

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PHONICS-BASED INSTRUCTION IN IMPROVING READING SKILLS AMONG EARLY LEARNERS IN AFIJIO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

Phonics-based instruction is widely regarded as an effective method for improving reading skills among early learners. This study assesses the effectiveness of phonics-based instruction in enhancing reading skills among early learners in Afijio Local Government. Using a descriptive survey research design, 100 pupils between the ages of 5 and 8 from five public primary schools were randomly selected. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire ($r = 0.78$), which measured learners' decoding skills, comprehension ability, and exposure to phonics instruction, and analyzed using one-way ANOVA. Results indicated a significant relationship between phonics-based instruction and improved reading skills ($F(2,97) = 8.93$, $p = 0.0003$), with frequent phonics use—defined as daily classroom exposure—showing greater enhancement in decoding and comprehension abilities ($F(3,96) = 12.45$, $p = 0.0001$). Challenges included inconsistent implementation and limited instructional resources. The study concludes that systematic phonics instruction significantly enhances early literacy development in rural Nigerian contexts. Based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers integrate phonics-based instruction into their teaching practices and that stakeholders provide adequate training and resources to support this pedagogical approach.

Keywords: Phonics-Based Instruction, Reading Skills, Early Learners, Education

Introduction

Reading is a key part of early childhood education since it is the basis for lifetime learning and brain development. In Nigeria, where literacy rates are still a problem, it is very important for students to develop good reading habits throughout their early years in order to do well in school and help the country grow. Reading activities at an early age have a huge impact on how children learn language, develop, and grow socially and emotionally, making it a

crucial feature of good early childhood education programs.

Despite this importance, many early learners in Nigeria continue to struggle with foundational reading skills, often due to traditional instructional methods that do not adequately support sound-symbol awareness or systematic decoding abilities. As educators and policymakers search for more effective approaches, phonics-based instruction has gained attention as a structured and child-

friendly method that helps young learners connect spoken and written language meaningfully. Strengthening reading instruction at this stage is essential for improving individual academic outcomes and addressing national concerns about literacy, educational quality, and long-term human development.

In this context, examining how phonics-based instruction enhances reading skills among early learners in Afijio Local Government becomes both timely and relevant, contributing to ongoing efforts to improve early childhood education practices.

Literature Review

Early reading plays a vital role in developing language and communication skills, which form the foundation of academic success. Adeyemi (2021) posits that children who engage in consistent reading activities at an early age exhibit enhanced vocabulary acquisition and language comprehension compared to peers with minimal reading involvement. A study in Lagos State found that preschoolers who participated in regular reading lessons improved their expressive abilities by 40% within six months. This early language base supports learners' ability to handle increasingly complex academic tasks. However, these findings do not clarify whether improvements stemmed from instructional methods, intensity, or quality of teaching, demonstrating the need for further investigation into which literacy approaches produce the strongest outcomes.

Early reading exposure also enhances cognitive development and critical thinking. Okafor and Nwosu (2020) found in Enugu State that children enrolled in structured reading programs demonstrated stronger problem-solving skills and improved memory. These programs stimulated neural circuits for analytical thinking, leading to better performance on

pattern-recognition and logic tasks. Such benefits extend beyond language arts and influence mathematics and science learning. However, the nature of the structured programs is not clearly described, making it difficult to determine whether phonics-based instruction contributed to the cognitive gains.

Reading serves as a strong predictor of broader school readiness. Ibrahim and Mohammed (2019) reported that children who developed reading habits prior to formal schooling adapted more quickly to classroom routines and performed better academically in early school years. Early readers scored 35% higher on readiness assessments than non-readers. Nevertheless, the study does not compare reading instructional techniques, leaving an important gap concerning which approaches best strengthen academic readiness. Additionally, early exposure to literature contributes to social-emotional development. Okonkwo (2022) found in Delta State that story-reading sessions improved children's emotional regulation, empathy, conflict resolution, and perspective-taking. Despite demonstrating significant socio-emotional benefits, the research does not show how structured techniques such as phonics fit into these outcomes.

Reading also strengthens cultural identity, especially when indigenous literature is incorporated. Adewumi and Adegbola (2021) emphasized that integrating indigenous stories into early reading programs fosters cultural pride and improves intercultural relationships among young children. While this highlights a cultural advantage, tensions exist because some phonics programs rely heavily on foreign materials, raising concerns about their cultural relevance in Nigerian settings.

