

Synthetic Phonics: An Evaluation of Pilot Training for Jolly Phonics Instructors in Nigeria¹

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Abstract

The low literacy rates and the dearth of quality education in Nigeria has given cause for reading interventions and programs to flow into the country to improve the literacy skills. These call for more investigation into the programs to ascertain their efficacy in teaching Nigerian children how to read and write effectively. This paper evaluates the impact of a three-day teacher training program in which a pre-test and post-test was employed to report data graphically. The program evaluated was based on the 'Learning to Read' methodology which is popularly called Jolly Phonics in Nigeria, a brand of synthetic phonics instruction, employed as an intervention by Kebbi state government under the auspices of Kebbi State Universal Basic Education Board in partnership with Universal Learning Solutions (ULS, 2015). The value of the Synthetic Phonics instruction through the Jolly Phonics Instructors Pilot Training held in the state attempted to implement the teaching of literacy skills through the synthetic approach to all the primary schools in the state. This research-based program, Jolly Phonics, accentuates the development of phonemic awareness to advance the development of literacy skills in the early years of struggling learners.

Keywords: Pilot Study; Jolly Phonics; Instructors; Literacy; Letter Sounds; Education.

1. Introduction

The Roadmap for the Nigerian Education Sector in 2009 identified that every Nigerian child must have access to basic education which is further defined as comprising of three-years of child care and nine-years of formal school education (UBEC, 2014). Invariably, it is the education that should be accessible to three - 14 years aged children. It is on this foundation that UBEC in Nigeria is responsible for ensuring a basic education that is effectively qualitative across the Nigerian Federation through the three tiers of Government; State and Local Governments under the auspices of UBEC, States Universal Education Boards, (SUBEBs) and Local Government Educational Authorities (LGEA's). All the three tiers serve as

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agencies, from to local, in implementing the program of providing the basic education to the country (UBEC, 2014).

In the Nigerian educational sector, many learning difficulties are often associated with poor literacy skills which transcend from the primary school to affect the larger educational society (Eshiet, 2014; UBEC, 2014). Learners often encounter problems when learning the content areas of other subjects because of their incapability to read and write effectively (Anyanwu et al., 2012; UBEC, 2014). In response to this impending problem, many Educational Boards in Nigeria sought other interventions where new approaches and methodologies could be utilized to target the universal literacy mission of 2015 (UBEC, 2014). Strategic plans must, therefore, be put in place to improve the literacy skills of the struggling Nigerian learners. Teaching reading through methodologies that include the use of activities and exercises that are practical in encouraging the development of literacy skills and competencies are worldwide advocated (Liu, 2013; Sparks, 2012).

Making reading meaningful and enjoyable for both teachers and children by the use of local resources and professional storytellers is one of the recommendations of the Reading and Access Research Activity (RARA) report in Nigeria (RTI International, 2016). It further advocates that teachers and stakeholders for child education should create materials that children will want to read at their discretion. Such materials should also include lots of games, songs, fun games, and other activities in the lesson plans that are learner-centered. This can give the children opportunities for tasks in their classrooms that may be individual, pair or group. These may make teaching enjoyable and locally relevant not just merely allowing the children to decode the meaning of items RTI International (2016). In view of this, the KBSUBEB in partnership with a Universal Learning Solutions (ULS, 2015) attempts to implement the Jolly Phonics method for the teaching of literacy skills in its primary schools across Kebbi state.

The aim of the program was to train and resource teachers and pupils of Primary one and two, to use the Jolly Phonics method in the state. Similar projects have already been successfully initiated in other states of the Nigerian federation such as Sokoto, Zamfara, Kano, Jigawa in the North West, Akwa Ibom, Cross-Rivers, Enugu in the South East, Niger, Abuja-FCT, and Benue States in the North-Central of the country KBSUBEB (2015). These were initial answers to clarion call made by the Ministry of Education (FME) which stakeholders to join in the effort to use synthetic phonics to improve reading and writing to young children early enough in primary schools.

2. Literature Review

Many scholars, around the globe, emerging from different theoretical backgrounds and methodological orientations make assumptions and generalizations about the teaching and learning processes of literacy skills due to its trending challenges, especially in underprivileged societies. Makhathini (2015) cited many of these scholars and their works (Liu, 2013), to exemplify attempts made on curbing

the challenges entranced in the acquisition of literacy skills especially amongst young learners.

