

Reform of government policy on the acquisition of functional literacy, numeracy and cognitive skills through the reading curriculum of primary schools

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Abstract

As part of the ongoing efforts to ensure the acquisition of functional literacy and communicative competence among primary school leavers, the present study examined the implementation of the reading component of the primary school English curriculum under the UBE scheme. The study was a descriptive survey and recruited six head teachers and sixty classroom teachers as the study sample. Five research questions were posed to guide the study and research data were collected using questionnaires and an observation checklist. Data were analysed using frequency counts and percentages. The findings of the study shed light on the status of the implementation of the reading curriculum in primary schools in Nigeria. In particular, it was found that the majority of the teachers do not always use the phonics instructional method while teaching reading, lack the required competency to use the phonics instructional method and show poor disposition towards the phonics method. It was also found that teaching materials are available, but very few of them are used by teachers in teaching reading. These findings suggest that the implementation of the reading curriculum under the present UBE scheme is faced with many challenges.

Keywords: *Reading, Phonics, Literacy, Curriculum, Primary school, UBE, Nigeria, Implementation*

Introduction

Unarguably, primary education is the foundation of the whole educational ladder which emphasizes its significance. Its goals in Nigeria include imparting lasting literacy, numeracy and communicative skills to young Nigerians (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2013). Thus, the gains of primary education are the acquisition of literacy and enlightenment (Oni, 2008). To this end, successive Nigerian governments have prioritized primary education, launching policies which sought to make it universal, free and compulsory for every Nigerian child. This quest began before Nigeria's independence in the 1950s (Nwagwu, 1978) and extended till 1976 when the ruling military government launched universal primary education (UPE) (Oni, 2008). Although the implementation of these policies was fraught with challenges, they no doubt contributed to improved literacy of the citizenry. For instance, the literacy rate in Nigeria for all ages grew steadily from 15.6% in 1950 to between 40 and 45% in the 1980s and then to 57% in 1991 (Yusuf et al., 2013).

Driven by the desire to improve on previous primary education policies and schemes, the universal basic education

(UBE) scheme was launched on 30 September 1999. According to the UBE scheme, basic education as conceived by the government is to be free, compulsory, universal and qualitative, and meant for children between the ages of 0-15 years (FRN, 2013). It is divided into Early Child Care Development and Education (ECCDE) (5 years), 1-year pre-primary education, 6 years of primary education and 3 years of junior secondary school. In particular, the philosophy of UBE is that, among other things, every learner who has gone through the basic education programme should have acquired an appropriate level of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and lifelong skills (Universal Basic Education Commission [UBEC], 2019). The Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 established the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) to oversee the implementation of the UBE programme.

Under the UBE scheme, curricular reforms in primary education for the English language as a classroom subject have placed great emphasis on the acquisition of reading skills. This is most probably connected with the desire to inculcate functional literacy and communicative skills in pupils as captured in the objectives of the UBE scheme. An analysis

of the present English language curriculum in the primary education level as developed by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) reveals that for the primary one and two there are three themes, namely: Reading (theme 1), Listening and speaking (theme 2), and Grammatical accuracy (theme 3) (NERDC, 2014). For primary three through six, there are four themes, namely: reading (theme 1), writing (theme 2), listening and speaking (theme 3), and grammatical accuracy (theme 4). In all, reading (theme 1) runs through all the class levels as a major component of the English language curriculum and contains equal or more topics compared to other themes for each class level in primary education (NERDC, 2014).

Another significant attribute of the primary education English curriculum is that under the theme of reading, there is a gradual incremental emphasis on phonics beginning with phonemic awareness, especially in the lower primary (primary 1-3) where pupils were taught how to read for the first time. Phonics emphasizes the connection between the letters of the alphabet and their sound values. In phonics, pupils are taught how to read words by associating

letters of the English alphabet with the sounds they represent. According to Amadi (2018), the main focus of phonics instruction is to help early readers appreciate the relationship between letters of the alphabet and their sounds and apply such knowledge to enhance their reading and spelling skills. To underline the importance of phonics and reading in general, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) in 2012 recommended phonics instructional method for teaching reading in primary schools (Mustapha, 2019), and has since embarked on training and retraining teachers in phonics instruction.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the acquisition of functional literacy has remained a highly desired learning goal and has received significant attention in primary education in Nigeria. Efforts have been made to ensure that primary school leavers are literate and can communicate effectively at the end of their programme. One such effort is the present reform in the reading component of the English curriculum which emphasized the phonics method of reading instruction. Whether these efforts have yielded desired results is debatable. Data from the United Nation revealed that 50% of in-school children in Nigeria

cannot read or write, while 63% in rural areas and 84% in the lowest economic class cannot read at all (Edem et al., 2011). UBEC in its recent national assessment of learning achievement in basic education reported that among primary six pupils, the national average score on reading achievement was 59.59% (UBEC, 2018). The report further revealed that 17 states and the federal capital territory (FCT), Abuja scored significantly below the national average, of which the low achievers were Benue (32.84%), Ekiti (46.70%), FCT (49.32%) and Enugu (49.76%). Of all the states in the South East, only Anambra (69.94%) scored above the national average. Other states in the zone scored below the national average: Abia (54.82%), Ebonyi (56.10), Imo (58.81%), and Enugu (49.76%). This empirical evidence suggests that the objective of the UBE scheme to eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria is yet to be realized as many primary school leavers still struggle to read.

