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FROM THE DESK OF THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It is my pleasure to present to you the second Edition of Journal of Early Childhood and Primary Education (JECPE). This Journal provides qualitative and quantitative research in early childhood and primary education, bridging cross-disciplinary areas, and applying theory and research within the professional community. This reflects the world-wide growth in theoretical and empirical research on learning and development in early childhood and primary education. The journal publishes peer-reviewed articles covering curriculum, child care programmes, administration, staff development, family-school relationships, equity issues, child development, advocacy and more. The journal has particular relevance to policymakers and practitioners working in fields related to early childhood.

I hereby present to you all the articles in this our second edition in affirming our claim for professionalization of early childhood education in KWASU, Nigeria. I hope you enjoy reading them and that they challenge you to think about the issues raised. I also hope that many of you will work to share your research over the coming months and years ahead. It is so important that your experience and voice are heard in this academic arena as we work together to increase the profile of early childhood education. I wish you all the best and I look forward to another challenging year in 2014. "Onward Early Childhood Educators/Practitioners".

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DETERMINANTS OF NURSERY PUPILS' ACQUISITION OF BASIC LANGUAGE SKILLS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

In this study, the researchers investigated the effect of teaching method (jolly phonics) and school characteristics (material provision, class size, teacher qualification, pupils' gender and school location) on nursery three pupils' acquisition of basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Survey design was adopted and purposive sampling technique was used to select 400 pupils from 40 schools (20 private and 20 public schools) in urban and rural locations in Rivers State. Ten pupils, (five boys and five girls) were randomly selected from each school. Data collection involved the use of Basic language skill test (BLST) and instructional material checklist (IMC). Data collected was analyzed using t-test and multiple regression, at $p<0.05$ significant level. Results revealed that significant mean difference (df = 398; t-crit = 1.96; t-cal= 12.651; $p < 0.05$) existed between the two groups. The mean difference of the effect of material provision was also significant (df = 398; t-crit = 1.96; t-cal= -2.641; $p<0.05$). The six school variables significantly explained the variance in the pupils' acquisition of basic skills with multiple regression of .768 and $R^2 = .589$ accounting for 59% of variance in the dependent variables. Class size ($\beta = -.629$; $p < 0.05$) and teaching method ($\beta = -.246$; $p<0.05$) made significant contribution to the acquisition of basic language skills. It is concluded that class size and teaching method are important factors that influence the acquisition of basic language skills. It is therefore expedient that policy makers, government, school heads and others who are in the position to see to the welfare of early childhood education pay more attention to these factors.

Key words: Jolly phonics, class size, basic language skills, material provision

Introduction

Basic English Language acquisition is that which enables a child to communicate with people around him without much problem. English Language is one of the compulsory subjects Nigerian children are exposed to in all levels of education. It is the official language of communication in Nigeria as well as the language of instruction in Nigerian schools. However, many products of the Nigerian school system graduate from Primary school without being able to express themselves properly in English language either by writing or by speaking (Ekpo, Udosen, Afangideh, Ekukinam, and Ikorok, 1999). This problem persists through secondary school at which level the learner is assumed to have acquired certain basic skills. Not being able to read or write is one of the greatest deprivations a young person can suffer. It may lead to some psychological problems such as frustration, negative attitude to schooling, poor study habit, misery, among others.

The general assumption is that there is a drop in the quality of education provided at the Nursery and Primary level. The truth, however, is that the drop in quality may not be as a result of drop in curriculum content. The problem may stem from the method of curriculum interpretation by practicing teachers who expose children to these skills especially at the nursery level. It appears that many teachers tend to skip some important aspects of English Language during teaching. Since English language is the official language of communication in Nigeria as well as the language of instruction in the schools, clear and correct pronunciations are therefore important for effective interaction and this cannot be achieved without good knowledge of the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). These four communication skills have some forms of relationships among them (Chukueggu, 2004).