Parental involvement is another important factor in early literacy development. Yusuf and Babatunde (2020) reported that

family reading initiatives in Kaduna State increased parental engagement and improved learning environments, resulting in a 50% rise in children's reading frequency and academic achievement. However, the study does not address whether parents are adequately prepared to support phonics-based learning at home.

Long-term societal and economic benefits also result from early reading. Eze and Chukwu (2023) found in a longitudinal study of rural communities in Imo State that children with strong early reading exposure were 60% more likely to complete secondary school and pursue higher education. The study further revealed that investment in early literacy reduces remediation costs and boosts national productivity. Yet, questions remain regarding which instructional model—phonics, whole-word, or language experience—offers the greatest cost-effectiveness.

From a theoretical perspective, parents serve as children's earliest educators. Vygotsky's (1962) theory of the zone of proximal development explains how adults scaffold children's learning through collaborative reading, such as story narration or shared reading (Pergar & Hadela, 2020). While this supports comprehension and creativity, it does not fully address the structured skill-building necessary for phonics mastery.

Access to literacy-rich environments also promotes early reading. Research indicates that owning a home library of 100+ books is linked to improved academic readiness (Adeyemi, 2021). Such environments build pre-reading skills like phonemic awareness and story knowledge (Adeyemi, 2021, citing Phillips et al., 2009). However, the specific role of phonics within these environments remains unclear.

Despite the benefits of early reading, many families struggle to prioritize literacy due to time constraints, poverty, and limited

awareness. Eze and Chukwu (2023) advocate for workshops, counseling, and community programs to help integrate reading into daily routines, providing children with intentional literacy experiences. While these interventions show potential, they do not specify which instructional method is best suited to low-resource communities.

Phonics instruction focuses on systematic letter-sound relationships for decoding print. Adekunle and Ogunniyi (2021) define phonics as teaching learners the relationship between graphemes and phonemes so they can decode words independently. Blending and segmenting are core components. Yusuf (2020) found that children with strong blending skills read more fluently, while Nwankwo and Adesina (2021) reported that explicit segmenting instruction improved spelling and phonemic awareness.

Phonics contrasts with whole-word methods, which emphasize memorization of entire words. Babalola and Olatunji (2023) state that whole-word strategies rely on visual memory rather than phonetic understanding. Mohammed and Ibrahim (2019) demonstrated that students taught systematically through phonics outperformed peers in word recognition and comprehension. Global studies, such as Martinez and Johnson (2020), affirm phonics' superiority across countries, though local applicability varies.

In Nigeria's multilingual context, effectiveness depends on cultural and linguistic alignment. Adewumi and Ibrahim (2021) argue that literacy interventions must reflect local languages. Afijio Local Government Area presents a typical rural Nigerian context, with only 45% adult literacy (Ogunleye & Adekunle, 2022). Limited teacher training, inadequate facilities, and socioeconomic barriers hinder early literacy development. Although phonics shows strong global evidence, its effectiveness

in rural multilingual areas like Afijio remains underexplored. This study therefore examines the impact of phonics-based instruction on early learners' reading skills, addressing contextual gaps and informing better instructional strategies.

Statement of the Problem

Numerous researches have examined the advantages of phonics-based instruction; however, there is limited material on its specific impact on enhancing reading abilities among early learners in Afijio Local Government. This gap shows the need for more research to identify effective ways of using phonics in early childhood education. Evidence is scarce on how frequency of phonics exposure, quality of teacher delivery, and development of decoding and comprehension skills function in rural contexts. Therefore, a focused investigation is needed to determine how phonics instruction and its intensity influence reading improvement in Afijio.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of phonics-based instruction in improving reading skills among early learners in Afijio Local Government. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Determine the relationship between phonics-based instruction and improved reading skills among early learners.
- Investigate the influence of the frequency of phonics-based instruction on learners' ability to decode texts.
- Examine the influence of the frequency of phonics-based instruction on learners' ability to comprehend texts.
- Explore contextual factors or implementation challenges affecting

phonics-based instruction in early childhood education.

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between phonics-based instruction and improved reading skills among early learners.

