

**RAISING LITERACY LEVEL OF CHILDREN IN DIFFICULT  
CIRCUMSTANCES: A CASE STUDY OF JOLLY PHONICS  
PROJECTS IN NIGERIA**

**By**

**PROF COMFORT M.EKPO  
DR. THELMA EKUKINAM  
DR STELLA NWOSU  
DR. IME EMAH**

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF UYO, UYO**

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper is the report of the study that sought to find out the relative effects of jolly phonics as a fast track strategy in enhancing primary one pupils reading ability. A pretest post-test experimental research design was adopted for the study. The sample consisted of 168 primary one pupils from five schools purposefully selected from the three senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria. Two intact classes in each school was used, two research questions were formulated to guide the study and one null hypothesis were tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance. Data collected were analyzed using means, percentages and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and the Burt's Reading Test. The result showed significant improvement reading ability of the pupils attributable to the utilization of the Jolly phonics method. This was significant enough to be replicated in other parts of the state and the nation as a whole.*

**Key Words:** Literacy, children, difficult circumstances, Jolly Phonics

## Introduction/Background

There is a low literacy status among primary school graduates in Nigeria [Ekpo et al 2006] which has led to poor academic performance in subsequent years, examination malpractice, restiveness among the youths and high rate of school dropout. Teachers appear helpless because they are giving out what they had (teaching the way they were taught}. Parents are frustrated and there is a need to seek for and employ alternative instructional strategy. Globally, Early Grade Literacy is very significant in every child's academic development. A child who fails to read and write when he/she should, will always remain behind each academic year because reading ability will progressively be the relevant tool for acquiring knowledge in all disciplines. Children in pre-primary level (kindergarten to the third grade can learn to read but after that level, they should be reading. Sunday Punch Newspaper (Nigeria) of 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2010 carried a pathetic story of how a five-year-old girl was flogged to death by her mother for her inability to read A B C. The fast-track Jolly Phonics learning package offers a workable strategy that could assist achievement faster. This model has now been replicated in over 30 states of Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana and India.

The Jolly Phonics (JP) projects were established as an intervention to the low English Language literacy levels observed among school pupils in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria as a whole. The projects earlier tagged, "Read and Write Now", later "Read and Write Forever" were initiated



from the Institute of Education, University of Uyo in 2006 with the following objectives among others:

- To increase the literacy level of State Primary School pupils and to sustain a high literacy level among those pupils,
- To continue to raise literacy levels in Akwa Ibom State using the synthetic phonics method (Jolly Phonics) and to further enhance the existing Read and Write Now (RAWN) model so that it may be effectively replicated in other states, countries and organizations.

The Jolly Phonics projects generally involve the training, retraining, resourcing and supporting early grade public school teachers on the use of the Jolly Phonics synthetic teaching method. In Nigeria, the project, by 2015 had trained over 21,644 teachers and head teachers from 15 states in the use of the JP method with 953,184 potentially benefitting from the project (ULS, 2015).

Synthetic phonics (UK) or blended Phonics (US) is a method of teaching reading first with letter sounds and then builds up the sound together to blend and achieve full pronunciation of the whole words. The children are taught how the English alphabetic code works ( letter/ sound correspondences) and to 'synthesise' (blending sounds to form words) and then segment the sounds to write words ( Loyld, 2016)..Jolly Phonics is an international synthetic phonics literacy teaching method that provides a multisensory resource package for learning of reading and writing. The method includes the use of stories, actions and songs in teaching letter sounds. It is participatory.

Globally, research has revealed that JP method is an effective method of improving reading and writing skills among young children (Johnson & Watson, (2005); Ekpo, Udosen , Afangideh , & Ikorok , (2007). Further works in this area (Rose, 2006; Stuart. 2004;) have shown that synthetic phonics or early phoneme awareness and phonics teaching improves reading , spelling and writing abilities in young children. Similarly, the impact of the JP method on children's reading

ability has shown to be quite high among low the economic status pupils (Schagen. & Shamsan 2007:) and pupils with special needs (Loyld, 2015).

The Jolly Phonics synthetic phonics method has also been found to increase children's English Language literacy level under various difficult pupil contexts, from low income parents, low educational level of parents to poor learning environments where there are (no desks, no class rooms etc.) difficult teaching and pupil contexts.(ULS, 2015)

In response to the call by the international community to ensure that nations eliminate disparities in education that may be to the detriment of the poor, street and working children; UNESCO in collaboration with UNICEF set up an Educational programme aimed at, meeting children's educational needs among other things. Experiences from these Programmes posed some relevant concerns such as: "How to use education to prevent children who grew up in risky surroundings from taking to the streets; "How to ensure they remain within the formal or non-formal education setting" (UNESCO 1999). A significant contribution of the Jolly Phonics literacy approach is in its ability to attract pupils to school and hold their interest in reading due to multi-sensory component of the learning kits. Statistics has shown that children exposed to this method are interested in school and are excited about being in school because of the fun they derive from reading using the synthetic phonics approach (ULS, 2015).