Firstly, listening and speaking are oracy skills, while reading and writing are literacy skills. Secondly, listening and reading are receptive skills. They are processes through which we receive or comprehend information. On the other hand, speaking and writing are productive skills. We compose or produce messages through them. Thirdly, speaking and listening use the aural medium while reading and writing use the visual medium. The key element of this work is finding out how curriculum interpreters aid learners to acquire these basic literacy skills at their early stage in education bearing in mind that the objective of setting pre-primary education is to help learners have a solid foundation that will help them survive in other educational endeavours. To this end, it is expected that Nigerian children should be given a good grounding in the language from the earliest stages of their schooling so that they can move ahead progressively on the path of learning. Experience has shown that if children are exposed to the basic skills as well as use appropriate methods, they will excel in every other subject early and in the future. Helping learners develop adequate basic language skills appears to be a major challenge facing language educators in Nigeria today.

Chukueggu (2004) emphasized that among the four communication skills, listening is one of the most neglected by both teachers and textbook writers despite its importance in both communication and language acquisition. The writer further stressed that most teachers have good ideas for the teaching of Speaking, Reading and Writing skills but do not know how to teach listening. It therefore stands to reason that to become a fluent speaker of English Language, one needs to develop strong listening skills because listening is used most widely in people's daily lives. In addition, teaching the learners a lot of listening activities could be a good way of developing their vocabulary as well as improving learner's listening comprehension. Without the skill of listening, there can be no language learning, and hence no communication. This reiterates the point that listening attentively leads to comprehension, when a learner listens very well, the meaning will not be lost and the learner will be able to communicate freely based on what he or she heard.

Be that as it may, if words are not properly pronounced as the native speakers would, the tendency is that it may connote another meaning. From past experiences especially during external examinations, failures in oral tests may be as a result of wrong pronunciation of words. Effective communication therefore depends on one's ability to express oneself in

speech clearly, accurately and fluently. Although thoughts could be expressed in writing, it is also through speech that one's thoughts would be put across accurately and effectively to one's audience without any form of ambiguity. This is because in some cases, it might be difficult for a reader to guess and interpret exactly what the writer has in mind. Therefore, a good spoken form of any language is a virtue in communication.

Much of what we learn in our lifetimes is by way of listening, speaking, reading and writing. For instance, according to Kathleen, Lisa and Patton (2005) "children's speaking and listening skills lead the way for their effective reading and writing. Hence, the tendency is that when a child is able to listen and speak fluently, that child has a greater chance of reading and writing well. According to Agabi (2007) reading is a vital skill necessary for effective education. It is used for the purpose of acquiring and transmitting knowledge. Reading skill could become easier to acquire when learners have mastered the art of pronouncing and speaking correctly. Reading skill could dictate performances in other disciplines. Literature shows that one's ability to read well will determine one's performance and achievement in any academic endeavour (Ekpo et. al, 1999). Ekpo and colleagues further stressed that the goal of reading instruction at the Nursery school level is that each child should be functionally literate and be able to communicate effectively.

Functional literacy means that individuals can read with understanding and be able to apply knowledge gained to solve life's problems. From experience, people tend to believe that pupils only read from primary school level but the Nursery school is the point at which proper foundation should be established for the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills. Children at the lower Nursery level spend time not on recognition of objects within and around their environment (NERDC, 2002) at upper Nursery [Nursery3], the child is not only expected to recognize these objects but should be able to read the names of the objects around him or her in the environment. At this level, the pupils are expected to read words as well as simple written sentences using the language of instruction.

Writing is not just about making marks on a paper or on an object. Marks are meaningless if they cannot be interpreted in any form of language. Writing as an art involves the ability to form letters, words or numbers with a pen or pencil. It is the ability to state something in a book, paper or on any object on which such statement can be printed (Longman, 2003). The development of writing skills is a very important aspect of human development. In today's rapidly developing world, the ability to write is a major handicap especially in nursery schools. Writing is an accurate representative of ideas on paper. The gains of writing are manifested in all subjects across the curriculum. Meaningful writing is designed to inform, entertain or identify and should begin at the earliest possible time.