As part of the ongoing efforts to ensure the acquisition of functional literacy and communicative competence among primary school leavers, the present study examined the implementation of the reading component of the primary school English curriculum under the UBE

scheme. To do this, the study considered the frequency of teachers' use of the recommended phonics method in teaching reading, teachers' competency and attitude towards the phonics method, what instructional materials are available and how often teachers use them for the teaching of reading skills in primary schools. It is expected that the findings and recommendations of the present study would support government efforts, initiatives and reforms concerning basic education in Nigeria, particularly in the acquisition of functional literacy, numeracy and cognitive skills through the primary school reading curriculum.

Literature Review

Reading and reading skills

When we read, we try to understand and make sense of the written text. Thus reading involves a complex activity comprising both perceptions and thought as one tries to decipher the meaning behind written symbols. Aukerman (2008) described reading as a decision-making process whereby the readers employ assorted schemes and metacognitive negotiations until they attain an understanding of a text. For Klingner et al. (2010), reading involves the reader's integration of composite mental processes of decoding, fluency,

vocabulary, and background knowledge to attain an understanding of the written text. Similarly, Nation and Angell (2006) defined reading as the act of making a conscious effort to recognize words and access their meaning by activating relevant background knowledge leading to the generation of inferences and integration of information.

The general objective of reading is to extract meaning in texts, and since most learning contents are often presented in a textual format, developing strong reading skills becomes a necessity for any learner irrespective of the education level, especially if they must excel and benefit maximally. Davies (1968) defined a reading skill as a cognitive ability that one can readily deploy when interacting with the written text. Such abilities include identifying word meanings, drawing inferences, identifying the writer's techniques, recognizing the mood of the passage and finding answers to questions, among others. For Afflerbach (2008), reading skills are automatic actions that lead to speedy, efficient and fluent decoding and comprehension of texts and normally happen without awareness of the components or control involved. These automatic actions which characterize skilful reading include

recognizing words and memorized objects, skimming and scanning through texts, decoding and classifying words, making inferences, guessing, hypothesizing and synthesizing interpretations, analyzing, verifying and extending hypotheses (Lee & Musumeci, 1988). For young children, these skills required to read proficiently are typically acquired first from preschool which continues to improve with time until they reach an independent reading level. Therefore, for best results, reading skills are acquired through systematic instruction and improved with practice and repeated instructions.

Instructional materials for the teaching of reading and the availability of these materials in primary schools in Nigeria

Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004 captured part of the responsibilities of the UBEC as ensuring that necessary instructional materials are in use in primary schools in Nigeria (UBE Act, 2004). According to Amadioha (2009), instructional materials refer to those alternative channels of communication that a classroom teacher can use to concretize a concept during the teaching and learning process. For Bukoye (2019), instructional materials are essential learning tools which allow the

students to interact with words, symbols and ideas in ways that develop their abilities in reading, listening, solving problems, viewing things, thinking, speaking, writing, using media and technology. Therefore, instructional materials consist of teaching aids carefully selected and used by the teacher during instruction to assist the learners in gaining a better understanding of the learning content of a particular curriculum subject. These materials can be visual materials (can be seen or observed), audio materials (can be heard or listened to), tactile materials (can be felt), and audio-visual materials or multimedia (Amadioha, 2009; Adepoju et al., 2020). (For a detailed discussion on instructional materials including their various categorizations and types, see Adepoju et al. 2020 and Udeagbala et al. 2020)

Some evidence in the literature suggests that the use of instructional materials could lead to favourable learning outcomes. In particular, students taught with instructional materials tend to show higher academic achievements than those taught without them (Adalikwu & lorkpilgh, 2013; Okonkwo, 2015; Igiri, & Effiong, 2015). In reading instruction, the intentional selection and use of

appropriate instructional materials are central to the development of desired reading skills (Moats, 2020). Typical instructional materials that should be found in a reading classroom to support effective learning include a variety of narrative and expository books, and a variety of texts such as newspaper articles, stories, proverbs, book maps, jokes, riddles, recipes, poetry, song lyrics, street signs, clothing tags, cleaning directions, current events board, dictionaries, display of pupil work, and posters among others (N'Namdi, 2005; Adeosun, 2017). With these materials, the classroom provides a rich environment where the teacher can easily guide the learners to develop and maximize their reading potential.

Following the launching of the UBE scheme, several studies have been conducted to examine the extent UBEC has met its mandate, especially on the provision of instructional materials to UBE schools. These studies presented similar findings, namely: instructional materials are not adequately available in our schools and sometimes the few available instructional materials are not accessible to either the teachers or the students (Abutu, 2015; Agboola & Aloysius, 2016; Fowoyo et al. 2020).