In the same vein, evaluation is said to be essential in order to make judgments for improvement and to provoke knowledge (Hassen, 2013; Patton, 2011). This will help in promoting and assessing how programs function and the strength of interventions in forming positive changes (Hassen, 2013). Kolberg (2013) argued that evaluation (both formative and summative) is a key to achieving the goals of a certain program. The judgment-oriented evaluations can also be used to measure the effectiveness of a particular program including its goals, objectives, and expected outcomes (Qin, 2012). It is further contended that evaluation is a critical instrument in determining the impact of a program in a given empirical study to identify and correct errors and underperformances (Qin, 2012). The evaluation also helps in assisting stakeholders to determine the efficacy of a program. However, if the evaluation is poor, it will hinder improvement opportunities (Zohrabi, 2011). It can invariably be deduced from the above that evaluation can be used in monitoring and examining activities and performances of a program. These can both have a negative and positive impact on the expected overall objective of the program. Evaluation is therefore indispensable for provoking evidence to usher recommendations based on the findings to improve on the general objective and goal of the program.

Phonics Approach and Acquisition of Literacy Skills. Reyhner (2008) asserted that there is an ongoing educational and political encounter with regards to the selection of a reading approach. He noted that the battle is between the advocates of “phonics approach” and “whole language” emphasis, which is taking place in not only on journals or pages of newspaper editorials but, even in state congress and legislatures. Liu (2013) further reported that:

... a dichotomy between the whole language approach and phonics emerged in the United States causing intense debate... led to a series of Congressionally-commissioned panels and government-funded reviews of the state of reading instruction in the U.S. (p. 2)

Advocates of the whole language approach argue that language should be learnt as a whole, and not be learnt in pieces or broken down into letters as it is a whole system of making sense of words functioning in connection with the appealing literary framework. They believe reading is the process word recognition as whole rather than individual. Conversely, the advocates of phonics approach are on the view that the central component, in the system of learning reading, is the teaching of correspondence and connections between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations (Liu, 2017).

Pang (2003) asserted that “phonics is based on the systematic teaching of sound and letter relationships, as well as sound and spelling patterns” (p. 9). However, Brown et al. (2012) challenged the view that phonics instruction is the best method for teaching early reading skills as portrayed in a study which show how a second-grader moves her eyes around the page whilst reading which according to them indicated other intricate patterns than just decoding of letters or words in a linear form. This approach is primarily regarded, by the Phonics advocates, as a bottom-up learning pattern or design where learners decode the meaning of a text through

recognition of letters and emphasises on the learners' ability to be able to sound out words based on how they are spelled (Reyhner, 2008).

The approach builds up a solid foundation of the English sound system for the struggling learners to internalize by way of developing their own literacy capabilities and applying them in constructing meaningful literacy knowledge for themselves (Sitthitikul, 2014). The advocates of phonics point to an ostensible decline in reading test attainments in the 1990s that they saw as a result of "whole language" instruction and "scientific" investigations which designate phonics instruction producing better reading scores than other learning models or approaches (Reyhner, 2008). Sitthitikul (2014), argues that now phonics instruction is receiving much attention as educators discuss the components of effective programs to use in teaching children literacy skills. Sitthitikul (2014) cited reviews of literature by Hurford et al. (1993), which proved now for more than two decades researches have confirmed the impact of phonological awareness and its relation to the acquisition of literacy skills.

Some writers and authors distinguished the phonics instruction into either intensive or basic phonics strategy. The intensive instruction is characterized as read-like behavior (systematic phonics) having all major letter-sound connections being taught in order through the assumption that the learners learn to read by initially learning the rules of phonics (learning to read by decoding to sound/ sounding out words and reading them loudly), and that the literacy skills must be taught consciously and deliberately be learned yet; the instruction can just be taught basically through a straightforward pattern (Liu, 2011). In enlisting the strengths of the phonics instruction Liu (2013) pointed out phonemic awareness as being more effective when learners are taught to use letters in the course phonemes manipulation. He further holds the opinion that an explicit phonemic awareness will help the struggling learners during the instruction, helps beginning readers and those having difficulties to spell words such as the kindergartners and first graders. He further argued that systematic phonics instruction, particularly an explicit one is significantly more effective to children of different ages, abilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds than alternative programs or designs offering non-systematic or no phonics instruction at all. Invariably, Liu (2013) argued that the phonics instruction comes with its own major weaknesses accordingly; there are too many rules in phonics instruction which even teachers find difficult to remember, and even when they remember they will find the system enormous and multifarious which may make the instruction defective. However, Sitthitikul (2014) contended that "...phonics instruction is limited in that it does not support children to expose to interesting reading and writing at the expense of systematically teaching specific reading and writing skills" (p. 122).