National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, (FRN 2004) section 2, page 11 refers to "Pre – Primary Education" as the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 plus prior to their entering the Primary school. It is the initial stage of organized instruction designed primarily to introduce very young children to a school-type environment. Pre – primary education is a prominent component of the Nigeria education

system. Sub- section 13 of the policy identifies the purpose of Pre-Primary education as a means of effective smooth transition of Nigerian children from home to school, prepare the child for the primary level of education, inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature; the environment, art, music and playing with toys, teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms through play, among others. In Nigeria, Pre-primary education appears to be all encompassing with respect to when a child should be exposed to teaching-learning activities. For instance, section 2 of the 2007 draft edition of NPE, states: "Basic education is the education given to children aged 0-15 years. It encompasses the early childhood education (0-5) and 9 years of formal schooling. Early childhood education, however, is segmented into 0-3years situated in day care centers fully in the hands of private sector and social development services whilst ages 3-5 are within the formal education sector. According to Idoko (2012), the thinking of the government now is to ensure that early childhood education is incorporated into the formal basic education. He said the campaign for access to education in the country requires that early childhood education is properly incorporated in the national system of education. It is imperative that the four basic skills should be introduced to the children at the nursery level.

These four basic skills cannot be effectively taught at Nursery level without the use of proper teaching methodology. How best to teach children the basic language skill has been the subject of fierce controversy in this country. On the one hand are the champions of "whole word recognition" Krashen (2003) and Vygotsky (1978). To them, one do not have to separate words into their component parts, you learn to recognize and memorize them by looking at their shapes and sizes alongside pictures (look and say) or you guess at them from the context in which they appear ("whole word", " whole language" or "real book"). On the other side are the supporters of the traditional method (Torgerson, Brooks, and Hall, (2006) and Lloyd (1998), whereby one matches and combines individual letters and sounds to form a word. This is technically known as phonics.

Phonics is all about the sound a letter or groups of letters make rather than recognizing whole words. Phonics consist of reading based on phonetic building blocks of language, rather than trying to memorize full words and reading based on recognition of words. Having learned the various English sounds (phonemes), then the letters they correspond to, children are then able to read many English words. Under phonics, once a child learns the basic and simple phonetic building blocks, the child can read any word and any book at his or her level. There are two main approaches to teaching phonics: Analytical, (Walter, 2008) and Synthetic approaches (Share, 2008). In Analytical phonics approach, practitioners do not teach children to pronounce sounds "in isolation" as in the practice with synthetic phonics approach. Both approaches require the learner to develop the ability to hear and discriminate sounds in spoken words.

Lloyd (1998) describes Jolly Phonics as a fun and child centred approach to teaching literacy through synthetic phonics. It is one of the leading phonics system and a standard teaching method used in pre- primary grade to help inculcate in young children basic reading skills. With actions for each of the 42 letter sounds, the multi-sensory method is very motivating for

children and teachers. Using Jolly Phonics in teaching meets all the criteria for quality phonics programs and helps teach the young children to read in a way that is easier and more fun for them (Ekpo et al,1999). Jolly Phonics is a systematic, sequential phonics program designed to teach children to read. Children learn 42 sounds of the English language rather than the alphabet, in other words Jolly Phonics teaches the letter sound before teaching the letter name.

The basic skills taught through Jolly Phonics are: learning the letter sounds, learning letter formation, blending, identifying sounds in words and spelling the tricky words. In Jolly Phonics program, pupils are given auditory training to develop phonemic awareness through a variety of activities, to hear sounds at a very early age. In writing, children need to hear, identify and write the sounds of a word. With Jolly Phonics, reading is begun once the children are able to blend the sounds into simple words. By listening to letter sounds and seeing a teacher modeling writing techniques, children's writing develops rapidly (Lloyd, 1998). One of the reasons Jolly Phonics has been successful according to Lloyd is that it takes a multisensory approach to learning. Not only do children see and hear the letters and sounds, they also act them out with hand or arm movements to help them with memory recall and association.

At Nursery three level, words and short sentences are forced into the children's memory through constant drill and memorization using the conventional method. This method at times can be likened to a situation where a mother forces her child to swallow bitter drugs for his or her quick recovery. The child has no right to question the mother or to look for a more convenient means of treating his illness. The only difference between the two environments (home and school) is probably the presence of instructors who use canes and harsh instructions to get the children to read (Odinko, 2006), an approach which lacks stimulating, interesting and exciting activities for children at this level.