Similarly, studies conducted to examine the adequacy and availability of instructional materials for teaching the English language in basic education schools have reported the inadequacy and non-availability of most instructional materials (Adepoju et al., 2020; Awolere, 2017; Ofodu, 2012). Although they are a component of the present English curriculum of basic education, instructional materials have not been specifically examined by previous studies for their adequacy and availability for teaching reading under the UBE scheme, particularly in the southeast zone of Nigeria. Related studies conducted for English studies may not present a true picture for making reliable generalizations in reading instruction.

The recommended phonics method and the extent of its use by teachers in teaching reading in primary schools in Nigeria

Phonics is a dominant topic in the reading curriculum of basic education in Nigeria. Savage (2007) defined it as the study of the relationship between sounds and symbols for the purpose of learning to read and spell. In phonics instruction, the teacher is expected to lead the pupils to understand the relationship between letter names and letter sounds; then

pupils are taught to blend sounds to read words (that is, decoding) and to write the letters that represent each sound (that is, encoding) based on the sounds each letter represents (Ugwuoti et al., 2018). Unlike most African languages, the sound/spelling system of the English language is not quite straightforward. As a start, the English alphabet has 26 letters that represent 44 sounds in over 350 different ways (Reutzel & Cooter, 2016). To illustrate, the letter "c" has different sounds in these words: /s/ city and /k/ copy; the sound /o/ has different spellings in these words: no, row, and though (Ugwuoti et al., 2018). These anomalies suggest that teachers of English need to teach phonics rules and relationships to pupils to guide them as they learn to read. In phonics instruction, a teacher may choose to use an analytic, synthetic analogy, or embedded phonics instructional strategies (see Aniefiok & Ebong, 2018, for details).

Research on phonics instruction has produced significant results in Nigeria. For instance, previous studies which compared phonics instructional method and other methods of teaching beginners' reading suggest that in most cases phonics instruction was a more effective method of teaching reading (Alonge et

al., 2017; Mngumber & El-Yakubu, 2014; Shoaga et al., 2017). It has also been shown in a previous study that the effectiveness of the phonics method may be improved by combining it with other methods/interventions such as the whole language method (a teaching method that prioritizes teaching children to read whole words and make sense of their reading using previous life experiences) (Okebukola, 1999) or the Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN) (Counihan et al., 2021). In general, the findings of previous studies tend to support the effectiveness of the phonics instructional method in helping beginning readers learn to read. However, it is not yet clear the extent primary school teachers have adopted the phonics instruction method following the implementation of the UBE, especially in southeastern Nigeria. Studies in this regard appear to be scarce.

Teachers' competency and attitude in using the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools in Nigeria

Teachers' competency and attitude constitute significant teacher factors that influence students' learning tremendously. Competency is the ability to apply knowledge and skills to achieve intended objectives. It is related to such

terms as capability, proficiency and expertise. Ukaigwe and Igbozuruike (2019) defined competency as the ability to blend and use knowledge, skills, and attitudes to successfully carry out tasks. Koster and Dengerink (2008) described a competent teacher as one who can use knowledge and professional expertise – including technical and communication skills, motivational and managerial skills, values, attitudes and personality traits – to awaken and sustain learners' interest and involvement in teaching and learning for maximal comprehension and achievement of instructional objectives. Typically, a competent teacher should be able to foster a robust teacher-student relationship, prepare a good lesson plan, use different teaching strategies, develop efficient student assessment, cooperate and synergize with other teachers and communicate effectively with students' parents and guardians (Wordu & Isiah, 2020).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the competency of a teacher requires more than just having sufficient knowledge of a particular content area or possessing necessary school certificates in the area. This is because a teacher can be qualified (possess necessary certifications) but they are not competent

(cannot lead learners to achieve the desired learning goals). Thus a competent teacher possesses the requisite knowledge and skills and demonstrates that these can be effectively employed to help learners achieve desired learning goals. Scholars generally agree that teachers' competency, irrespective of the learning content or the level of education, directly and significantly influences students' learning achievement and interest (Gbadamosi & Jegede, 2015; Kiptoo et al., 2017; Nbina, 2012; Obot, 2012; Ugbe & Agim, 2009). In teaching reading, for instance, a competent teacher is more likely to identify struggling readers and be able to devise strategies to help them. Similarly, such teachers driven by innovation are more likely to successfully adopt and adapt government educational policies like the recently introduced phonics instructional method for teaching reading in primary schools.

Just like teachers' competency, teachers' attitudes towards teaching and learning matters significantly. Attitude in psychology may be defined as a learned tendency to evaluate things including people, issues, objects, or events in a certain way. Such evaluations are often positive or negative, or sometimes, even

uncertain. Hogg and Vaughan (2005) defined attitude as a comparatively lasting set of beliefs, feelings, and behavioural tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols. Attitude is often the result of experience or upbringing, and may influence one's behaviour significantly. It has three components: cognitive (your thoughts and beliefs about a subject), affective (your feeling towards the subject) and behavioural components (your behaviour or action towards the subject as influenced by your attitude) (see Estrada et al., 2011, for details).

