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The Effect of Oral Reading Fluency on the Reading Performance of Children with Reading Difficulties within Buea Municipality, Cameroon

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ABSTRACT:- This study examined the effect of phonics method on oral reading fluency on the reading performance of children with reading difficulties in Buea municipality. Quasi-experimental research design was used for the study. The population of the study comprised of all primary three children with reading difficulties. Fourteen (14) children were drawn from the population to form the sample. The children were then divided into experimental and control groups (7 children in each group). Data was collected using the reading readiness diagnostic instrument. And data was analysed using mean difference, standard deviations and the Cramer's V to measure the progression rate. The findings of the study indicate that oral reading fluency has an effect on the reading performance of children as indicated on the results of the experimental group which was higher than that of the control group. The hypothesis here stated is then rejected thus implying that the phonics method has a significant positive influence on the oral reading fluency of children.

Keywords: Oral Reading Fluency, Reading Performance, Children with Reading Difficulties

Introduction and Conceptual Trends of Issues on Oral Reading Fluency: Reading Performance Of Children With Reading Difficulties

One of the methods that have proven to be an effective method in the teaching of reading has been the phonics method which is the system of teaching reading that builds on the alphabetic principle, that is, the relationship between letters or groups of letters and their corresponding sounds. The phonics method of teaching reading encourages the learners to work out the meaning of sounds (syllables) and to "blend" these sounds to form words.

Learning to read is not a natural process and most children need explicit instruction in order to acquire and master the various types of knowledge, skills, and strategies involved in reading (Lyon, 1998; Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 2001). Children differ in the amount of direct teaching they require to achieve these component skills in reading. While some will require specific training in phonological awareness to pave the way for learning the alphabetic code (Scanlon & Vellutino, 1997) others require much more time and practice. A majority of children will require direct and explicit training in phonic skills and word analysis strategies in order to gain confidence in decoding and spelling (Jenkins & O'Connoi, 2002). The National Reading Panel stresses the instruction of phonics should be systematic and explicit (National Reading Panel, 2000). Other studies confirm these findings (Joseph & Schisler, 2007; Torgesen, Alexander, Wagner, Rahotte, Voeller & Conway, 2001).

The National Reading Panel (2004) found that phonics instruction is an effective approach to teaching reading for children from kindergarten through 6th grade, and for all children who are having difficulty in learning to read. The National Reading Panel also found that phonics instruction benefits all ages in learning to spell (Phajane, 2014). Using the phonics method in the teaching of the alphabetic code helps children to build their skills in word decoding (Allington, 2005). Other studies as cited by (Phajane, 2014), reports that phonics instruction improves children's ability to identify words, that useful phonics strategies include teaching children

the sounds of letters in isolation and in words and teaching them to blend the sounds of letters together to produce approximate pronunciations of words. It also states that phonics instruction should occur in conjunction with opportunities to identify words in meaningful sentences and stories (Gray & McCutchen, 2006).

Hudson, Lane & Pullen (2005) offer us a very comprehensive definition of the term: oral reading fluency, they suggest, is the "accurate reading of connected text at a conversational rate with appropriate prosody or expression" (Hudson, et al., 2005, p.702). Another definition by Caitlin & Cummings, (2013) defines oral reading fluency as "the ability to read connected text quickly, accurately and with expression in doing so; there is no noticeable cognitive effort that is associated with decoding word on the page". In a communicative context of language teaching this particular skill emerges as an essential constituent of language development as it has been found to be one of the most reliable predictors of overall reading competence (Hudson, et al., 2005; Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp & Jenkins, 2001) and reading comprehension (Allington, 1983; Johns, 1993; Samuels, 1988; Schreiber, 1980 in Hudson et al., 2005). Reading fluency is closely connected to text comprehension. If words are read inaccurately, the reader will fail to perceive the author's intended meaning, and thus misinterpret the text. A reader's capacity to understand the text is hindered by poor automaticity in word reading while slow movement through the text can act as a distractor posing further limitations to this reader's ability to comprehend meaning (Hudson, et al., 2005).

Most studies investigating the correlations between oral reading fluency and reading competence do so by measuring reading fluency first in a very simple way: they count number of words read correctly by particular readers in a given time (Hudson et al., 2005; Fuchs et. al., 2001; Shinn, Good, Knutson, Tilley & Collins, 1992; Tsiadimos, 2015).

