upon to pronounce unfamiliar words independently of the teacher. As noted by Omachonu (2018), innovative and activity-based instructional methods influence students' achievements positively. The activities involved in the synthetic phonics-based instruction may have gingered the pupils' interest in reading.

The results on table 2 show that males slightly had higher mean interest rating score than the females in synthetic phonics instruction. However, results on table 3 (which is also used to address gender) show that statistically, there is no significant difference in the mean interest rating of males and females. This finding is in agreement with Musa, Dauda and Umar (2016) who did a study on gender differences in achievement goals and performances in English language and Mathematics and found that gender has no influence on students' achievement as there was no significant difference in the achievement of males and females in English. The existence of no significant difference in the mean interest rating score of males and females could be attributed to the fact that the class activities involving synthetic phonics instruction in reading English might have aroused and stimulated the pupils to be equally attentive and focused during the instruction. The implication therefore is that synthetic phonics does not stereotype gender, rather it is gender friendly.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that the use of synthetic phonics-based instruction is effective in enhancing pupils' interest in reading in English more than the conventional method. Gender has no influence on the interest of pupils taught reading in English using synthetic phonics-based instruction. Therefore, it was recommended that synthetic phonics-based instruction should be incorporated into the English reading curriculum. Seminars and workshops should be organized for all English studies teachers to acquaint them with the use of synthetic phonics-based instruction for teaching reading in English. English studies teachers should always strive to vary their teaching approaches by using innovative strategies such as synthetic phonics in the teaching of reading in English at the primary school level.

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