Teachers possess certain attitudes towards educational practices which can be positive or negative. A teacher's attitude is seen as the way teachers perceive and think that may influence their actions (or behaviours) in relation to their teaching practices in the classroom (IGI Global, 2022). Thus, if teachers have a positive attitude towards a particular educational practice, they tend to like and promote it. Therefore, since teachers play a key role in implementing educational policies, the success or otherwise of such implementation depends significantly on the extent teachers express a positive attitude towards it (Ulug et al., 2011; Avidov-

Ungar & Eshet-Alkakay, 2011). Furthermore, studies have shown that teachers' attitude influences not just policy implementation but also teachers' classroom behaviour, what students learn and the extent they learn it, and the teachers' teaching style (Estrada et al., 2011; Ojo, 2018; Ulug et al., 2011).

The discussions so far suggest that teachers' competency and attitude towards educational practices are important factors in the success of curriculum innovation and implementation. If teachers are incompetent and/or express a negative attitude towards a particular educational practice, despite the prospects of such practice, they will most likely not achieve the target objectives. In particular, the introduction of the phonics method for teaching beginning reading in our primary school is likely to fail if teachers who are supposed to translate the policy into actions in the classroom lack the required competence or are averse to this innovation.

The present study

To promote the acquisition of reading skills, phonics instruction was introduced in the English studies curriculum of primary schools by the present UBE

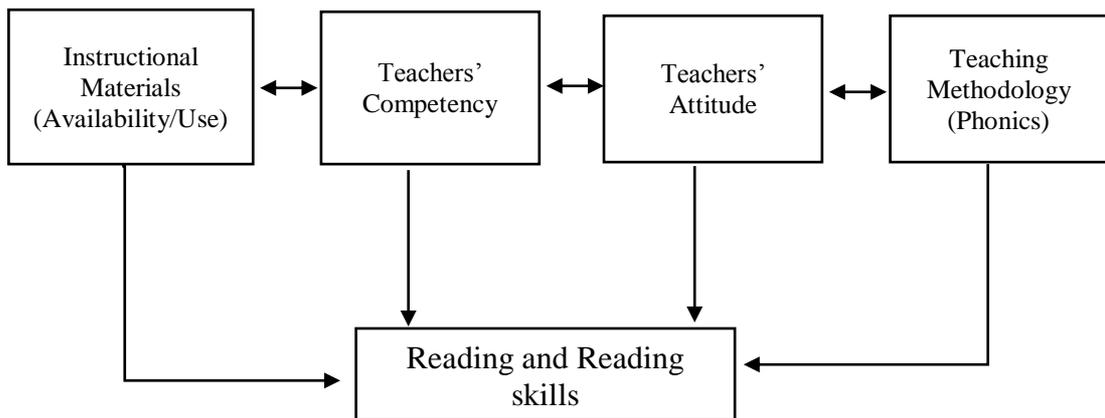
scheme. The phonics instructional method was also recommended for teaching beginning reading in primary schools in Nigeria. However, the review of extant literature shows that scholars are yet to examine the implementation of phonics instruction in the present UBE scheme, especially in southeastern Nigeria. Moreover, there are few studies on the availability and use of instructional materials for teaching reading as well as on teachers' competency and attitude towards the phonics instructional method. Therefore, the present study examined the implementation of the primary school reading curriculum on the use of the phonics instructional method to identify its strengths and weaknesses. The study would equally provide constructive recommendations for the improvement of the primary school reading curriculum. To achieve its purposes, the following research questions would guide the study:

1. How often do teachers use the recommended phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools?
2. Do teachers possess the competency of using the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools?

3. What is the attitude of teachers towards the use of the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools?
4. What recommended instructional materials are available for the teaching of reading skills in primary schools?
5. What recommended instructional materials do teachers use most often for teaching reading in primary schools?

Conceptual framework

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework



From the conceptual framework (Figure 1) above, the present study highlights the availability and use of instructional materials, teachers' competency and attitude towards phonics instructional method, and the extent of use of the method for teaching reading as the key factors in the implementation of the reading curriculum. These factors also influence pupils' acquisition of reading skills significantly.

Methodology

Study design

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach using both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative methods (observation) to systematically collect data and answer research questions.

Study location and sample

The study was conducted in Enugu State, Southeastern Nigeria. The sampling process was multi-staged. In the first stage, Enugu State was purposively chosen following a recent report of poor reading achievement among primary school pupils in the state (UBEC, 2018). In the second stage, one local government area (LGA) was randomly sampled from each of the three senatorial districts in the state. In the third stage, two public

primary schools were randomly selected from all the public primary schools in each of the local government areas selected. In each of the schools selected, all the teachers and head teachers were included in the study. In all, the study sample included sixty teachers and six head teachers.

Survey measures

Teacher Personal Data and Phonics

Instruction Survey (TPDPIS): TPDPIS was developed by the researchers to collect data on participants' demography and teachers' use of phonics instructional methods. The instrument is of two parts. Part A has 10 items and solicits participants' personal information such as gender, qualification, area of specialization, and years of teaching experience, among others. Part B has five items which sought to know, among other things, whether the respondents can use the phonics method and how often they use it.