There is a great deal of evidence which shows that children's early reading progress depends critically on their oral language skills (Muter, Hulme, Snowing & Stevenson, 2004). Oral language is the foundation for literacy in general and for reading comprehension especially (Pan, 2011). Studies have shown that children who demonstrate oral language fluency learn to read more efficiently (National Institute for Literacy, 2008). Also, a longitudinal study on vocabulary and grammatical knowledge showed that these two were significant predictors of reading Muter, Hulme, Snowing & Stevenson, 2004). It is, therefore, important and imperative that classroom intervention programs on reading be implemented in order to improve on reading (Morgan, 2017).

Statement of the problem

It has been observed that children are able to read out words that are taught to them through drills and memorization methods but are not able to read out the same words presented to them in an alternated order or when mixed with other words having similar initial, medial or final vowel or consonant sound blends. This is because the method used in teaching encourages memorization and rote reading rather than developing reading skills. Most children with reading difficulties may face problems with phonics, and or word recognition, the effect of reading difficulties makes learning challenging since such children generally lack the ability to interpret words on page or chalkboard, have trouble recognizing the relationships between letters and sounds or numbers and the visual symbols that represent them. Children with poor reading skills also perform poorly during examinations, have low self-esteem and are discouraged with life, turn to be truants and school dropouts, have dislike for school with a sense of isolation. Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfilment and job success inevitably will be lost. This leads one to wonder whether the phonics method can lead to improved reading performance when employed in our context and classrooms with the influence of multilanguage's such as the Pidgin English (which is close to the English language) and the mother tongues of the learners used for communication at homes and the community. Against this understanding, this study sets out to investigate the effect of the phonics method on the reading performance of children with reading difficulties in the Buea municipality.

Theoretical review

Two theories reviewed in this study are stages of reading development by Jeanne S. Chall and the socio-cultural theory of cognitive development by Vygotsky. One of the major proponents in reading development who came up with stages in reading is Jeanne Chall. With her works in 1983 and 1996, Chall categorized reading into six different stages. In her six-stage model of reading acquisition, each stage subsumes the previous one. The stages are numbered 0 to 5 with the numberless stage (0) accounting for a greater time span and also greater series of changes than any other stage. Stage (0) is the pre-reading stage: Birth to Age 6; the period before the child is enrolled in school. What the child knows about reading before the first year of schooling is of great importance. Admittedly, children who had little or no contact with the language of instruction in school or with reading in their native language of communication at home for that matter will

differ at this stage but can compensate for this when they start learning (Chall, 1996). In stage two, which occurs at ages 6-7 years, there is a progression in the skills learned in stage one. The child becomes faster in decoding as she/he gains speed in decoding skills and carries out more practice, the child begins to focus on content. Whole word proponents argue that teaching the child to decode is like teaching the child word without meaning (Goodman, 1982) which implies that decoding results only in word reading. However, decoding and comprehension can be learnt together in succession as it is difficult for a child to assign meaning to a word he cannot read. Decoding is a useful tool in the acquisition of skilled readers which requires accuracy, automaticity and effortlessness to convert familiar and unfamiliar written words into the spoken language (Ashby & Rayner, 2006).

The stage theory, was relevant to this study because it enabled the researcher to plan the lesson of the children according the age group of the children having in mind that children learn according to their mental and chronological age. Giving a child what is more than the child's capacity to take will make the child not to be interested or lose interest in what you are teaching the child at a particular time frame. The stage theory shows exactly what a child can learn at a particular age and time of mental and physical development.

The socio-cultural theory of cognitive development of Vygotsky's (1961), Vygotsky believed that individual development could not be understood without reference to the social and cultural context within which such development is embedded. He states that using activity mediators, the human being is able to modify the environment and this is her way of interacting with nature. Vygotsky's further explain that, children learn and develop their thoughts through collaboration and interaction with more knowledgeable members of their society. During the interaction, language is used to express and exchange thought, as well as to influence one another's thoughts and behavior. The cooperative dialogues between children and their more proficient partners, together with the partner's guidance or assistance while doing the tasks, become internalized by the children and this enables them to guide their own actions and to accomplish skills themselves (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Furthermore, according to Vygotsky (1978) the sociocultural environment present the novice with a variety of tasks and demands and engages the novice in his world through the tools. Notwithstanding, parents, teachers as representatives of culture actualize these instructions primarily through language.