According to Ekpo, Udosen, Afangideh, Ekukinam and Ikorok (1999) the provision of materials is a barrier to effective teaching of reading using Jolly Phonics. Some schools are provided with teaching materials only to be kept with the head teachers and never used (Odinko, 2007). The availability and non- availability of facilities and their adequacy in schools have an effect on the academic performance of the pupils (Ndukwu, 2002). This is in agreement with what is experienced in our day to day classroom interaction. In some schools, the large number of pupils in a class does not give enough room for the teacher to properly implement this programme (Odinko, 2006). In addition, the Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) project (1985-1990), conducted in Tennessee (U.S.A.) on the relationship between class size and academic attainment of children from kindergarten 1 through k-3 provides evidence that smaller classes (between 13-17 and large classes 22-26) in kindergarten and early grades lead to pupils' higher academic achievement, and that these effects are greater for students who have experienced more years in small classes (Nye, Hedges, & Konstantoloulos, 2000) reiterates this fact.

Finn, Pannozzo and Achilles (2003), conclude that students in small classes are more engaged in learning behaviours, and they display less disruptive behaviour than do students in larger classes. Thus, the number of pupils in a class could affect the quality, the kind of teaching methods used and the extent to which the teachers could bring in what they felt is the best practice to help the nursery school child learn. Other researchers are of the view that learners in small classes are more likely to interact actively with the teacher by initiating, responding and sustaining contact (Blatchford, Basset and Brown, 2005); offer opportunities for teachers to teach better (Anderson,2000); create facilitating conditions for teachers to teach and students to learn (Wang and Finn, 2000), among others.

Relationship also exists between interactions and level of training of teachers in nursery school centers. Hooks, Scott- Little, Marshall and Brown, (2006) study of the south Carolina new initiative to improve the quality of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classroom as well as that conducted in Nigeria (Odinko, William and Donn, 2009) revealed that professional preparation that provides a solid understanding of what and how to teach is essential for teachers to improve and provide quality teaching-learning activities in pre- school classrooms. In addition, the study showed that teachers with degrees and specialized training do provide higher quality early education experiences for children. This result conforms with Abimbade's (1999) findings on Principles and Practice of Educational Technology in Nigeria, which showed that when teachers are well trained, they tend to have better knowledge for improvising and use of teaching aids/materials. The findings of Ndukwu (2002) also corroborates the view that the quality of a teacher could significantly influence pupils' intellectual development considering that trained and better-qualified teachers tend to utilize resources more effectively than the untrained ones.

Achievement gap may equally be attributed to gender. Achievement gap refers to the observed disparity on a number of educational measures between the performances of group of students. Most studies show that, on average, girls do better in school than boys. For instance girls get higher grades and complete high school at a higher rate compared to boys (Jacobs, 2002). Standardized achievement test also shows that female are better at spellings and better on tests of literacy, writing, and general knowledge. (National Centre for Educational Statistics, 2003). Barnet and Rivers (2006) study revealed that until quite recently, boys often outperformed girls in many areas in which they are now believed to be innately weaker. Gender becomes a factor in classroom instruction, thus, the teacher should not create a learning environment that favours the sources of either boys or girls.

Where a school is located may have effect on learners' achievement. Owoeye (2002), found that urban students performed better than rural students in all forms of achievement test. Some of the schools in the cities are well equipped with infrastructural facilities, qualified teachers who have opportunities to attend seminars to improve on their job performances. Pupils' achievement may be affected since the resources (both human and material) are not evenly distributed.

The acquisition of Basic English Language Skills at Nursery level needs proper teaching methodology like the use of Jolly Phonics. There appear to be dearth literature although a study has been carried out on the effect of Jolly Phonics strategy and the English as a Second Language (ESL) on pupils reading development, and studies on speaking but none seemed to have worked on the effect of environmental factors in acquiring basic literacy using jolly phonics. This study therefore sought to find out how teaching method (Jolly Phonics) and some variables (teaching method, material provision, class size, teacher qualification, pupil's gender and location) may contribute to learner's acquisition of basic language skill. To provide information on the above problem, the following research questions served as a guide.