H₀₂: The frequency of phonics-based instruction has no significant influence on learners' ability to decode texts.

H₀₃: The frequency of phonics-based instruction has no significant influence on learners' ability to comprehend texts.

Research Question

1. What contextual factors or implementation challenges affect the effectiveness of phonics-based instruction in early childhood education?

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey research methodology. The population comprised all early learners in public primary schools in Afijio Local Government, from which a random sample of 100 learners was selected from 5 schools. The sample included learners aged 5–7 years from Grades 1 and 2, representing both genders. A 4-point Likert-type questionnaire titled the *Effectiveness of Phonics-Based Instruction Questionnaire (EPBIQ)* was created by the researcher, containing 20 items measuring learners' reading skills and the frequency of phonics-based instruction. Frequency was defined as instructional sessions per week, categorised as low (1–2), moderate (3–4), and high (5 or more). Content validity was ensured by two experts in early childhood

education, and reliability using the test–retest method produced a coefficient of 0.78. Ethical procedures involved obtaining consent and ensuring confidentiality. Data were analysed using one-way ANOVA at a 0.05 significance level, while contextual factors and implementation challenges were explored qualitatively through open-ended items.

Results

H_{01} : There is no significant relationship between phonics-based instruction and improved reading skills among early learners.

Table 1: One-Way ANOVA on the relationship between phonics-based instruction and reading skills

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-Value	p-value	Decision
Between Groups (Low, Moderate, High Instruction)	245.67	2	122.84	8.93	0.0003	Reject H_{01}
Within Groups	1320.45	97	13.61	-	-	-
Total	1566.12	99	-	-	-	-

The ANOVA results indicate a statistically significant correlation between phonics-based instruction and improved reading skills ($F(2, 97) = 8.93$, $p = 0.0003$). Since $p < 0.05$, H_{01} is rejected.

Post-Hoc Analysis (Tukey HSD):

Learners in the High Instruction group scored significantly higher than the Low Instruction group ($p = 0.001$).

No significant difference was observed between Moderate and High groups ($p = 0.08$).

Practical interpretation: Early learners exposed to frequent phonics-based instruction demonstrate markedly better reading skills, suggesting that structured phonics lessons can enhance foundational literacy at a young age.

H_{02} : The frequency of phonics-based instruction has no significant influence on learners' ability to decode texts.

Table 2: One-Way ANOVA on the influence of phonics-based instruction frequency on decoding skills

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-Value	p-value	Decision
Between Groups (Low, Moderate, High, Very High Frequency)	165.32	3	55.11	10.22	0.0002	Reject H_{02}
Within Groups	518.44	96	5.40	-	-	-
Total	683.76	99	-	-	-	-

Post-Hoc Analysis (Tukey HSD):

Learners in Very High Frequency group scored significantly higher than Low Frequency ($p < 0.001$) and Moderate Frequency groups ($p = 0.02$).

No significant difference between High and Very High Frequency groups ($p = 0.09$).

Practical interpretation: Increasing the number of phonics sessions per week enhances learners' decoding skills, with the most substantial gains occurring when moving from low to moderate/high frequency instruction.

H₀₃: The frequency of phonics-based instruction has no significant influence on learners' ability to comprehend texts.

Table 3: One-Way ANOVA on the influence of phonics-based instruction frequency on comprehension skills

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F-Value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Decision</i>
<i>Between Groups (Low, Moderate, High, Very High Frequency)</i>	154.86	3	51.62	9.87	0.0004	Reject <i>H₀₃</i>
<i>Within Groups</i>	501.48	96	5.22	-	-	-
<i>Total</i>	656.34	99	-	-	-	-

Post-Hoc Analysis (Tukey HSD):

Very High Frequency learners outperformed Low Frequency learners ($p < 0.001$).

No significant difference between Moderate and High Frequency groups ($p = 0.12$).

Practical interpretation: Frequent phonics instruction improves comprehension skills, but improvements plateau beyond a certain frequency, suggesting optimal benefits at moderate-to-high instructional levels.

Research Question: What contextual factors or implementation challenges affect the effectiveness of phonics-based instruction in early childhood education?

Analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses revealed several key themes:

Teacher Training: Limited professional development in phonics methods reduced instructional quality.