Reading Skills Instructional Materials Questionnaire (RSIMQ):

This questionnaire is of two parts, A and B. Part A has a list of instructional materials for teaching reading provided by the school. In part A, teachers were expected to state the extent they agreed that these

materials were available for use in their schools. It has a four-point response range of: "Strongly agree", "Agree", "disagree" and "Strongly disagree". In Part B, the list of instructional materials provided in Part A was also given. Teachers were expected to indicate how frequently they used a particular instructional material during reading instruction. The response options include: "Never", "Rarely", "Some of the time", and "Most of the time".

Teacher Competency Evaluation Checklist

(TCEC): This observation checklist is expected to be used to measure teachers' competency in six dimensions, namely: preparation of lesson plan, teaching, classroom management, teaching-learning materials, blackboard management, personality, and composure. The head teachers used the TCEC during classroom observation of teachers to measure teachers' competency in teaching reading. The TCEC was developed by the researchers and face-validated by experts in language education.

Teacher Knowledge Survey (TKS): TKS was developed by Moats and Foorman (2003). The survey contained three sub-sections A, B and C. Part A of the survey has 10 questions with open-ended responses.

Part B has 11 multiple choice questions, with four answer choices labelled A, B, C and D. Also, Part C contained 10 multiple choice questions with four answer choices of A, B, C, and D for each question. The different parts of TKS evaluated teachers' knowledge of different aspects of phonics. The TKS was trial-tested in a smaller sample of 20 phonics instructors recruited from a local government not included in the study and it yielded a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.79$.

Teachers Attitude Questionnaire (TAQ):

TAQ is an attitude-measuring survey developed by researchers to determine teachers' attitudes towards the phonics instructional method of teaching reading in primary schools. It contains 20 items with four response points: "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree", and "strongly disagree. The TAQ was validated and trial-tested in a smaller sample not included in the study. It yielded a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.82$.

Procedure

After selecting the schools for the study, the researchers secured the permission of the head teachers to allow their teachers to participate. The teachers and all the head teachers signed a consent letter to participate in the study after which they

(the teachers of primary six classes and the head teachers) were trained as research assistants. The trained teachers participated in the survey while the head teachers served as observers during reading instruction and group instruction. Thereafter, the research instruments were administered on four different days. First, the TPDPIIS was administered to the teachers. Two days later, the RSIMQ and the TAQ were administered together to the teachers, while the TKS was administered a day after. The instruments were not administered together on the same day so that teachers do not complain of fatigue. When all the questionnaires had been administered, the researchers gave a copy of the TCEC to each head teacher to administer. Each head teacher used the TCEC as an observation checklist to measure the competency of their teachers during reading instruction. All data obtained were subsequently screened for outliers and incomplete information before being subjected to appropriate analyses. Data screening and analysis were done using SPSS version 21.

Ethical approval

The researchers obtained the permission of the head teachers in each of the participating primary schools before

conducting the study. Through the head teachers, the researchers informed the teachers about the study and its purposes. Part of the conditions given by the head teachers for allowing the study to take place in their schools includes withholding the identities of the participating schools and teachers. To ensure that participants were not coerced to participate, each participating teacher signed an informed consent letter which explained the research intentions, promised participants the confidentiality of their responses and sought respondents' consent to participate. To encourage greater participation in the study, cash and gift incentives were given to participants. All the respondents were not known to researchers in person before the study.

Method of data analysis

In research question one, how often teachers use the recommended phonics instructional method was categorized as "Never", "Rarely", "Some of the time", and "Most of the time". The frequency and percentage of each category were presented. To measure teachers' competency in research question two, the following indices were used: phonics classroom teaching observation score (which has five levels: excellent, very

good, good, satisfactory, and need to improve), phonics knowledge test score obtained from TKS (which has two levels: scores > 40% and scores < 40%), years of experience (which have three levels: < 2 years, 2 – 5 years, and > 5 years), teachers professional development in reading and phonics in the past five years (which has 5 levels: none, once, twice, thrice, fourth times and above), and area of specialization, that is, the field of study, (which has two levels: English and others). The frequency and the percentage of each index were reported. In research question three, teachers were asked to rate their attitude towards phonics instructional method on a 4-point rating scale of "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree", and "strongly disagree". The attitude of teachers towards the use of the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools was measured by, first, calculating the average attitude score of each respondent, and second, comparing this average score to a predetermined cut-off point. The frequency of the mean scores above the cut-off point was taken to represent the proportion of teachers with a strong positive attitude towards the use

of the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools. We adopted the approach used in Topkaya (2010), Okonkwo (2012), and Ofoegbu et al. (2021) to determine cut-off points. The boundaries of each response in the 4-point scale from 1 to 4 were calculated by dividing the serial width (3) by the number of responses (4); it was found to be 0.75. This value was used to interpret the mean values. Thus depending on this calculation, the accepted boundaries for each response to research question 4 are presented below:

$$1 = 1 + .75 = 1.75; 2 = 1.75 + .75 = 2.5; \\ 3 = 2.5 + .75 = 3.25; 4 = 3.25 + .75 = 4.0$$

A cut-off point of 3.25 and above on the scale was taken as a meaningful indicator of participants' positive or strong attitudes towards the use of the phonics instructional method. This approach to determining cut-off points was equally used in research questions 4 and 5 to determine the instructional materials that were available and used often in teaching reading in primary schools respectively.