Phonics Instructional Designs. The advocates of phonics approach are seemingly not in agreement with one another as different studies portrayed, in their attempts to describe a specific type of phonics instruction that will be most effective in the acquisition of literacy skills. Carnine et al. (2014) identified six approaches to phonics instruction; synthetic phonics, analytical phonics, analogy-based instruction, phonics through spelling, embedded phonics and onset-rime phonics instruction. Meanwhile, Savage (2006) recognized three approaches; direct/ systematic

instruction, integrated instruction, and embedded phonics instruction. However, some of these descriptions are preferred than the others (for example, Edwards & Rassool, 2007; Edwards, 2011; Rose, 2006; Torgerson et al., 2006). Similarly, according to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (2005) in Australia, systematic, direct and explicit synthetic phonics is preferred, and the 2006 Rose Report (Rose, 2006) indicated synthetic phonics as obligatory in the United Kingdom, as it argued that the vast majority of young struggling learners were offered the ‘best and most direct route’ by the phonics instruction in being skilful readers and writers in the country. However, in the United States both systematic and synthetic phonics become the most favoured as the National Reading Panel (2006) published on its website that:

Systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read.

Instructional Styles of Synthetic Phonics. Synthetic phonics instruction is often described as a multisensory strategy (as it involves many senses of the children) employed in the inculcation of literacy skills to the young struggling learners to make them efficient in reading and writing forms of communication (Jolliffe, Waugh, & Carss, 2012). In this phonics instruction, the sounding-out of phonemes that are connected with particular graphemes is produced in isolation or individually unlike in the analytical phonics where they are not. The teachers visualize the sounds, through written forms or otherwise, to the children who at the same time see its sign and listen to the pronunciation of it. Synthetic phonics works so rapidly by starting teaching with the smallest units of the sounds and builds up to bigger units through a blending of the sounds together to form new words. For example, in teaching the word ‘bag’, the teacher starts with the phoneme /b/, /a/ and then /g/ through blending pattern. This phonics instruction approach has been found out to be a highly effective method, in many studies and reports, for the acquisition of literacy skills among young children (Johnston & Watson, 2005; Liu, 2013; Rose, 2006; Sitthitikul, 2014). Johnston (2011) also noted that: “After 6 years at school, children taught by the synthetic phonics approach read words, spelt words and had reading comprehension skills significantly in advance of those taught by the analytic phonics method” (p. 14). Moreover, in view of the synthetic method effectiveness to the acquisition of second language, Cheung and Slavin (2005) affirmed that the structured phonetic programmes have efficiently supported the development of language in the children's L1 and L2.

Ehri et al. (2001) examined the effects of systematic phonics instruction by comparing its results the unsystematic instruction in a quantitative Meta-analysis. In their analysis of 38 experiments that were carried in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States they came up with the result which showed systematic phonics produced better reading than every type of program taught to control groups in the conducted assessment. Calderón et al. (2011) also examined pupils with English as an L2 in the United States in an attempt to identify which program offers effective instruction for the learning of literacy skills amongst the struggling learner. The study concluded that those schools that offered systematic phonics instruction during comprehension and vocabulary lessons performed better at all grade levels. Purewal (2008) in the analysis of her research conducted in both

the United Kingdom and United States through a critical reviewing of literature on literacy learning ideologies and policies concluded that systematic synthetic phonics instruction is effective in terms of individual word identification and word reading. Yet, the research has not found the same efficacy with regards to the reading comprehension that was statistically significant.

Jolly Phonics as Synthetic Phonics in Nigeria. Jolly Phonics is a synthetic phonics instruction developed in the United Kingdom since 1992 as a commercially designed teaching program developed for teachers by a teacher called Lloyd as a result of the fantastic results yielded by the synthetic instruction in the acquisition of literacy skills and other language avenues (Lloyd, 2013; Johnston et al., 2011; Stuart, 2006). Lloyd (2013) noted that Jolly phonics is aimed to teach children through five basic skills developed by Lloyd, Wenham, and Jolly which are found to be effective to children as they learn with joy. These basic skills are (1) Learning of Letter sounds (2) Letter formation (3) Blending (for reading) (4) Identifying the sounds in words for writing and (5) Tricky words (learning of irregular words). Through these basic skills the Jolly phonics, as a synthetic approach cuddles the initial teaching of letters, letter sounds, and their blending to form to sound out basic words; however, in the instruction letter sounds are separated and then, blended together to form words (Cunningham, 2012; Campbell, 2015). Thus, the Jolly phonics instruction teaches in the following order:

KBSUBEB (2015)

1. s, a, t, l, 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

Figure 1. Order of Instruction in Jolly Phonics.