In Vygotsky's view, learning is an interactive interpersonal activity. Therefore, the tasks which are provided to promote children's learning and thinking need to be engaging and suitable for the children's cognitive development. The tasks and settings provided for children in a classroom need to be in their ZPDs and relevant to their social histories and social experiences. This means that the activities have to be challenging for the children and slightly above the level of their current ability. Teachers also need to provide suitable assistance for each child at the right time. Of course, teachers have to be in a position to stretch learners through interactive activities.

As a result of its leaning on the sociocultural theory, the research engineers a departure from the rote learning approach to the use of partner work, group work, games, and a participatory classroom environment. Phonics teaching in synthetic and systematic phonics teaching requires that at the beginning learners are given direct and systematic instruction. Once they have acquired some basic skills, they are able to partner with the teacher in generating more knowledge and skills. Knowledge acquired from learning basic skills is often enough for learners to develop more advanced skills (Chall, 1996a). This theory is relevant to the current study in that it directs the study on how to organize the lessons of the children in a way that will sort the children's need depending on their environment and their mental capacity in a gradual way until the children come to the level of knowing and understanding.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to find out the effect of the phonics method on the reading performance of children with reading difficulties.

Specific Objectives

To find out the effect of the phonics method on the oral reading fluency of children with reading difficulties before and after intervention.

Research question

How would the use of the phonics method affect the oral reading fluency of children with reading difficulties?

Hypothesis

- There is no significant mean effect between children with reading difficulties taught oral reading fluency using the phonics method with those not taught before and after intervention.

II. METHODS

Research design

The research design that was used in this study is the quasi-experimental design. For the purpose of this study, the type of quasi experimental design used was the Pre-test Post-Test design with Non-Randomized experimental and control groups

Table 1: The Pre-test Post-Test Design with Non-Randomized Experimental and Control Groups

Group (independent)	Pre-test	Experimental	Post-test (Formative Evaluation)
G1	Q1	X	Q2
G2	Q1		Q2

Table 1 above can be explained as follows:

1. X represents the independent variable, which was referred to as the experimental variable. The experimental variable has been put into a master plan of activities relating to each variable. Each subsection of the master plan reflects phonemic awareness activities relating to a variable and a hypothesis.
2. Q1 and Q2 represent the dependent variable before and after the manipulation of the independent variable X. In this study, it represents the pre-test and post-test respectively, administered before and after the experimental treatment.
3. G1 and G2 represent the experimental and control groups respectively.

Population and sample

The population of the study was made up of 197 primary three pupils. From this population, a target population of 51 pupils with reading difficulties was selected. With an accessible population of 14 primary three pupils. From the sample, the researcher assigned an equal number of control and experimental group that was made up of 7 boys and 7 girls.

Instrument used for data collection

Data was collected using a triangulation of instruments. As such the following instruments were used to collect the data for the study: Teacher's report which was used to collect the anecdotal records and case history of the participants, classroom records to collect the children progress during the school year and a pre-test post-test was given to all the participants before and after the intervention period to get their starting level and end level of the pupils, the test was made up of a phonemic awareness test, oral blending test, word reading test, and a spelling test. The test consisted of sections in the phonemic awareness; oral blending; word reading; spelling. The instrument that were used for treatment were word and letter chats, card board letters, words and sentences.

Procedure for data collection

A letter of introduction was given to the school head teacher introducing the researcher and soliciting for cooperation of the school authorities and the pupils. After the researcher had obtained permission from the school to conduct the research, the researcher then used the reading diagnostic instrument to conduct a pre-test on the pupils with reading difficulties. After the pupils were identified, they were then divided into control and experimental groups.

After dividing the pupils into control and experimental groups, the experimental group was then taught separately with word and letter chats, card board letters, words and sentences using more examples and illustrations while the control group was taught normally without these items but similar lessons.

After six weeks of treatment, the researcher administered the post-test to both the experimental and the control group using the same reading diagnostic instrument that was used for pre-test.

III. METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The statistical procedure that was used to analyse the research question was mean difference, standard deviations and the Cramer's V test based on the progression rate, as the composite variables were categorical and dichotomous ('Has progressed' and 'Has not progressed'). While the hypotheses were verified by comparing effect sizes, using Cohen's *d*.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings are discussed based on the research question and hypothesis according to the performance of the experimental and control groups.

Research question: How would the use of the phonics method affect the oral reading fluency of children with reading difficulties?

The results presented here are focused on oral reading fluency of children with reading difficulties in both the experimental group and the control group as presented below.

The results indicate that the mean scores and standard deviations for blending skills indicated that the mean score of the pupils on the pre-test was (μ = 2.29, SD = 1.113) and the post-test was (μ = 3.57, SD = 1.134). The findings indicate that there was an improvement in the mean score (1.28) from the pre-test to the post-test. Also, the test scores for the rhyme recognition skills indicated that the mean score of the pupils on the pre-test was (μ = 1.57, SD = 1.397) and the post-test was (μ = 3.14, SD = 1.215). The results show an improvement in the mean score (1.57) from the pre-test to the post-test. Furthermore, the test scores for the alliteration identification skills indicated that the mean score of the pupils on the pre-test was (μ = 2.00, SD = 1.155) and the post-test was (μ = 3.43, SD = 1.272). The results show an improvement in the mean score (1.43) from the pre-test to the post-test

Table 1: Description of oral reading fluency across test levels for the experimental group

Reading fluency skills		**Test level**	
		Pre-test	**Post-test**
Blending	Mean	2.29	3.57
	Median	2.00	3.00
	Std. Deviation	1.113	1.134
Rhyme recognition	Mean	1.57	3.14
	Median	1.00	3.00
	Std. Deviation	1.397	1.215
Alliteration identification	Mean	2.00	3.43
	Median	2.00	3.00
	Std. Deviation	1.155	1.272
Alliteration discrimination	Mean	2.29	2.86
	Median	2.00	3.00
	Std. Deviation	1.799	1.952
Oral reading fluency/20	**Mean**	**8.14**	**13.00**
	Median	**8.00**	**13.00**
	Std. Deviation	**2.545**	**3.512**

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Likewise, the test scores for the alliteration discrimination skills indicated that the mean score of the pupils on the pre-test was (μ = 2.29, SD = 1.799) and the post-test was (μ = 2.86, SD = 1.952). The results show an improvement in the mean score (0.57) from the pre-test to the post-test. Additionally, the means scores and standard deviations for the oral reading fluency for the pre-test (μ = 8.14, SD = 2.545) and the post-test (μ = 13.00, SD = 3.512). This shows a general improvement in the mean scores (4.86) from the pre-test to the post-test. This demonstrates that in the experimental group, there was an improvement from pre-test to post-test for all the scales and the overall reading fluency. The effect of the intervention shows it positively improved the various scales of the students on the reading fluency. The results of the control group are presented below in table 2.

The results indicate that the mean scores and standard deviations for blending skills show that the mean score of the pupils on the pre-test was (μ = 2.14, SD = 0.69) and the post-test was (μ = 2.43, SD = 0.535). The findings indicate that there was an improvement in the mean score (0.29) from the pre-test to the post-test. Also, the test scores for the rhyme recognition skills indicated that the mean score of the pupils on the pre-test was (μ = 2.29, SD = 0.488) and the post-test was (μ = 2.43, SD = 0.535). The results show a small improvement in the

mean score (0.14) from the pre-test to the post-test. Furthermore, the test scores for the alliteration identification skills indicated that the mean score of the pupils on the pre-test was (μ = 2.57, SD = 0.976) and the post-test was (μ = 2.71, SD = 0.756). The results show a slight improvement in the mean score (0.14) from the pre-test to the post-test.