RESULTS

Table 1.
Teachers' Demographic Information

Characteristics		N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	1	1.9
	Female	52	98.1
Age	Less than 30 years	10	18.9
	30 – 40 years	23	43.4
	Above 40 years	20	37.7
Highest Qualification	NCE	29	54.7
	B.Ed/B.Sc/B.A	23	43.4
	PDE/PGDE		
	Masters		
Area of Specialization	Others	1	1.9
	English	10	18.9
Teaching Subject(s)	Others	43	81.1
	All subjects	53	100
	English only		
Years of Experience	Others		
	Less than 2 years	7	13.2
	Between 2 to 5 years	17	32.1
Present Teaching Class	5 years and above	29	54.7
	Primary 1	8	15.1
	Primary 2	9	17.0
	Primary 3	13	24.5
	Primary 4	9	17.0
	Primary 5	9	17.0
	Primary 6	5	9.4

From the participants' demographic data (see Table 1 above), out of a total of 53 teachers, only one teacher is male; the rest are females. The sample contained more older teachers above 40 years (37.7%) than younger teachers (less than 30 [18.9%]). In terms of qualifications, the number of NCE holders (N = 29) and degree holders (N =23) is roughly comparable. The majority of the teachers specialized in other areas outside English

(81.1%). Only about 18.9% of the teachers are English language specialists. The majority of the teachers have at least two years of teaching experience (86.8%), while all the teachers teach all the subjects in the curriculum.

Research question 1: *How often do teachers use the recommended phonics instructional method for teaching reading in primary schools?*

Table 2.

The frequency of teachers' use of the phonics method to teach reading in a week

Frequency level	Never	Rarely	Some of the time	Most of the time
Number of teachers	13	5	25	10
Percentages(%)	24.5	9.4	47.2	18.9

Table 2 showed the frequency of teachers' use of the phonics method in teaching reading in Nigerian primary schools. While the majority of the teachers used it some of the time (47.2%), a significant number of them rarely or never used it (33.9%). Only about 18.9% of the

teachers used the phonics method most of the time while teaching reading.

Research question 2: *Do teachers have the competence to use the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools?*

Table 3.

Teachers' competency in using phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools

Indices of competency	Levels	N	Percentages (%)
Classroom observation score	Excellent	Nil	-
	Very good	15	28.3
	Good	35	66.0
	Satisfactory	3	5.7
	Need to improve	Nil	-
Phonics test score	Less than 40%	24	45.3
	More than 40%	29	54.7
Years of experience	Lees than 2 years	7	13.2
	2 – 5 years	17	32.1
	Greater than 5 years	29	54.7
Teachers' professional development in reading and phonics (in the past five years)	None	12	22.6
	Once	10	18.9
	Twice	18	34.0
	Three times	8	15.1
	Four times and more	5	9.4
	English	10	18.9
	Others	43	81.1

Table 3 is a summary of the indices of teachers' competency obtained from the study samples. The summary showed that the majority of the teachers (94.3%) were rated either good or very good in conducting or handling reading classes. 54.7% of the teachers scored above forty percent on the phonics knowledge test while the rest (45.3%) scored below forty percent. The samples showed that there were more experienced teachers (greater than 5 years in service [54.7%]) than non-experienced teachers (less than 2 years in service [13.2%]) in primary schools. Results also showed that a significant number of the teachers (41.5%) had not participated at least once in any professional development

programme in reading and phonics in the last five years. On average, only about 9.4% of the teachers participated in professional development programmes yearly in the last five years. Furthermore, most teachers who taught reading (81.1%) had no degree or academic qualification in the English language. These findings suggest that while there may be a few competent teachers in primary schools, many of the primary school teachers may lack the competence to use the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools.

Research question 3: *What is the attitude of teachers towards the use of the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools?*

Table 4.

Attitudes of teachers towards the use of the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools

Cut-off point (mean = 3.25)	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)	Decision
Below cut-off	41	77.4	Weak attitude
Above cut-off	12	22.6	Strong attitude
Total	53	100.0	

Table 4 revealed the attitude of teachers towards the use of the phonics instructional method in teaching reading in primary schools. It was observed that the majority of the teachers (77.4%) showed weak/poor attitudes towards the use of the phonics method in teaching

reading in primary schools. Only 22.6% of the teachers showed a positive attitude.

Research question 4. *What recommended instructional materials are available for the teaching of reading skills in primary schools?*

Table 5.

