

The Role of Nigerian Academics in Domesticating an International English Literacy Teaching Model: the Case of Zamfara State *Jolly Phonics* Project

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Abstract: The subscription of Nigeria to MDGs and the attendant efforts of providing qualitative universal basic education by governments made international interventions in the sector visible in all parts of Nigeria. Such intervention is usually technical that tends to provide stakeholders, especially teachers, with internationally tested models that will boost their service delivery and bring improved output from teaching and learning activities. Jolly Phonics is one of such models that aim at teaching reading and writing to pupils at Primary 1&2 with letter sounds that are introduced through child centred strategies of songs, stories and 'actions'. Using Jolly Phonics Project of Zamfara State Universal Basic Education as a reference point, this paper features the critical role of home academics in adapting the model to the local linguistic and cultural environment of the host state.

Keywords: English Literacy, Nigerian Academics, Synthetic Reading, Jolly Phonics, Zamfara State.

INTRODUCTION

International collaboration and partnership in education is evident in Nigeria through the activities of organizations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, DFID and several others in various ministries and educational establishments of the country. This is more prominent at the basic education sub-sector of the nation's education where hardly exists any of the 36 State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) that is not into partnership with one or more international organization. This development may not be unconnected with the expectations of achieving universal primary education and global partnership for development as enshrined in the 2nd and 8th goals of the Millennium Development Goals respectively. One discernible challenge to such partnership is the domestication of the models, approaches and methods that those organizations intend to deliver to the local partners. This paper highlights some of the technical roles of Nigerian academics in connection to the domestication process of a literacy intervention project with brand name Jolly Phonics in Zamfara State.

Attainment of literacy is one of the prime expectations of basic education and statistical information in that regard is not so encouraging in many developing countries. In a survey of 1,200 students across 40 schools in the Gambia, Gove and Cvelich [1] report that two third of the students could not read a single word from a simple paragraph after 1 to 3 years of school enrolment and instruction in English

Language (80%, 60% and 47% for Grades 1, 2 and 3 respectively). In some occasions, the problem of literacy is not only in foreign languages like English or French, but also in indigenous languages. In another reading assessment of pupils after two years of school enrolment (end of Grade 2) in Mali, the percentage of pupils who were unable to read a single word according to languages was 94% to English, 93% to Bomu, 91% to Fulfulde, Songhai 84% and Bamanakan 83%. In Uganda, the result was 53% single word reading inability to English and 51% to Luganda [1].

In Nigeria, research reveals that the average literacy rate for children 5 to 16 years is 46%. The distribution of this percentage is far from even among the 36 states in Nigeria where some states, especially in the southern part of the country, record up to 73% while others mostly in the North West and North East of the country record as low as 13% [2]. The report of National Commission for Mass Education [3] gave a related revelation on the literacy dichotomy in Nigeria with Imo State having the highest literacy rate in English and Lagos having the highest literacy rate in any language. In terms of the six geo-political Zones in Nigeria, the report opines:

“South East had the highest literacy rate in English while South West had the highest literacy rate in any language. North West had the least literacy rate in English Language,

whereas North Central had the least literacy rate in any language” pg 8.

One observation that has to be passed on the literacy information on North West and North East Nigeria above is the restriction of the instruments of the research to English and Nigerian Languages and suppressing the factor of literacy in Arabic which millions of people from these zones possess. It is also important to note that the low literacy rate was recorded in spite of the average school attendance of 80.1% among respondents [3]. A local committee of academics from Nigerian universities set up to investigate the situation of primary education in Zamfara State (North West Nigeria) also revealed that many children could not read or write after six years of primary education [4].

A discernible point from the discussion above is that the performance of Nigerian schools has been low in connection to the expectations of making the millions of children passing through them capable in the literacy requirements of reading and writing. This may not be unconnected with so many factors, among which is the method of teaching English literacy as a national language itself. In a bid to improve on that, Zamfara State adopted a synthetic phonics method of teaching reading and writing, using the Jolly Phonics programme, as an alternative to the existing traditional

method of teaching literacy and involved a team of academics from Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto to provide technical support.