The Jolly phonics came as a philanthropic program in Nigeria and partners with government agencies and other educational institutions through Universal Learning Solutions (ULS, 2015), a United Kingdom based organisation with a head office in Lancaster to help boost the literacy skills of young learners in Nigeria (UBEC, 2014). In other words, the partnership of some government agencies in Nigeria with ULS was a strategy conceived out of the need to reduce the problem of deficiency and resourcefulness among primary schools in Nigeria and also the ardent desire to provide effective instruction for the learning of basic literacy skills by struggling Nigerian pupils. According to ULS (2015) report, the program has so far trained an average of 1,443 teachers across 15 different states in Nigeria in partnership with the SUBEBs from each state and UBEC at the National level. The report further stated:

The programme started in Akwa Ibom State ... in 2006, and quickly spread to full rollout in Cross River State from the 2012-2013 academic year. In the 2013-2014 academic year, Zamfara, FCT, and Benue States initiated the project and then it spread to Enugu, Anambra, Edo, Imo, Kebbi, Jigawa, Nasarawa, Bayelsa, Rivers and Plateau States in the 2014-2015 academic year. (p. 1)

1)



Figure 2. Map of Nigeria with Arrow Pointing to Kebbi State within 36 State

Data source: Nigeria Galleria, (2018)

The focus of this study was to evaluate the efficiency of the pilot training conducted for Jolly Phonics instructors in the Kebbi state which aimed at implementing the phonics instruction as an intervention to improve the reading and writing achievements of primary one and two pupils of Kebbi state primary schools in Nigeria.

The following research question guided this study:

1. Can the Jolly Phonics training equip the English as a second language instructors to teach pupils in the pilot scheme to read and write effectively?
2. How effective is the Jolly Phonics training in terms of improving English as a second language learners reading and writing skills?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Procedures

The study employed an experimental research design to report data, which was collected through a pre-test and post-test method to evaluate the extent to which the pilot test training equipped the participants with the instructional knowledge of the Jolly Phonics method to teach pupils in the pilot scheme to read and write to the extent that the Kebbi State Ministry of Education and KSUBEB will appreciate the effectiveness of the Jolly Phonics method and will approve its adoption in all the public primary schools in the whole Kebbi State.

3.2. Participants

Through convenient sampling the participants in this study are drawn from all six primary schools that were invited for the study involving 22 primary one teachers, six head teachers, eight officials and three academics who would later be serving as the Mentoring and Evaluation Team of the project. Thus, the first 28 participants (comprising of head teachers and primary one teachers) was the focus of the study. This sampling technique is selected in this pilot study as it proves to be effective during exploration stage of the research area especially when conducting pilot data collection (Saunders et al., 2012; Republic of Nigeria, 2014; US, 2000).

3.3. Data Collection

To be able to collect the data assessments based on Burt reading test as used by Eshiet (2014) but, was adopted with some little modifications to suit the study environment and time constraints. The study began with a pretest on a one-on-one basis and completed with a posttest which was carried out collectively as a whole.

3.4. Data Analysis

In analyzing the data for this study, the whole word reading ability of the participants, the Burt Reading test was administered to assess the readability of the participants.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Pre-Training Assessment

Before the training, we administered a pre-training assessment (tests) where the participants were training to ascertain their prior-expertise in connection with the basic skills for teaching the Synthetic Jolly Phonics instruction. We posed four (4) different sets of questions to the participants which were; listing of all the letter sounds they could identify, recognizing the consonant blends in words that were shown to them, counting sounds in words, and explain or demonstrate what blending helps children do whilst learning to read and write. The pre-training assessment was

conducted with the help of structured questionnaires for easy analysis and visualisation, comparability and are quite practical (Rowley, 2014). Figure 3 demonstrates a summary of the result of the pre-training assessment in themes:

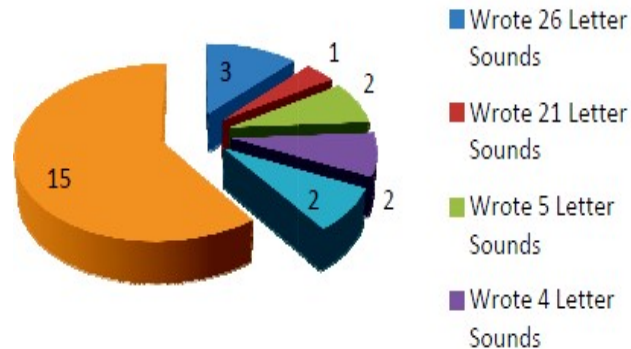


Figure 3. Writing of Letter-Sounds Test Before the Training.

The chart shows only three persons who wrote 26 letter sounds were able to write A-Z in the usual alphabetical order which made it uncertain if they understood what letter sounds were. But, only one participant wrote 21 sounds, and the 2 persons that wrote 5 sounds identified the short vowels /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/.

4.2. Identification of Consonant Blends

In the identification of consonant blends, only 1 participant Identified just a single sound out of seven displayed before them while the remaining participants did not identify any.

4.3. Counting of Letter Sounds

In this category one participant counted two out of the nine letter sounds correct, another participant counted was able to count only one correctly, and the remaining 23 did not count any of the given letter-sounds correctly.

4.4. What does Blending Help Children do?

In all the participants only two attempted this question and they all had different answer as one said “to read and write correctly” and the other “to pronounce words correctly” as the remaining 23 did not attempt the question.

4.5. Post-Training Assessment

Following the conduct of the pre-training assessment test, the Jolly Phonics training commenced and progressed smoothly through to the final day which was the third day. At the end, the participants were very excited about the training as they had been exposed to a new method of teaching literacy to their young struggling learners. Thus, we conducted the post-test assessment just as in the pre-training; questionnaires

were distributed to the participants. Below are graphical charts of how the post-training assessment was:

4.6. Writing Letter Sounds Test

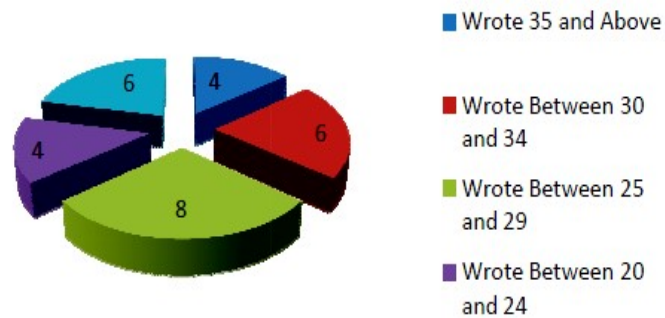


Figure 4. Writing of Letter-Sounds After the Training

This shows four participants wrote 35 sounds and above on the Burt test, six other participants wrote between 30-34 sounds, eight participants wrote between 25-29, and the last four wrote between 20-24 sounds correctly. This shows significant improvement in the pre-training assessment.

4.7. Identification of Consonant Blends

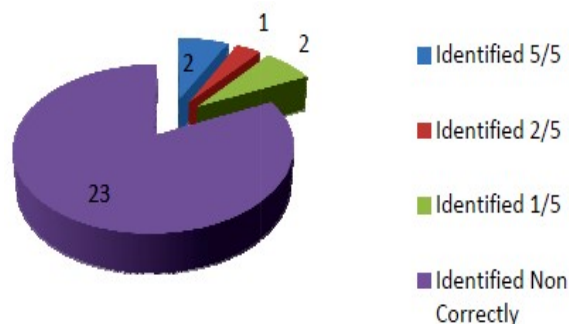


Figure 5. Identification of Consonant Blends.

The chart portrays two participants identified all the given sounds, one participant identified two out of five sounds, and another two identified one out of the five consonant blends whereas 23 participants identified none correctly.