1) Is there any significant difference in the achievement mean scores in basic language skills of Nursery three children who were taught with Jolly Phonics and those who were not?
2) Is there any significant difference in the achievement mean scores in basic language skills of Nursery three children who attend schools where materials are provided and those who attend schools where materials are not provided?
3) To what extent would the six school variables (class size, teacher qualification, material provisions, pupil gender, location and teaching method) together predict Nursery three learners' acquisition of basic language skills?
4) What is the relative contribution of each variable to the prediction?

Methodology

The target population was pupils aged between 3-5 years who are enrolled in either private or public schools in Rivers State. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 40 schools (20 which used jolly phonics method and 20 which did not). Stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure adequate representation of schools where materials are used and schools where they are not used as well as male and female children in urban and rural locations. In each of the schools selected, a Nursery 3 class was selected but where only one class exists, that class is used. This nursery class is chosen because they must have been exposed to rudiments of the four language skills. From each selected school, ten children (5 males and 5 females) were randomly selected. In all, 400 pupils from forty pre-primary schools participated in this study.

Two valid and reliable instruments developed by the researchers were used for data collection: Basic Skills Test (BST) and Instructional Material Checklist (IMC). The BST was used to ascertain information on the level of acquisition of the basic language skills. It has five sections; A – E. Section A collected information on the name of the school, location, age of child, gender, class size and teaching method while sections B, C, D and E generated information on the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) with 20 items. Section B consists of listening skill test with 5 items, C, speaking skill Test has 5 items, D, reading Skill Test has 10 items and E, Writing Skill Test has 3 items. The highest score expected is 98 while the lowest score expected is 23. The IMC was used to generate information on teaching-learning materials actually available in the Nursery schools used. It has two sections, A and B. Section A collected information on the name of school, location,

class, class size, qualification of teacher and teaching method used while Section B solicited information on materials available in each school environment. It has 17 different types of teaching-learning materials listed accordingly, and the available ones were checked against the school where they exist. The respondent to this instrument were the researcher.

The instruments were validated by practicing pre-school teachers and experts in Early Childhood Education. The achievement test was trial tested twice on 50 pre-school pupils who were not part of the study sample. The results showed no ambiguities in the test items and the test-retest reliability was 0.83 while the reliability co-efficient of the material provision checklist was established using inter-rater scale and it yielded reliability index of 0.87.

In each of the selected schools, the investigators used observation technique to check the materials present in the schools used. Later, the basic language skill test was administered on the pupils. The administration entailed having a one-on-one interaction with every child. This method was used for reading and speaking skill tests whereas the investigators read (dictated) the word aloud for the whole class while testing in listening and writing skills tests during which each child wrote what he or she heard in their respective papers. Data collection lasted for twenty days.

Inferential statistics (T-test) and Multiple Regression were used to analyze the data generated. This facilitated the answering of the respective research questions. The T-test was used for research questions 1and 2 while Multiple Regression was used for research questions 3 and 4.

Results

Research Question 1: Is there any significant difference in the achievement mean scores in basic language skills of Nursery three children who were taught with Jolly Phonics and those who were not?

Table 1: Summary of T-test showing Difference in the Achievement Mean Scores in Basic Language Skills

Variables	N	Mean	SD	t-crit.	df	t-cal	Inference
Achievement in Jolly Phonics	200	76.39	28.01	1.96	398	12.651	Significant
Basic Language Skills Others Methods	200	44.22	22.56				

*Significant at 0.05

Table 1 shows the number of pupils taught with Jolly Phonics (200) and the number taught with other methods (200). The mean score of those taught with Jolly Phonics was 76.39 with standard deviation 28.01 whereas that of those taught with other methods was 44.22 and

standard deviation 22.56. The mean difference is 32.17 and it is statistically significant (df = 398; t-crit = 1.96; t-cal= 12.651; $p < 0.05$).

Research Question 2: Is there any significant difference in the achievement mean scores in basic language skills of Nursery three children who attend schools where materials are provided and those who attend schools where materials are not provided?