Table 2: Description of oral reading fluency across test levels for the experimental group

		Test level	
		Pre-test	**Post-test**
Blending pre-test	Mean	2.14	2.43
	Median	2.00	2.00
	Std. Deviation	.690	.535
Rhyme recognition pre-test	Mean	2.29	2.43
	Median	2.00	2.00
	Std. Deviation	.488	.535
Alliteration identification pre-test	Mean	2.57	2.71
	Median	3.00	3.00
	Std. Deviation	.976	.756
Alliteration discrimination pre-test	Mean	2.29	2.57
	Median	2.00	3.00
	Std. Deviation	.488	.535
Oral reading fluency/20 pre-test	**Mean**	**9.29**	**10.14**
	Median	**10.00**	**11.00**
	Std. Deviation	**1.799**	**1.215**

Likewise, the test scores for the alliteration discrimination skills indicated that the mean score of the pupils on the pre-test was (μ = 2.29, SD = .488) and the post-test was (μ = 2.57, SD = 0.535). The results show an improvement in the mean score (0.28) from the pre-test to the post-test. Additionally, the means scores and standard deviations for the oral reading fluency for the pre-test (μ = 9.29, SD = 1.799) and the post-test (μ = 10.14, SD = 1.215). This shows a general improvement in the mean scores (0.85) from the pre-test to the post-test. This demonstrates that in the control group, there was a slight improvement from pre-test to post-test for all the scales and the overall reading fluency of the control group. In the control group, a slight improvement was obtained with all the scales as well. To further determine the effect of the intervention on the experimental group on the reading fluency of the pupils the effect was tested as indicated below.

Research hypothesis: There is no significant mean effect between children with reading difficulties taught oral reading fluency using the phonics method with those not taught before and after intervention.

To ascertain the impact of the reading fluency ability of children the used of the phonic method the progression based on mean difference comparison and the progression based on the difference in the proportion of the number of pupils that have progressed was used to test the hypothesis as indicated below.

Progression based on mean-difference comparison

Table 3: Comparing progression (mean difference from pre-test to post-test) in oral reading fluency between control end experimental groups

	Progression (mean difference from pre-test to post-test)	
	Experimental group	**Control group**
Blending pre-test	1.3	0.3
Rhyme recognition pre-test	1.6	0.1
Alliteration identification pre-test	1.4	0.1
Alliteration discrimination pre-test	0.6	0.3
Oral reading fluency/20 pre-test	**4.9**	**0.9**

Theoretical effect size= 0.725
Group SD=3.880
Calculated effect size=1.031

The theoretical effect size is smaller than the calculated one. This, therefore, implies that there was a significant progression for the overall oral reading fluency score from pre-test to post-test for the experimental group. Comparing progression based on the mean difference between the experimental and the control group, it was higher in the experimental group for all the scales because of the effect of the intervention on the experimental group. The slight progression in the control group from the pre-test to the post-test might have been due to interaction with other pupils and learning at home. To further determine the effect of the intervention progression based on the difference in the proportion of the number of pupils that had progressed is indicated below.

Progression based on the difference in the proportion of the number of pupils that have progressed

The results of the test statistics here reveal the number of pupils who witness an improvement in their test scores in both the experimental and the control groups.

Table 4: Comparing progression rate based on simple improvement between control and experimental groups

			Oral reading fluency		Total	Cramer's V test
			No progression	Progression		
Group	Experimental	n	1	6	7	V=0.642; P=0.010
		%	14.3%	85.7%	100.0 %	
	Control	n	5	2	7	
		%	71.4%	28.6%	100.0 %	

Comparing progression rate based on simple improvement between control and experimental groups, all the children in the experimental group had progressed except one (85.7%) while only 2 of them making 28.6% had progressed in the control group and this difference was significant (V=0.642; P=0.010). The Cramer's V value indicates that the progression in the experimental group is due to the effect of the reading fluency intervention on the pupil's post-test. The hypothesis here stated is then rejected thus implying that the oral reading fluency intervention has a significant positive influence on the reading fluency of primary school pupils in the experimental group.

Recommendations

The objective of the study was to find out the effect of the phonics method on the oral reading fluency of children with reading difficulties before and after intervention. The findings revealed that the oral reading fluency had a significant effect on the reading performance of the children and therefore recommends that oral reading should be included in the English language curriculum so as to increase the reading performance of children with reading difficulties in schools.

Educational implications

The study will be drawing the attention of curriculum designers of the English language to see the need of designing a curriculum that will be learner friendly while in-cooperating the best methods that will be easily used by teachers to help the learners become better readers in future.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of the results above indicate that the oral reading fluency intervention has a positive effect on the reading performance of children as indicated by the results of the experimental group which was higher than that of the control group. The hypothesis here stated is then rejected thus implying that phonics method has a significant positive influence on the oral reading fluency of children.

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