Available instructional materials for the teaching of reading skills in primary schools

	Instructional material	Cut-off point	Average availability score	Decision (used/not used)
1	A variety of narrative and expository books which may contain stories, proverbs, jokes, riddles, recipes, poetry, and song lyrics	2.5	2.92	Available
2	Newspaper articles	2.5	2.50	Available
3	Book maps	2.5	2.55	Available
4	Printed Traffic and street signs	2.5	2.57	Available
5	Clothing tags	2.5	2.38	Not available
6	Alphabet display	2.5	3.12	Available
7	Bulletin board	2.5	2.41	Available
8	Chalkboard or dry erase board	2.5	3.30	Available
9	Classroom libraries	2.5	2.68	Available
10	Computers	2.5	2.55	Available
11	Content posters	2.5	2.41	Not available
12	Current events board	2.5	2.51	Available
13	Dictionaries	2.5	3.04	Available
14	Display of pupil work	2.5	3.06	Available
15	Duty list	2.5	2.98	Available
16	Labels	2.5	2.64	Available

17	Literacy workstations	2.5	2.40	Not available
18	Monthly calendar of the current year	2.5	2.87	Available
19	Weather chart	2.5	2.34	Not available
20	Word walls	2.5	2.68	Available
21	Globe	2.5	2.3	Not available
22	Health bulletin	2.5	2.08	Not available

Table 5 showed instructional materials that have been provided for teaching reading in primary schools. The table showed that the materials available were more than those unavailable (16 out of 22 materials were available). The unavailable materials include a health bulletin, globe-weather chart, literacy workstation, content posters, and clothing tags. The

rest of the materials scored an average availability score greater than the cut-off point of 2.5 and were judged to be available.

Research question 5. *How often do teachers use the recommended instructional materials for teaching reading in primary schools?*

Table 6.

Teachers' use of recommended instructional materials for teaching reading in primary schools

	Instructional material	Cut-off point	Average use score	Decision (used/not used)
1	A variety of narrative and expository books which may contain stories, proverbs, jokes, riddles, recipes, poetry, and song lyrics	2.5	2.9811	Very often used
2	Newspaper articles	2.5	2.23	rarely used
3	Book maps	2.5	2.23	rarely used
4	Printed Traffic and street signs	2.5	2.09	rarely used
5	Clothing tags	2.5	2.00	rarely used
6	Alphabet display	2.5	3.04	Very often used
7	Bulletin board	2.5	2.34	rarely used

8	Chalk board or dry erase board	2.5	3.47	Very often used
9	Classroom libraries	2.5	2.34	rarely used
10	Computers	2.5	2.36	rarely used
11	Content posters	2.5	2.38	rarely used
12	Current events board	2.5	2.40	rarely used
13	Dictionaries	2.5	3.19	Very often used
14	Display of pupil work	2.5	2.98	Very often used
15	Duty list	2.5	2.70	Very often used
16	Labels	2.5	2.25	rarely used
17	Literacy workstations	2.5	2.08	rarely used
18	Monthly calendar of the current year	2.5	2.41	rarely used
19	Weather chart	2.5	2.21	rarely used
20	Word walls	2.5	2.09	rarely used
21	Globe	2.5	2.09	rarely used
22	Health bulletin	2.5	1.83	rarely used

From Table 6, it can be observed that teachers very often used only a few of the recommended instructional materials for teaching reading in primary schools. Materials frequently used include a variety of narrative and expository books which may contain stories, proverbs, jokes, riddles, recipes, poetry, song lyrics, alphabet displays, chalkboard or dry erase board, dictionaries, display of pupils' work, and duty list.

Discussion

The study examined the implementation of the reading component of the primary school English studies curriculum under the present UBE scheme.

Findings from research question one showed that primary school teachers use the recommended phonics instructional method sometimes. However, the findings also revealed that many of the teachers never used the phonics instructional method. The poor adoption of the phonics instructional method as found in the present study supports the findings of the previous studies. Alufohai (2020) and Anyebe (2017) reported that primary school teachers use multiple methods in teaching reading. Other methods used in place of the phonics method include the "Look-and-say method" and "the language approach" (Alufohai, 2020). By recommending the phonics method for

teaching reading in primary schools, the government expected that primary school teachers would embrace this method and use it always in their reading classes. However, the present findings suggest otherwise, as there is still a significant percentage of teachers who are yet to adopt the phonics method. Many teachers who do not use the phonics method are constrained by a lack of skill in phonics instruction or sheer negative attitude towards the phonics instruction, or maybe they lack adequate knowledge of its benefits and prospects. Evidence abounds that the phonics method is more effective in improving the reading skills of young learners compared to most conventional reading instruction methods (Alonge et al., 2017; Umezinwa & Udogu, 2018). This is probably part of the reason for its adoption in Nigerian primary schools. But if teachers do not use the phonics method frequently, the aim of recommending it as an evidence-based approach for improving pupils' reading skills would be defeated.

