Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.3 No.4 December, 2020; p.g. 207 – 214; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

SCHOOL LOCATION AND EQUITY IN LITERACY ACQUISITION: EXAMINING SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' INTEREST IN READING VIA SYNTHETIC PHONICS MODE

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine whether school location has an influence on second language learners' interest in reading when taught with synthetic phonics. The study was carried out on 118 primary one pupils' in public primary schools in Enugu state, Nigeria. The design of the study was quasi-experimental. The study participants who were assigned to experimental and control groups were pretested and post tested before and after treatment was administered. Data were collected using Reading Interest Inventory (RII). The collected data were analysed with Means, Standard Deviation and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Mean and Standard Deviation were used to answer the research questions while ANCOVA was used to test the hypothesis at p<0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study showed that school location significantly influenced pupils' interest in reading in favour of rural school pupils. It also showed that there was no significant interaction effect of teaching method and location on pupils' interest in reading. Based on the findings it was concluded that synthetic phonics is capable of bridging the gap in motivation and interest in learning between pupils in different school locations. It was also concluded that synthetic phonics has the potential to promote equity in literacy acquisition across school location. Thus, the adoption of synthetic phonics as part of initial reading instructional methods in Nigerian primary schools and effective monitoring of its proper implementation were recommended.

Keywords: School location, interest, reading culture, synthetic phonics, initial reading.

Introduction

School location denotes the geographic environment in which a school is sited. The environment could be rural or urban. Rural-urban location of schools has been found to be one of the important predictors of differences in pupils' academic achievement (Amadi, 2018). Research has shown that a child's academic achievement may be greatly influenced by the environment in which he lives or the school location (Amadi, 2018). Similarly, a child's interest in reading may be greatly affected by his school location. Researchers have given some explanations for the gaps in reading achievement of students based on research findings. XU (2009) observes that rural youths exhibit lower educational aspiration than their urban counterparts. He found that smaller percentages of students in rural schools were enrolled in post secondary institutions. Other studies have also shown that students in rural schools tend to place less value on academics, and so have lower academic motivation (Macmillan, 2012 and XU, 2009). This may subsequently affect their interest in learning and obviously their academic performance.

Evidence abound that parents of rural children tend to have less education than urban parents (Graham and Teague 2011 and Nwosu, 2009). This in addition to poverty may explain the non-challant attitude of parents towards the provision of reading and writing materials and irregularity of children to school. Nwosu (2009) notes that absenteeism amongst students in rural areas is as a result of poverty and child labour propagated by parents. This condition may be detrimental to effective teaching and learning as it may create unequal learning opportunity and engender lack of interest in reading which in turn results in poor academic achievement.

Differences in academic achievement of students have also been associated with differences in educational opportunities and school resources available to students in rural and urban environment. To substantiate this, Graham and Teague (2011) in their study on Early Childhood Education in United States report that 39 percent of teachers in rural schools accept that their school library was always adequate as against 61 percent of teachers in urban schools. In the same study, 13 percent of rural teachers indicate that their classrooms are often inadequate compared to 11 percent and 9 percent of teachers in suburban and urban schools respectively. Nwosu (2009) equally reiterated that schools located in urban areas are capable of attracting more quality students and teachers who are ready to take academic venture seriously. Unequal conditions present in different environments may lead to differences in interest in learning among students from different school locations. This variation has been associated with a number of factors ranging from differences in school facilities to learners' attitude towards learning. Differences in methods of teaching may also influence the interest of students in different school locations.

In the view of this Ibegbu, (2012) notes that interest refers to the act of showing a sense of concern or curiosity in acquiring knowledge in a subject. Interest is generated when a student understands the skills and facts in a subject and so becomes competent in it. The mastery of the skills in a subject area serves as a positive reinforcement and motivation which quickens students' curiosity and urge for further learning (Amadi, 2018).To stimulate the child's interest in learning a teacher is expected to engage such a child in a lot of activities. Ekpo *et al.,* 2007 notes that some of the activities that can stimulate pupils' interest in reading during initial reading instruction are, storytelling, use of well-illustrated and colourful story books and the use of visually, attractively decorated environment The use of effective methods for teaching initial reading can also stimulate pupils' interest in reading.

The use of synthetic phonics for teaching beginning reading is also expected to stimulate learners' interest and also enhance their achievement in different reading skills. Synthetic phonics first introduces children to the knowledge of letter sound relationships before they are exposed to the reading of real books. As a method of teaching initial reading, it exposes learners to the knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence and how to apply such knowledge in forming and decoding unfamiliar words. Synthetic phonics has proved to be effective in teaching reading particularly during the early years of primary education. The strategies that are involved in its teaching are found to be motivating, captivating and capable of evoking and sustaining the pupils' interest during instruction (Amadi, 2018).