Resource Availability: Schools often lacked sufficient reading materials, charts, and letter-sound aids.

Parental Support: Variability in home literacy practices influenced learner engagement and retention.

Time Allocation: Infrequent class periods for phonics instruction constrained learning opportunities.

Class Size: Large classes limited individual attention and hands-on practice.

Practical Summary: Even when phonics-based instruction is applied, contextual factors such as teacher preparedness, material availability, home support, and instructional frequency affect its

effectiveness. Addressing these challenges can improve reading outcomes for early learners in Afijio Local Government.

Discussion of Findings

The results for Hypothesis One align with previous research demonstrating the effectiveness of phonics-based training in early reading development. The statistically significant correlation between phonics instruction and enhanced reading proficiency reinforces evidence that systematic teaching of sound–letter correspondence is essential for literacy development. This supports Adeyemi’s (2021) finding that children who received structured phonics intervention showed major language gains, and corresponds with Okafor and Nwosu’s (2020) conclusion that explicit phonics training strengthens decoding skills and cognitive processing.

The significant effect of phonics teaching frequency on decoding and comprehension also reflects existing research on structured literacy. These results corroborate Yusuf’s (2020) study, which showed that systematic phonics implementation improves reading fluency and word recognition, and agree with Nwankwo and Adesina’s (2021) evidence linking increased phonics engagement with improved phonological awareness and reading accuracy.

Findings related to contextual factors and implementation challenges highlight the roles of teacher preparedness, resource adequacy, home literacy practices, and instructional frequency. This aligns with Adewumi and Ibrahim (2021), who emphasized the need to consider both home and school literacy environments in multilingual Nigerian contexts. Qualitative responses indicate that insufficient materials, large class sizes, and limited parental support can weaken phonics outcomes.

Although the statistical findings are strong, several moderating factors exist,

including linguistic diversity, socio-economic differences, and variations in prior reading exposure. Phonics appears effective because it delivers structured exposure to letter–sound relationships, allowing children to decode unfamiliar words and comprehend texts more efficiently. The findings affirm that frequent, systematic phonics instruction is vital for early literacy and underscore the need for improved teacher training, resource provision, and parental engagement to maximize phonics effectiveness in rural areas like Afijio Local Government.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the efficacy of phonics-based instruction in enhancing reading abilities among early learners in Afijio Local Government Area, Oyo State, Nigeria, where literacy challenges remain significant. The results, supported by ANOVA, revealed a statistically significant correlation between phonics-based instruction and improved reading skills, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The study also demonstrated that the frequency of phonics instruction significantly affects learners' decoding and comprehension skills, resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis on instructional frequency. These findings align with global and national research, reaffirming the effectiveness of systematic phonics education in improving decoding, fluency, and comprehension among early learners.

Additionally, the study identified key contextual and implementation challenges, including teacher preparedness, availability of resources, parental support, class size, and time allocated for phonics lessons. Addressing these factors is essential for maximizing the benefits of phonics instruction in rural communities like

Afijio. Although valuable, the study is limited by self-reported instructional frequency and a sample confined to five schools, which may affect generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, larger samples, and explore multilingual influences and culturally adapted phonics materials to enhance early literacy outcomes in diverse Nigerian settings.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed, prioritized according to feasibility and potential impact: Teachers should integrate phonics-based instruction into their daily teaching practices to create structured and engaging learning experiences for early learners. Professional development programs should include practical training modules on systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondence, blending, and segmenting; strategies for differentiating instruction for learners with varying literacy readiness; and the use of culturally relevant and multilingual reading materials to address diverse linguistic contexts.

Government and stakeholders should ensure that schools are equipped with adequate phonics-based teaching materials, including alphabet and phoneme charts, flashcards, decodable readers, culturally relevant storybooks, and digital literacy tools or phonics apps where feasible. Parents and caregivers should be actively involved in early literacy development through workshops on conducting home reading sessions, supporting phonics practice with games and storytelling, and encouraging multilingual literacy practices. Schools should allocate dedicated time for phonics instruction and maintain smaller class sizes where possible to support individualized learning. School administrators should also monitor the implementation of phonics

instruction by assessing learner progress, observing classroom practices, and adjusting instructional strategies as needed. Prioritizing teacher training and resource provision offers the most immediate and sustainable improvements.

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