



GENDER DIFFERENCES AND INTEREST IN READING: EXAMINING THE LITERACY ACQUISITION OF NIGERIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

This study which investigated the relationship between gender and pupils' interest in reading was conducted in Enugu, Nigeria. It adopted the non-equivalent, non-randomized control group quasi experimental design. The population of the study consisted of all the primary one school pupils in Enugu East local government area while the sample comprised 118 pupils drawn from four public primary schools. The schools were assigned to experimental and control groups through tossing of coin while gender was purposively selected. The instrument used for data collection was Reading Interest Inventory (RII) which was constructed by the researcher. Data generated were analysed using Mean, Standard deviations and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviations while the hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance using ANCOVA. The findings of the study indicated that gender was not a significant factor on pupils' interest in reading. It also revealed that there was no significant interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' interest in reading. It was concluded that synthetic phonics is able to stimulate and sustain pupils' interest in reading gender notwithstanding. The adoption of fun-filled and activity-based instructional methods such as synthetic phonics for initial reading instruction was therefore recommended.

Keywords: interest in reading, reading interest inventory, gender, reading instruction, initial reading

1. Introduction

Gender refers to the attribute of being masculine or feminine. It describes the differences that exist between male and female with regards to their physique and the roles and duties assigned to them socio-culturally. Literacy acquisition and interest in

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reading can be expressed according to gender. There is a number of reported evidence of gender differences in achievement in different subject areas. For instance, Education, Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), (2010) reports that some studies have revealed that girls consistently showed superior performance in reading and writing than boys. In proffering explanations for this gap in achievement, Gyimah, Amponsah, Pin and Kwarternng (2012) attribute the difference to differences associated to the different parts of the brain used by boys and girls in processing language.

Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) (2009) further makes a catalogue of explanations for gender gap in reading. The council reports that girls tend to read more non-recommended texts than boys. Girls also seem to spend more of their time sharing and discussing reading materials than boys who prefer watching and discussing sports or movies. There is also reported evidence of gender differences in genre preferences. Some studies indicate that girls prefer texts such as horoscopes, popular fiction, romance stories or novels, classic fiction, plays, poetry, song lyrics and books on contemporary issues while boys have more interest in cartoons, comics, news, sport pages, science fiction and fantasy stories, hobby and craft books (Katz and Sokai, 2003). Most of the boys' preferred texts are not classified within school acceptable reading texts. Hence, they may not be available or seen in most classrooms and school library shelves. On the other hand, girls' preferred texts fall within acceptable school-based reading texts and tend to be available in most classrooms or school library shelves.

The unavailability and unacceptability of boys' preferred texts in classrooms and school libraries may make the boys lose interest in reading thereby leading to their subsequent underachievement in reading. But the positive attitude of girls towards reading enables them to acquire a lot of experiences that give them advantage over boys who exhibit less positive attitude to reading. Logan and Johnston (2009) view attitude to reading as an important factor that influence the regularity of children's independent reading, their rate of involvement in class reading activities, their enjoyment of reading and their reading achievement. Literature has equally shown that positive attitude to reading tend to be associated with high reading achievement. Gender gap in reading is thus associated with differences in attitudes and behaviours towards reading which also engender positive or negative interest towards reading.

Interest seems to be a stimulant to academic achievement. It 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. Interest thus refers to the act of showing a sense of concern or curiosity in acquiring knowledge in a subject (Ibegbu, 2012). The teacher can engage in a lot of activities to be able to stimulate the child's interest in learning. In initial reading instruction, some of the activities that can stimulate pupils' interest in reading are, storytelling, use of well-illustrated and colourful story books and the use of visually, attractively decorated environment (Ekpo *et al.*, 2007). The use of effective methods for teaching initial reading may also stimulate pupils' interest in reading.

Using synthetic phonics for initial reading instruction is also expected to stimulate learners' interest and also enhance their achievement in different reading skills. Synthetic phonics is used to first teach children letter sound relationships before they are introduced 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 been perceived to be effective in teaching reading particularly during the early years of primary education. The strategies that are applied in its teaching are found to be motivating, captivating and capable of evoking and sustaining the pupils' interest during instruction. Interest in reading can be expressed according to gender.