Table 2: Summary of T-test showing Difference in the Achievement Mean Scores in Basic Language Skills based on Material Provision

Variables	N	Mean	SD	t-crit	df	t-cal	Inference
Achievement score							
Material Not Provided	200	52.83	31.79	1.96	398	-2.641	Significant
Materials Provided	200	62:38	29.29				

*Significant at 0.05

Table 2 shows mean score of those that attend schools where materials are not provided was 52.83; standard deviation was 31.79 while the mean score of those that attend schools where materials are provided was 62.38 and the standard deviation was 29.29. The difference between the means was 9.5 (df = 398; t-crit = 1.96; t-cal= -2.641; $p < 0.05$).

Research Question 3: To what extent would the six school variables (class size, teacher qualification, material provisions, pupil gender, location and teaching method) when put together, predict Nursery three learners' acquisition of basic language skills?

Table 3: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis among Six School Variables and Pupils Achievement in Basic language skills

Analysis of Variance					
Source	**Sum of Squares (SS)**	**Df**	**Mean Square**	**F. Ratio**	**P value**
Regression	212590.45	6	35431.742	93.924	.000*
Residual	148254.34	393	377.238		
Total	360844.79	399			
Multiple R = .768 R. Square = .589 Adjusted R^2 = .583 Standard Error of Estimate = 19.42					

Table 3 shows that the six school variables (class size, teacher qualification, material provision, pupil gender, school location and teaching method) to predict pupils' achievement in basic language skills yielded a coefficient of multiple regression (R) of 0.768. It is shown further in the table that the six predictor variables accounted for 59 percent of the variance in Nursery school pupils' achievement in basic language skills (Adjusted R^2 x 100 = 59). In other words, 59% of the variance in the change in their achievement in basic language skills can be explained by pulling the different variables together. The Analysis of Variance of the

result indicate that the six predictor variables significantly predicted the pupils' achievement in basic language skills ($F_{(6,393)} = 93.924$; $p<0.05$). This means that 41% of the variation in the skill acquisition cannot be explained by the six variables alone. Thus, there must be other variables that must have influenced the dependent variable.

Research Question 4: What is the relative contribution of each variable to the prediction?

Table 4: Relative Contribution of Independent Variables to Pupils' Achievement in Basic Language Skills

	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized coefficient	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	127.761	7.563		16.893	.000
Class size	-2.313	.144	-.629	-16.113	.000*
Teacher Qualification	.877	.624	.047	1.405	.161
Material Provision	1.368	2.457	.019	.556	.578
Gender of child	-1.985	1.959	-.033	-1.013	.312
School Location	2.157	2.093	.036	1.031	.303
Teaching Method	-14.755	2.214	-.246	-6.663	.000*

***p. value = < 0.05**

Table 4 reveals the relative contribution of the three independent variables to the dependent variable expressed as beta weights. Class size (β=-0.629; $P<0.05$) and teaching method (β=-0.246; $P<0.05$), in that order, had the highest significant relative contribution to the dependent variable. Following the teaching method are teachers' qualification (β=-0.047; $P>0.05$), school location (β=0.036; $P>0.05$), gender of the child (β=-0.033; $P>0.05$) and material provision (β=0.019; $P>0.05$) which do not have significant relative contribution to the dependent variable.

Discussion

The result revealed that inculcating basic literacy skills using jolly phonics could significantly aid better understanding of basic literacy skills by children at this level. This was revealed in the scores obtained by the pupils in this study. The computed mean scores based on the teaching method used showed that those taught with Jolly Phonics performed better than those taught with other methods. This result supports the view of Ekpo, Udosen, Afangideh, Ekukinam and Ikorok (1999) who reported that using Jolly Phonics in teaching meets all the criteria for quality, improved basic skills acquisition by children at the nursery level. Further, in a study of English as a Second Language (ESL) in the United States of America, Kwan and Willows (1996) revealed that pupils taught with jolly phonics made remarkable achievements on measures of phonological processing. The improvements made

by these children may be because with Jolly phonics, the pupils were taught using synthetic phonics as the primary approach to learning the basic language skills. The pupils were able to acquire reading skills and reading culture is developed at the early stage.