Furthermore, the findings of research question two demonstrated that most primary school teachers do not possess the competency to use the recommended phonics method. Competency as described in the present study covered

knowledge in phonics, classroom management, academic qualifications, professional development in phonics instruction and years of teaching experience. Many teachers were found to be inadequate in these competency indices. This finding supports previous findings which reported that most teachers in primary schools are not competent, especially in teaching reading comprehension (Etuk, 2006; Muodumogu, 2012; Amadi, 2018). Because these teachers are incompetent, Muodumogu (2012) noted that they could neither explicitly develop learners' skills nor use research-proven best practices in the teaching and assessment of reading. They also find it difficult to choose materials using learner-based criteria. Thus lack of competency explains to some extent why some teachers in primary schools have not adopted the phonics method as shown in the findings of this study; instead, there is the persistent use of other instructional methods which were not recommended for teaching reading in primary schools. Having incompetent teachers is a major concern as it may be impossible to realise the aims of the UBE scheme which are to impart lasting and functional literacy to pupils. Considering the pivotal role of teachers in driving curriculum innovation and pupils'

achievement, incompetent teachers may lack the capacity to interpret and implement the requirement of the UBE scheme as specified in the reading curriculum, thereby making pupils' achievement in reading continue to dwindle.

While still probing teachers' use of the phonics method, it was found in research question three that the majority of the teachers (77.4%) had weak/poor attitudes towards the use of the phonics method in teaching reading in primary schools. This finding provides a clearer picture of the possible reasons behind the non-adoption of the phonics method by some primary school teachers: the teachers do not have a favourable disposition towards the phonics instruction method. The importance of teachers' positive perception of educational policies is enormous. This is because teachers are at the forefront of the implementation of these policies. They translate the provision of the policies into familiar learning activities that guide learners towards the achievement of intended educational goals. Therefore, it is worrisome that many teachers do not have a positive attitude towards the recommended phonics instructional method. This poor attitude of teachers

has a negative impact not only on the implementation of reading policy but also on teachers' classroom behaviour, teaching style, what students learn in reading lessons, how they learn reading and the extent they learn to read (Ojo, 2018; Ulug et al., 2011). This being the case, it is not likely that the intention of the UBE scheme as it relates to the literacy development of the pupils would be fully achieved.

Findings from research question four confirmed that most instructional materials required for teaching reading in primary schools are available. This finding did not agree with those of previous studies which reported that instructional materials for teaching English studies were not available (Adepoju et al., 2020; Awolere, 2017; Ofodu, 2012). The discrepancy in the findings could be because previous studies mostly focused on instructional materials for English studies generally while the present study focused on instructional material for teaching reading, a component of the English studies curriculum. These findings notwithstanding, Agboola and Aloysius (2016) noted that the procurement or acquisition of facilities and materials for teaching is not the end in itself, for it is equally important to properly manage

and maintain them for their use in teaching and learning. Poor management and maintenance of instructional materials could result in a situation whereby they may be available but are not in a good condition to be deployed in teaching and learning. Furthermore, in research question five, it was found that it was only a few of the available instructional materials were used by the teachers for teaching reading. In corroboration of the present finding, it was reported in previous studies that most instructional materials are not accessible to teachers for use (Abutu, 2015; Agboola & Aloysius, 2016; Fowoyo et al., 2020). These findings confirmed that the availability of materials does not guarantee their usage for instruction. There are possible reasons why teachers may not use instructional materials for teaching reading even when they are available. First, the teachers may lack the competency to use the available materials. Second, the materials may be in a poor state and cannot be used. Third, available materials may be inadequate or insufficient in terms of the quantity provided. Fourth, teachers may have a poor attitude towards the subject, and thus not bother to use instructional materials for effective teaching and learning. In the present study, it is not

exactly clear why teachers do not use instructional materials often while teaching reading. This situation is not a good sign as instructional materials which were provided to aid the teachers in making teaching and learning easy, enjoyable, and effective are rarely used (Ani, et al., 2021). If this trend is allowed to continue, the goals of the UBE scheme in improving literacy and ensuring communicative competence among young Nigerians would be difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

The study examined the implementation of the reading component of the English studies curriculum under the present UBE scheme in primary schools. In line with the research questions, the following findings were made: the majority of the teachers do not always use the phonics instructional method while teaching reading, lack the required competency to use the phonics instructional method and show poor disposition towards the method. It was also found that teaching materials are available; however, very few of the materials are used by the teachers in teaching reading. In all, these findings suggest that the implementation of the reading curriculum under the present UBE scheme is faced with many challenges.

Therefore, to overcome these challenges and subsequently improve pupils' interest, attitude and achievement in reading, it is necessary to reiterate that teachers need to be regularly trained and retrained on the use of phonics method, and effort should be made to carry teachers along in subsequent educational policies since their leading role in the policy implementation makes them major stakeholders in the education system.

Recommendation

1. A monitoring team should be established and empowered to visit schools to observe and encourage teachers to adopt the recommended phonics instructional method.
2. Opportunities for continued professional development of teachers should be made more available to equip teachers with the necessary skills and attitudes to embrace curriculum innovations.
3. Future educational policies must consider an inclusive approach for relevant stakeholders during policy planning and development. Being the major stakeholders in education, teachers should always be carried along in any educational policy development process.
4. Head teachers should create closer and positive rapport with teachers under their care. This is important as such a relationship would enable the head teachers to easily identify teachers' challenges concerning teaching and learning, and be able to proffer timely solutions and interventions.

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