Quite a number of studies have been conducted on the influence of gender on students' interest in different areas of study. The study of Umo (2001) determined the influence of gender on students' interest in Igbo grammar. The result of the study revealed that gender was a significant factor on students' interest in Igbo grammar in favour of girls. Umo however observed that there was no significant interaction effect of method and gender on students' interest in Igbo grammar. Similarly, Ogboji's (2013) study showed that there was significant difference in the mean interest rating scores of male and female students in cultural and creative arts (CCA) in favour of females. In other words, gender had influence on the students' interest in CCA. The findings of the study further showed significant interaction effect of instructional resources and gender on students' interest in CCA. However, Egbe (2015) observed that gender had no significant influence on students' interest in English grammar. The study also showed no significant interaction effect of instructional approach and gender on students' interest on English grammar. In corroboration, the studies of Udofia (2008) and Torty (2010) showed non-existence of interaction between teaching method and gender on students' interest. Hence, based on available literature not much has been explored on the influence of gender on students' interest in reading. This study thus determines the influence of gender on pupils' interest in reading in a synthetic phonics class.

2. Research Questions

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

1. What is the difference in the interest ratings of male and female pupils in reading?
2. What is the interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' interest ratings in reading?

2.1 Hypotheses

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

H₀₁ There is no significant difference in the mean interest ratings of male and female pupils in reading.

H₀₂ There is no significant interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' interest in reading.

3. Methodology

The study was quasi-experimental. It was specifically the non-equivalent non-randomized control group design. It comprised a population of 1844 primary one school pupils out of which a sample of 118 pupils were selected using multi stage sampling technique. The variable of gender was purposively selected. 62 males and 56 females were used for the study. Data were collected using 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 validity and reliability of the instrument were tested and it yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.87. The instrument 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. Mean and Standard deviations were used to answer the research questions while Analysis of Covariance was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance ($p < 0.05$).

4. Results

Research Question One

What is the difference in the interest ratings of male and female pupils in reading?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Interest Ratings of Male and Female pupils in Reading

Gender	Pre test		Post test		Gain Scores	Gain Scores Difference
	N	Mean	SD	Mean		
Male	62	2.93	.25	3.13	.34	.20
Female	56	2.93	.29	3.33	.15	.40

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations of interest rating scores of male and female pupils in reading. The result reveals that in the pretest, male pupils had a mean interest rating score of 2.93 with standard deviation of .25 while their female counterparts had a mean interest rating score of 2.93 and a standard deviation of .29. Similarly, in the post test, male pupils had a mean interest rating score of 3.13 and a standard deviation of .34 while their female counterparts recorded a mean interest rating score of 3.33 with a standard deviation of .15. The result indicates that female pupils had a slight higher mean interest rating score than their male counterparts. This can be seen from a gain score difference of 0.20 indicating a slight gender difference in pupils' interest in reading in favour of female pupils.

Research Question Two

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

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

Instructional Approaches	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Synthetic Phonics (Experimental Group)	Male	28	3.27	.35
	Female	28	3.31	.17
Analytic Phonics (Control Group)	Male	34	3.02	.29
	Female	28	3.15	.22

Table 2 shows the mean interest rating scores and standard deviations of the interaction effect of teaching methods and gender on pupils' interest in reading. The result reveals that male pupils exposed to synthetic phonics method had a mean interest rating score of 3.27 and a standard deviation of .35, while their female counterparts in the same group had a mean interest rating score of 3.31 and a standard deviation of .17. Similarly, male pupils exposed to analytic phonics had a mean interest rating score of 3.02 and a standard deviation of .29, while female pupils exposed to the same method had a mean interest rating score of 3.15 and a standard deviation of .22. The result indicates that the mean interest rating scores of female pupils in both groups were higher than that of their male counterparts. Therefore, the effect of teaching methods on pupils' mean interest rating scores is not the same for male and female pupils in reading. Hence, there is interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' interest in reading. The level of significance of interaction effect in the mean interest rating scores was further verified by testing hypothesis two.

Hypothesis One

There is no significant difference in the mean interest ratings of male and female pupils in reading.

Table 3: Summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of Male and Female Pupils' Mean Interest Ratings in Reading when exposed to Synthetic Phonics

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
Gender	.091	1	.091	1.541	.217
Error	6.467	109	.059		
Total	1202.271	118			
Corrected Total	9.686	117			

Table 3 was used to test hypothesis one. The result shows that there is no significant difference in the mean interest ratings of male and female pupils in reading as it

revealed that ($F(1,109) = 1.541, P = .217$). With a probability value of .217 which is greater than the level of significance set at 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), the null hypothesis of no significant difference in the mean interest ratings of male and female pupils in reading is accepted. Hence, gender is not a significant factor in pupils' interest in reading.