A lot of studies have been conducted to determine the influence of school location on students' interest in different areas of study. The study of Omeje (2009) which determined the influence

of location on students' interest in Igbo writing revealed that location had no significant influence on students' interest in Igbo writing as students from both locations showed equal interest in learning. It also showed that there was no interaction effect of teaching method and location on students' interest in Igbo writing. The findings of Torty (2010) also revealed that location had no significant influence on students' interest in English language tenses. However, Ogboji's (2013) study showed that school location was a significant factor on students' interest in Cultural and Creative Arts (CCA) in favour of those from rural location. It further indicated that there was interaction effect of instructional resources and location on students' achievement and interest in CCA.

Similarly, Egbe (2015) discovered that school location was a significant factor on students' interest in favour of urban students who had higher scores. The results of the study further showed that there was no significant interaction effect of instructional approach and location on students' interest in English grammar. Based on available literature, it could be observed that not much has been done on the influence of location on students' interest in reading. Hence, the need for this study which determined the influence of location on pupils' interest in reading when taught with synthetic phonics.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised in order to facilitate this study:

1. What is the difference in the interest ratings of pupils in urban and rural schools in reading?
2. What is the interaction effect of teaching method and location on pupils' interest ratings in reading?

Hypotheses

Two hypotheses were formulated and tested at ($p<0.05$) to guide the study:

H_{o1} There is no significant difference in the mean interest ratings of pupils in urban and rural schools in reading.

H_{02} There is no significant interaction effect of location and teaching method on pupils' interest in reading.

Methodology

The study which was quasi-experimental specifically adopted the non-equivalent non-randomized control group design. The instrument used for data collection was Reading Interest Inventory (RII) which was constructed to test pupils' interest in reading when taught with synthetic phonics. The instrument incorporated items based on the cognitive, affective and psychomotor dimensions of expressions of interest. The instrument yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.87 and was administered as pretest and posttest before and after treatment was administered. Mean, Standard deviations and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) were used to analyse the generated data. While Mean and Standard deviations were used to answer the research questions, Analysis of Covariance was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance ($p<0.05$).The population of the study consisted of all the primary one public primary school pupils in Enugu East Local Government Area of Enugu State from where a sample of 118 pupils were selected using multi stage sampling technique. 66 pupils were sampled from urban location while 52 were drawn from rural location. One school each from

the two locations was assigned to the experimental group and another school to the control group through tossing of coin respectively.

Results

Research Question One

What is the difference in the interest ratings of pupils in urban and rural schools in reading?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Interest Ratings of Urban and Rural School Pupils in Reading

Location		Pretest		Post test		Gain Scores	Gain Scores Difference
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Urban	66	2.94	.24	3.07	.31	.13	.27
Rural	52	2.92	.26	3.32	.16	.40	

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations of interest rating scores of urban and rural school pupils in reading. The result reveals that pupils in urban schools had a mean interest rating score of 2.94 with a standard deviation of .24 while pupils in rural schools had a mean interest rating score of 2.92 and a standard deviation of .26in the pretest. Also, in the post test, urban school pupils had a mean interest rating score of 3.07 and a standard deviation of .31 while their rural counterparts obtained a mean interest rating score of 3.32 and a standard deviation of .16. The result indicates that the mean interest rating scores of pupils in rural schools are higher than their counterparts in urban schools. This implies that there is a difference in pupils' interest in reading based on school location. This can be seen from a gain score difference of .27 recorded in favour of pupils from rural location.

Research Question Two

What is the interaction effect of teaching method and location on pupils' interest ratings in reading?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Interaction Effect of Teaching Method and School Location on Pupils' Interest Ratings in Reading

Instructional Approaches	Location	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Synthetic Phonics (Experimental Group)	Urban	23	3.21	.36
	Rural	33	3.35	.18
Analytic Phonics (Control Group)	Urban	43	2.99	.26
	Rural	19	3.28	.11

Table 2 shows the mean interest rating scores and standard deviations of the interaction effect of teaching methods and school location on pupils' interest in reading. The result reveals that the mean interest rating scores of urban and rural pupils in the synthetic phonics group were 3.21 and 3.35 with standard deviations of 0.36 and 0.18 respectively. Meanwhile, urban and rural pupils in the control group had mean interest rating scores of 2.99 and 3.28 with standard deviations of 0.26 and 0.11 respectively. The result shows that rural pupils exposed to both synthetic phonics (experimental group) and analytic phonics (control group) had higher mean interest rating scores than their counterparts in urban schools. This implies that rural school

pupils recorded higher mean interest rating scores than the urban school counterparts irrespective of the teaching method used. Hence, there is interaction effect of teaching method and location on pupils' interest in reading. The level of significance of interaction effect on pupils' mean interest rating scores was further verified by testing hypothesis two.

Hypothesis One

There is no significant difference in the mean interest ratings of pupils in urban and rural schools in reading.