This result may be explicable because this method involves the use of multisensory approach to learning. Not only are the children taught to see and hear the letters and sounds, they also act them out with hand or arm movements to help them with memory recall and association Lloyd (1998). Thus, each letter sound has a corresponding action and by performing such action for each sound, the pupils are using kinesthetic, auditory, visual and speech methods to help them internalize the letter(s) representing each sound. Further, the eclectic nature in Jolly Phonics must have made it easier for the pupils to learn the basic language skills while inability to use different methods while teaching children may lead to impediment in pupil's ability to learn the skills which was reflected in the scores of the pupils taught without jolly phonics method.

Imbibing this culture is beneficial to beginning reader because it could help a child to read any word and books at his or her level with ease. Learning phonetically, a child attempts to read anything because he or she can deconstruct the words. This may be because the teacher is characterized by what children enjoy doing at this age level (story-telling, dancing, singing, demonstrating, etc). These opportunities enable them to segment, blend and read even new words. Children with more developed auditory skills tend to be better readers. For instance, from classroom experience, when sound /e/ for instance is introduced using stories, songs, hand and arm movement, a child can read new words like – say, stay, day, tray, play, independently. The pupils taught with other methods do not have such opportunities, thereby having difficulty in reading new words. When they are left out, they may guess or skip over words that they do not know and some may not learn how to read. They also may be forced to memorize some words without adequate clue on how the words are formed. Children may memorize full words and read based on recognition of words that they are familiar with and may get stuck when they encounter new words.

There were indications that pupils who attend schools where materials are provided performed better than those whose schools where not provided with learning materials. This is also explicable because the availability and non-availability of facilities have effect on the academic performance of the pupils. This is in agreement with some educationists (Varol and Farran 2006, Bassey 2002, Ndukwu 2002) who believe that teaching materials facilitate teaching and learning activities, which result in effective teaching and improve academic performance. Facilities such as desks, seats, educational toys (counters, shapes, colours, blocks) teaching aids (real objects) and charts are ingredients for effective teaching and learning at this level. They are of the view that such materials provide first- hand experience and help to bring about permanent and meaningful experience in the learner.

Piaget (Henniger, 2005) also explained that children of the early childhood years from approximately 2 to 7 years engage in pre-operational thinking. During this stage, Piaget noted that children learn more through the use of symbols than in abstraction. He also stressed that

hands-on-manipulation of materials and real objects provide children at this stage with much information to assimilate and accommodate. This may be why nursery classroom setting for children aged four and below in the U.K, is divided into different areas to provide opportunity for the following activities, painting, model making, writing, and drawing. The essence of this arrangement could be for the children to have better opportunities for manipulation of materials and to the teacher for effective teaching which in turn improves academic performance. Bearing in mind the importance of material resources to teaching and learning, my view is that adequate instructional materials should be provided. Teachers could be more effective when there is adequate supply of materials needed to teach especially the basic language skills. In a school where flash cards, picture books, sand trays, audio tapes, etc. are made available, the teaching of the basic skills with the use of Jolly Phonics could be more effective.

The results of the present study also showed that the six school characteristics variables when taken together seem to be effective in predicting nursery pupils' acquisition of basic skills. The observed F-ratio is significant at the 0.05 level-an indication that the effectiveness of a combination of the independent variables in predicting nursery pupils' acquisition of basic skills could not have occurred by chance. The magnitude of the relationship between pupils' acquisition of basic skills and a combination of the independent variables is reflected in the level of contribution 59% of the total variability in learners' acquisition of basic skills. This could not have occurred by chance.

As for the extent to which each of the six independent variables contributed to the prediction, the value of the T- ratio associated with respective variables, as shown in Table 4, also indicated that only two variables (class size and teaching method) contributed significantly to the pupils' acquisition of basic skills. It is explicable that teaching method made significant contribution to the prediction of learners' acquisition of basic skills because Jolly phonics is a method which develops in learners' phonemic awareness. It is one of the leading phonics system and a standard teaching method used in pre-primary schools to help young children acquire the basic skills. Lloyd (1998) developed this programme in order to support a small group of children in her class who were unable to progress in reading using the whole language approach. They were taught to listen carefully to the sounds in the words, identify the sounds and relate them to the letters. At the end, these pupils who initially demonstrated difficulty in reading and writing had significant improvement in their reading abilities. However, Savage, (2009) is of the view that teachers should use this method to support children learning from the outset but not to wait for children to fail before using phonics methods.