4.8 Counting of Letter Sounds

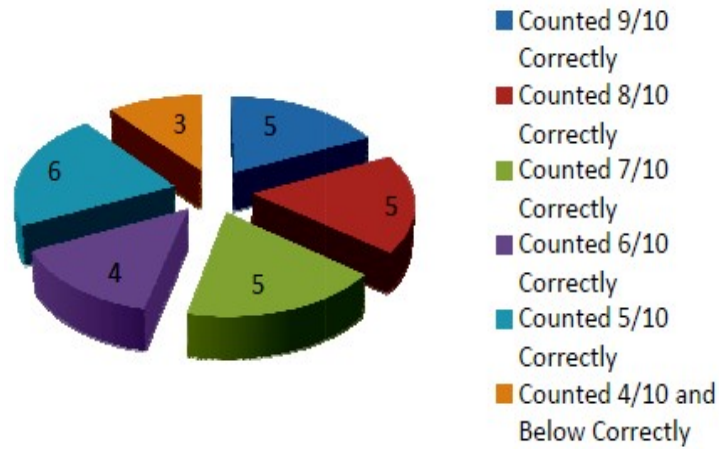


Figure 6. Counting Sounds in Words Test

Here, the result shows five participants were able to count nine out of the ten letters sounds correct, another eight counted eight out of 10 correctly, and four counted six out of ten. As the scores go down, we can see six participants scoring 5/10 in counting the letter sounds correct, whereas three scored 4/10.

4.9 What does Blending Help Children do?

The chart shows 14 participants, including the only one who mentioned JP helped in teaching reading, answered the question correctly and another 14 answered wrongly

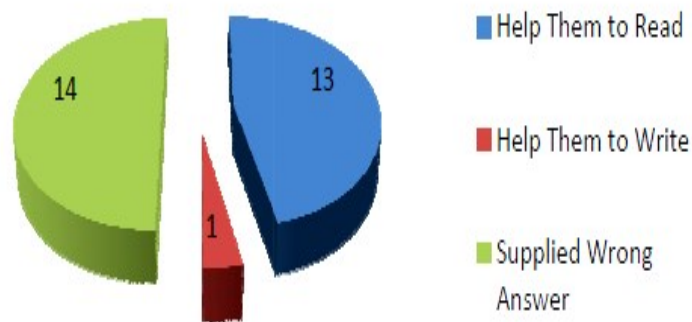


Figure 7. What Blending Help Children Do

As the results have shown above, the post-test we had administered evaluated the teacher trainees who attended the Jolly Phonics training program in Kebbi state. Their understanding of the five basic skills of the JP instruction was appraised and the majority of the participants comprehended the steps and the skills required for teaching literacy through the synthetic instruction brand of Jolly Phonics.

We understand that the reading process, in Jolly phonics instruction, is fast and rapid just as argued by Stuart (1999).

The results show that every phoneme is weighty in a given sound segment at any position; initial, middle or final and this further confirms the submissions by August et al., (2008), Stuart (2006) and Torgeson et al., (2006). It shows also that when sounds are taught incorrectly the blending will be difficult to work to do. Thus, the emphasis on hearing and recognizing the phonemes at all positions was emphasized.

Conversely, there was negligible mother tongue infringement in their pronunciation of the letter sounds particularly with the phoneme/p/. From the results, we can deduce that the trainees found consonant blends difficult to comprehend just as argued by Johnston and Watson, 2005; Johnston 2011; Liu, 2013; Rose, 2006; Sitthitikul, 2014; Torgeson et al., 2006. This as shown by the result was caused by the emphasis on the participants to pronounce the phonemes correctly.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This evaluation provides evidence that the Jolly Phonics programme can be successfully implemented in Kebbi state primary schools for teaching literacy skills to struggling-learners. The findings of this study further affirmed the outcome of the several studies that examined the effects of Jolly Phonics in enhancing fast track learning to the learning of a new language as demonstrated by the performance of the trainees. The teacher trainees were enthusiastic about the intervention as it would help them carry out their teaching of English language with passion and purpose. The style they have learned showed them that the teaching of the language must be child-centered as they were made as participants to actively be the vital part of the teaching and learning process. Hence, the study strongly recommends a comprehensive investigation that is more longitudinal to include testing and observing both the teachers and their pupils while teaching and learning in the actual language classrooms to ascertain a better result of the effects of the intervention. Further implication and recommendations of the findings of this study are: (a) the adoption of Jolly phonics instruction requires qualified and fully trained teachers with the prerequisite expertise of teaching the language through the multisensory synthetic method, (b) the pupils will learn better with fun and develop more attention in their learning when learning through word recognition, (c) the curriculum planners in the state should develop the system by fully incorporating the use of Jolly Phonics reading approach into the syllabus of primary schools (d) the Jolly Phonics instructional approach should be incorporated into the educational system of the teacher preparatory program.

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