JOLLY PHONICS

Jolly Phonics is a brand name for synthetic phonics instruction developed by Jolly Learning Ltd, UK. Like many other phonics approaches, Jolly Phonics systematically teaches reading and writing by linking letters with the sound they make commonly in the English spelling system. It outlines 42 letter sounds that are arranged in order of complexity with most commonly occurring alphabet sounds first, followed by digraphs which require a combination of two alphabets and finally, the remaining single-letter alphabet sounds. The key skills that are expected as children progress through the letter sounds are the ability to pronounce it correctly (learning the letter sound), writing it (formation), combining it to read new words (blending) and listening for it in words to aid spelling (segmenting). The learning of letter sounds is followed by teaching the tricky words such as ‘I’, ‘come’ ‘because’ which do not normally follow the letter and sound correspondence. Similarly, Jolly Phonics developed songs, stories and actions on each letter sound that make their learning easy and enjoyable. The following are the 42 letter sounds in Jolly Phonics order:

- 1 . s, a, t, i, p, n
- 2 . c k, e, h, r, m, d
- 3 . g, o, u, l, f, b
- 4 . ai, j, oa, ie, ee, or
- 5 . z, w, ng, v, oo, oo
- 6 . y, x, ch, sh, th, th
- 7 . qu, ou, oi, ue, er, ar

Fig-1: Jolly Phonics order

Although the current curriculum is silent about method of teaching reading in primary schools, phonics instruction is not prevalent in Nigerian schools particularly public ones. The ‘whole language’ method that teaches letter names and then introduces words as shapes which pupils are expected to memorise is more common. In Zamfara State public schools for instance, Jolly Phonics was the first experiment of teaching with phonics. Hence, the need for reinforcement of training and research with the support of home based academics to address local peculiarities that may impact on the delivery and outcome of the method.

The research aspect of Zamfara State phonics project, part of which appears in subsequent sections, is still ongoing. Its findings are expected to add to the ever increasing volume of literature on the efficacy of phonics instruction over traditional methods and vice versa [5-11]. On the other hand, effective evaluation of the package requires different efforts to ensure proper implementation. Subsequent sections highlight the technical input provided by some Nigerian academics in this direction.

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE ON TEACHER-TRAINING

The first technical role played by academics was identification of letter sounds that are likely to pose a challenge to the trainees based on the linguistic environment of Zamfara State which is predominantly Hausa. This strategy helped a long way in easing the task of the trainers who were mainly drawn from the

southern part of the country and were not familiar with those challenging possibilities. After the identification, the trainers were encouraged to appreciate the place of articulation for the letter sounds and guide the trainees with difficulties in line with that instead of relying on mere repetition of the sounds. Below is the result of the difference in two classes based on the use of repetition approach (Fig-2).

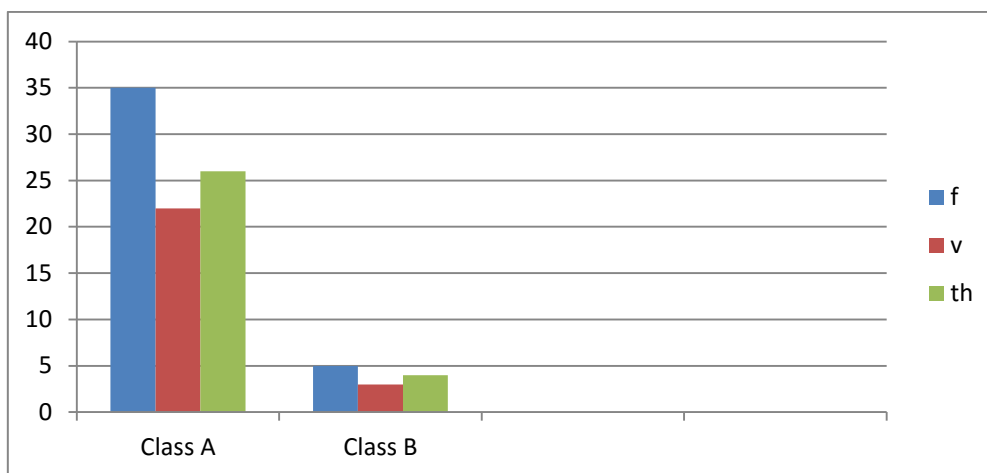


Fig-2: Class A and place of articulation approach strategy (Class B) on three sounds with the tendency of pronunciation difficulty (f, v and th)

Another technical support during the training was on the content of Supplementary Reading Material for the training. The stories that accompany each letter sound are expected to be of local significance and that normally reflects in the names used in the stories which in turn are required to begin with the letter sound in question. The major problem identified in this regard is the use of names based on their distorted rendition by non-Hausa speakers in Nigeria as in the case of Danjuma for “d” and Shehu for ‘s’. The academic team corrected this error and saved the confusion it can create in children whose native speaker judgment will be at logger heads with the examples. The team also provided suitable local names in instances where otherwise distant ones are used in the book.