Hypothesis Two

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

Table 4: Summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of the interaction effect of Teaching method and gender on Pupils' Mean Interest Ratings in Reading

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
Gender	.091	1	.091	1.541	.217
Method * Gender	2.212	1	2.212	.000	.985
Error	6.467	109	.059		
Total	1202.271	118			
Corrected Total	9.686	117			

The result in Table 4 was used to test hypothesis two. The table reveals that the exact probability value of .985 associated with teaching method and gender is greater than 0.05 level of significance; ($F(1, 109) = .000, p = .985, p > 0.05$). Thus, the null hypothesis of no significant interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' mean interest ratings in reading is upheld. The researcher therefore, concludes that the interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' mean interest rating in reading is not significant. Hence, there is no significant interaction effect of gender and teaching method on pupils' interest in reading.

5. Discussion

The result in Table 1 showed that there is a gender difference in pupils' interest in reading in favour of female pupils who had a slightly higher mean interest rating score in the post test. This result was further verified by the ANCOVA result in Table two which revealed that gender was not a significant factor on pupils' interest in reading. This means that the interest of both male and female pupils were equally motivated and aroused towards the acquisition of reading skills through the use of synthetic phonics. In other words, the slight higher mean interest rating score recorded for female pupils might as well be a chance factor. Hence, the method provokes positive interest towards reading in the pupils irrespective of gender. This justifies Logan and Johnstons' (2009) view that attitude to reading is an important factor that influences the regularity of children's independent reading, their rate of involvement in class reading activities,

their enjoyment of reading and their reading achievement. The finding also validates Ekpo et al's (2007) observation that jolly phonics teaching materials stimulate and captivate children's imagination and interest, and enhance their reading skills.

The result of the study is in line with Egbe (2015) who also found that gender had no significant influence on students' interest in English grammar. It also agrees with Ifeakor's (2005) finding that gender was not a significant factor in students' interest in Chemistry. The researcher noted that both male and female students had equal interest in Chemistry when taught with commercially produced computer assisted instruction package. The implication is that, in both language and science studies, activity-based instructional methods are capable of provoking the interest of students towards learning gender notwithstanding. However, the result negates Umo's (2001) finding that gender was a significant factor on students' interest in Igbo grammar in favour of girls. This seems to suggest that research on the influence of gender on students' interest is not one-directional. Rather, gender influence on students' interest is still inconclusive. One possible reason for this study's finding could be because both male and female pupils showed positive interest in reading when taught with synthetic phonics. The fun and exciting activities learners were exposed to in the course of instruction were able to provoke their interest in reading despite their gender.

The finding presented in Table 3 showed that there was interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' interest ratings in reading. It showed that female pupils had higher mean interest rating scores than the male pupils despite the method used. The result was further evaluated by the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) presented in Table 4 which however indicated that the level of interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' interest in reading was not statistically significant. Hence, there was no significant interaction effect of teaching method and gender on pupils' interest in reading. The earlier slight higher interest rating scores obtained by female pupils may be a chance factor. This finding agrees with Torty (2010) who reported that there was no interaction effect of method and gender on students' interest in English language tenses. It also corroborates Udofia's (2008) report of non-existence of interaction between teaching method and gender on students' interest in Introductory Technology. The finding is however not consistent with Ogboji (2013) who observed the existence of interaction between instructional resources and gender on students' interest in CCA. The finding of the study thus portrays a consistency in pupils' interest in reading across gender. It therefore suggests that synthetic phonics is able to stimulate and sustain pupils' interest in reading no matter their gender. In effect, the method proves to be gender friendly and so can be used to partial out the persistent gender gap in achievement in language related subjects.

5.1 Conclusion and Recommendations

Evidence from this study proves that gender did not significantly influence pupils' interest in reading. Male and female pupils showed equal interest in reading when taught with synthetic phonics. Therefore, it can be said that synthetic phonics is able to

promote and sustain pupils' interest in reading gender notwithstanding. Hence, it is not gender sensitive and thus produces positive effects in reading across gender. Since interest enhances achievement, fun-filled and activity-based instructional methods capable of boosting interest and achievement in reading such as synthetic phonics should be adopted for teaching reading in Nigerian primary schools.

About the Author

Eugenia Ada Amadi holds a Ph.D in Language Education /English. She is a lecturer at the General Studies Division, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Agbani Enugu State. Her research interest is in Reading Education (particularly beginning reading), teaching and learning of English as a second language and other aspects of applied linguistics. She has published articles on initial reading instruction and medium of instruction. She is a member of Reading Association of Nigeria and International Literacy Association.

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