The result also showed that class size greatly influenced pupils' acquisition of basic skills. This may be one of the reasons why the National Association for the Education of young Children in the US recommends the regulation of adult- child ratio. It is the assumption that teachers with too many children are unable to have sensitive, responsive interaction with the children kept in their care (NAEYC, 1998). On logical grounds, Blatchford, Moriarty, Edmonds and Martin (2002) argue that it is likely that the greater the number of children in

class, the more time teachers will spend on procedural and domestic matters such as marking the registers, lining children up and putting on coats, toileting, accidents, and conversely the less time teachers will spend on instructing and interacting with individual children. They also argued that teachers could be more sensitive and responsive in their interactions with children when there are fewer children per adult. Nye, Hedges, and Konstantoloulos, (2000) believed that large classes could have an adverse effect on the amount of teacher attention on individual children. Hall and Nuttal, (2000) revealed that teachers, regardless of size of class, strive to implement a particular type of pedagogy- one that values differentiation, individual contact, small group work, and that size of class influences the degree to which they are able to operate between their pedagogical philosophy and their practice. In the same light, the research findings of Odinko (2007) in Nigeria has shown that the greater the number of children of the same age in the same classroom environment, the greater they draw on teachers' attention and resources, thus making it more difficult for the teacher to provide appropriate nurture and interaction needed by the respective children. The implication of this, based on teacher perceptions is that the number of pupils in a class could affect the quality, the kind of teaching methods used and the extent to which the teachers could bring in what they felt is the best practice for helping the pre-school learn.

However, the importance of other variables (material provision, school location, child - gender and teacher qualification) should not be ruled out. They are significant when pulled together, therefore policy makers and school administrators should not rule out providing materials to schools, since children at this age level learn better when they touch and feel real objects. Furthermore, where school is located is important in ensuring learners acquisition of basic language skills. Gender of pupils also has roles to play especially when equal treatment should be given to boys and girls. Teacher qualification should not be neglected, qualified hands especially those who are exposed to working with children and have knowledge of the elements of basic language skills during their training could be more effective.

Implications for Professional Practice and Recommendations

The research findings have implications for the following aspects of Pre-Primary Education. In general, the findings have illuminated on some factors (teaching methods and school characteristics) that may affect acquisition of basic skills at the nursery level. These factors, especially the ones that exert effects on the acquisition of basic language skills should be regarded as very important by curriculum developers and interpreters who are interested in developing and implementing the Pre-Primary programme.

The impact of class size on the acquisition of basic language skills is very significant. There will be greater pupils' satisfaction, better teacher-learner interaction and friendliness with smaller classes size. School heads should ensure that the teacher-pupil ratio is low enough to guarantee that every child receives adequate attention because children at this stage need a lot of love and attention from those who take care of them. A class size of about 15 pupils per teacher is recommended. In addition, policy makers and educational administrators should seriously consider having low teacher-pupil ratio as one of the criteria for approving pre-

primary schools. There is also a need to continuously monitor the schools to ensure that this rule is not violated.

There is also a need for all stakeholders in early childhood education to ensure that highly qualified professional teachers constitute the bulk of staff in Nigeria Nursery schools. This could be achieved through elaborate provision of opportunities for teacher on-the-job training and teacher retraining programmes in early childhood care and development.

The reported influence of material provision has implication for practitioners in aiding children's acquisition of basic skills. The government should look into the supply of material resources to schools and such materials should be evenly distributed. Thus, stakeholders should put machineries in place to ensure that the materials provided are always used during instruction.

The reported influence of teaching methods has implication on the pupils' acquisition of basic skills. The method used by the teacher determines to a large extent the level of acquisition of the basic skills. The teachers should employ the right method in the classroom during instruction and the curriculum planners should incorporate such in the curriculum.

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