MENTORING PROCESS

The mentoring aspect of Jolly Phonics project in Zamfara State involves a period of monitoring round to schools (one to two weeks per term) with a view to guiding the teachers on proper implementation of the project and reporting back the development to the stakeholders of the project. The academics assisted in this regard by enhancing the five-page monitoring form and developing an interpretative framework that should be able to present the summary of what is happening with the project in schools in terms of teacher’s opinion, head teacher’s opinion, competence, learning outcome, areas that require additional training etc. The following charts are from a summary of mentoring visitation to 288 Jolly Phonics schools in the state:

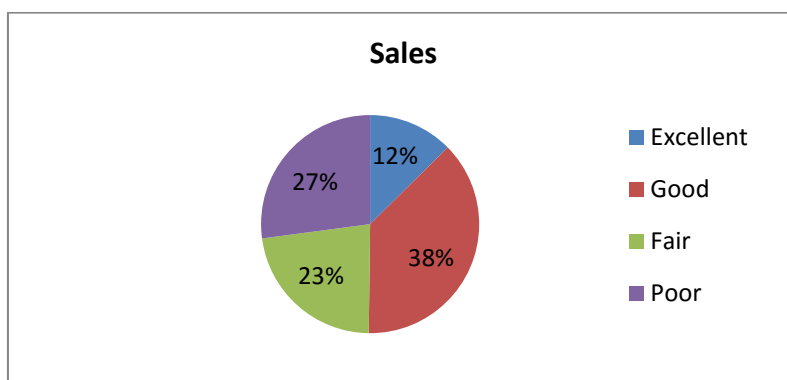


Fig-3: A chart indicating teacher’s competence in Jolly Phonics method in Zamfara State

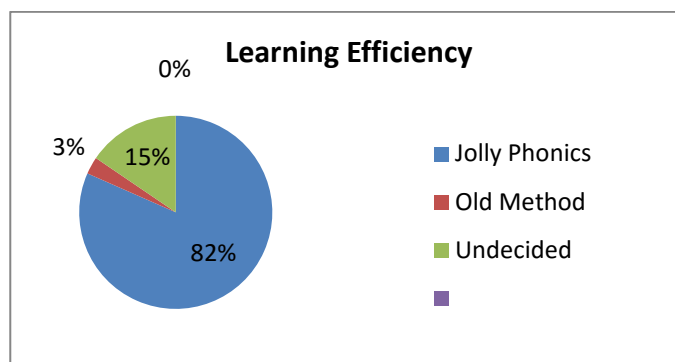


Fig-4: A chart indicating learning efficiency between Jolly Phonics and old method based on teachers' judgment in Zamfara State

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the monitoring data, the academics were able to advise the providers of the package and the beneficiary institution on the way forward.

RESEARCH PROCESSES

The results indicated above about learning impact between Jolly Phonics and the old method of teaching English literacy in the state was obtained from the teacher's impressionistic judgment. Thus, there exists the need to assess individual pupils over a long period of time to empirically test the opinion of the teachers. In view of this, research is ongoing in sixteen focus schools that are selected based on Educational Zones, LGEAS and location in terms of rural or urban. Newly enrolled pupils in Primary One are used as the experiment group, while their predecessors in Primary Two are the control group.

The first major domesticating initiative of the academics on the research activity is critiquing the two major standardized instruments of testing reading and indicating the unreliability of each. Burt Reading test (Revised 1974) was found inadequate because of its neglect of the social component of the subject (pupils in our case) like parent's education which is likely to have impact on the pupil's reading ability. The instrument is also limited to word reading and overlooks the reading of sentence which is an essential aspect of the entire process. EGRA on the other hand is comprehensive but it includes aspects of testing letter names which Jolly Phonics only introduces letter in the programme. Thus, using EGRA implies an automatic negative outcome on the first aspect of the instrument (Letter name knowledge). To this end, the academic team developed a questionnaire that draws from the resources of both EGRA and BURT Reading test and named it an integrated questionnaire. The questionnaire was successfully used in collating baseline data from focus schools and will be used at the end of the first year of the project to get interim results of its impact.

CONCLUSION

The central place of language in literacy programmes and the inherently dynamic nature of the

phenomenon of language make it expedient to involve academics in experimentations relating to this endeavour. The decision to do that in the case of Zamfara State synthetic phonics project of Jolly Phonics brand has assisted in making the project adapt to the linguistic realities of the host community thereby paving way for its success. This is evident in the various insights provided by the academics in the areas of sound production during training, sound harmony in the training manual, summary and interpretation of mentoring outcome as well as establishing a long term research process on the project. These contributions were informed by the diverse understanding of the academics in various aspects of language and linguistics particularly phonetics, phonology, sociolinguistics and applied English Linguistics.

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