Table 3: Summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of Pupils' Mean Interest Scores in Reading when exposed to Synthetic Phonics Method and Analytic Phonics Method

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3.219[a]	8	.402	6.781	.000
Intercept	7.505	1	7.505	126.481	.000
Pretest	.003	1	.003	.056	.813
Method	.403	1	.403	6.796	.010
Location	1.183	1	1.183	19.941	.000
Error	6.467	109	.059		
Total	1202.271	118			
Corrected Total	9.686	117			

To test hypothesis one, the result in Table 3 was also used. The result reveals that school location is a significant factor in pupils' interest in reading as it indicates that F (1, 109) = 19.941, P = .000. Since the exact probability value of .000 is less than the level of significance set at 0.05 ($p<0.05$), the null hypothesis of no significant difference was rejected. It is therefore concluded that there is a significant difference in the mean interest ratings of urban and rural school pupils in reading in favour of pupils from rural location.

Hypothesis Two

There is no significant interaction effect of location and teaching method on pupils' interest in reading.

Table 4: Summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of Pupils' Mean Interest Scores in Reading when exposed to Synthetic Phonics Method and Analytic Phonics Method

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3.219[a]	8	.402	6.781	.000
Intercept	7.505	1	7.505	126.481	.000
Pretest	.003	1	.003	.056	.813
Method	.403	1	.403	6.796	.010
Location	1.183	1	1.183	19.941	.000
Method * Location	.112	1	.112	1.895	.171
Error	6.467	109	.059		
Total	1202.271	118			
Corrected Total	9.686	117			

Result of the analysis in Table 4 was further used to test hypothesis two. The table reveals that the exact probability value of .171 associated with teaching method and location is greater than 0.05 ($p>0.05$) level of significance; ($F(1, 109) = 1.895$, $p = .171$). Hence, the null hypothesis of no significant interaction effect of teaching method and location on pupils' mean interest rating in reading is accepted. It was therefore concluded that the interaction effect of location and teaching method on pupils' mean interest rating in reading was not significant. Thus, there is no significant interaction effect of location and teaching method on pupils' interest in reading.

Discussion

The result in Table 1 showed that pupils from rural schools had higher mean interest rating scores than those from urban schools. This means that there was a difference in pupils' interest in reading based on school location. This was further strengthened by the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) result in table 3 which revealed that there was a significant difference in the mean interest rating scores of urban and rural school pupils in reading. Hence, school location significantly influenced pupils' interest in reading in favour of rural pupils. The result is in agreement with Ogboji (2013) who reported that school location was a significant factor on students' interest in favour of students from rural location. However, it negates the findings of Egbe (2015) which showed that school location had significant influence on students' interest in favour of urban students who had higher interest scores. Egbe's finding suggests that urban students showed more attraction towards the source of knowledge. The result of this study is also at variance with the findings of Omeje (2009) and Torty (2010) which revealed that location had no significant influence on students' interest. In other words, students from urban and rural locations showed equal interest in learning.

The finding of the present study is a surprising one as it would be expected that urban pupils would show more interest towards the source of knowledge. This may be suggesting that pupils from rural schools found the activities involved in synthetic phonics very exciting and interesting and so showed more interest towards the source of knowledge than urban school pupils. The novelty of the teaching materials and techniques could have also heightened their

interest. The teachers in the rural schools also showed more eagerness in using the method and that would have as well motivated the pupils all the more.

The finding in Table 2 revealed that there was a significant interaction effect between teaching method and location on pupils' interest in reading. This was further verified by the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) in Table 4 which however showed that the interaction effect of teaching method and location on pupils' interest in reading was not significant. The finding aligns with Omeje (2009) who reported that there was no interaction effect between teaching method and location on students' interest in Igbo grammar. It however disagrees with Ogboji (2013) whose study revealed that there was interaction effect between instructional resources and location on students' interest in CCA. The finding of the study implies that pupils from both urban and rural schools show consistent interest in reading irrespective of teaching method. It also suggests that treatment is not sensitive to location and so would be effective in stimulating pupils' interest in reading irrespective of school location. The non-significant interaction between teaching method and location on pupils' interest in reading as revealed in this study also suggests that the effectiveness of synthetic phonics on pupils' interest in reading is not influenced by school location.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study further prove that the effectiveness of synthetic phonics on students' interest is not influenced by school location. The result revealed that rural pupils showed more interest in reading than urban pupils when taught with synthetic phonics. In other words, synthetic phonics has the potential to promote equity in literacy acquisition across school location. Hence, it is recommended that pupils from different school locations should be sufficiently exposed to equal literacy opportunities to bridge the gap in achievement among learners from urban and rural school environments. The adoption of synthetic phonics as part of initial reading method of instruction in Nigerian primary schools and effective monitoring of its proper implementation are also recommended

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