English Language is the most prominent medium of instruction all over the world and it is given prime position in every school curriculum. It is both a subject in the curriculum and the medium of instructions, Kuchah (2015).In Nigeria and in most developing Nations teachers have been forced to teach students under difficult circumstances; this includes learning environments that do not meet the minimum standard condition for learning as well as children whose socio-economic situations hinder them from effective learning. Difficult circumstances according to



Kuchah (2015) include those circumstances that are outside the control of teachers and learners but which affect the daily experiences of teaching and learning significantly”.

The call for the implementation of the Education for All Policy by UNESCO and UNICEF has led to the provision of free primary education to its citizens by many developing states including Nigeria without corresponding increase in provision of resources Kuchah (2015). This has resulted in over populated class rooms and dearth of learning resources. There is therefore universal schooling bereft of quality. Consequently teachers are forced to cope with overcrowded class rooms, lack of learning resources, text books, lack of libraries, low teaching proficiency, qualification and motivation, student’s limited exposure to English Language usage, lack of financial and material resources and other cultural constraints (Kuchah 2015 ‘3’). The fact remains that the teacher as well as the pupil are under a great deal of physical and emotional pressure in these difficult circumstances. Even the most competent teachers working under such circumstances may not achieve optimal delivery. This accentuates the need for pedagogical practices that can be used to improve learning irrespective of the circumstances.

Literacy is an integral part of basic education and the benefit of quality basic education to individuals and the society is immense. A good basic education strengthened by the acquisition of literacy and numeracy is the minimum educational foundation upon which an individual can build lifelong learning attitudes. For such reasons, the Federal Government has been emphasizing functional literacy in all its policy documents: (the National Policy on Education in 1977 to date; the Decree establishing the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education, Decree 17 of 1990; the Vision 20:2020 and the National Economic).

It is recognized by Government that literacy education will help equip individuals with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for economic self-sufficiency, poverty reduction and sustainable development. With about 50 percent of the nation's population being children, education is seen under NEEDS as the most important bridge to the future and a powerful instrument of empowerment to the citizenry.

*In order to give effect to its intention, the Federal Government of Nigeria identified literacy as a critical success factor in achieving its developmental objectives. Consequently, literacy is given a prime position in the national development frameworks. For instance, the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), the Vision 20-2020, the Federal Ministry of Education Roadmap for Nigerian Education Sector as well as the Universal Basic Education Programme (UBEP) all have articulated policy for literacy. (FME, 2010:18)*

In the light of the above, the use of alternative method to improve English Language literacy was sought. This paper reports the effect of Jolly phonics as a fast track literacy method on enhancing primary one pupils reading ability and an effective literacy intervention for children under circumstances of economic depression and poverty.

## **Research Methods**

1. To what extent do post-test mean scores of pupils reading ability in the experimental and control groups differ?
2. What is the pupils opinion of Jolly Phonics as a learning strategy?



## **Hypothesis**

There is no significant difference in the post-test mean scores of pupils reading ability in the experimental and control groups

## **The Study**

A purposive sampling technique was adopted in selecting sample (based on the population of the school), 2 governmental primary schools each in the 3 senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom state for the study 84 was in the control and 84 for in the experimental group.

The pretest-posttest non randomized, quasi experimental design was used for the study: As the pupils were used in their intact classes. Both the control and the experimental groups were administered pre-test using the Burt's Reading Test at the beginning of the academic session, another test was subsequently administered as a posttest with the Burt's Reading Test after the intervention. For 36 weeks, the experimental group was taught reading and writing in English using the Jolly phonics resources and methods by Jolly Phonics trained teachers from their school, while the control groups were taught the usual expository method.

The instrumentation used for the study was the Burst's Reading Test, a standardized reading test designed to elicit from the respondents reading ability to read two letter words and gradually three, four, and more letter words. The number of words the pupils are able to read is matched with the Burt's scale and reading, this determines the pupils reading age. The data collected were analyzed using Burt's Reading Test Conversion Sheet, means, standard deviation, percentages and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA).

The experimental groups were further interviewed to elicit their opinion of the JP method in order to provide answer to research question 2.

## Results

RQ1. *To what extent do post-test mean scores of pupils reading ability in the experimental and control groups differ?*

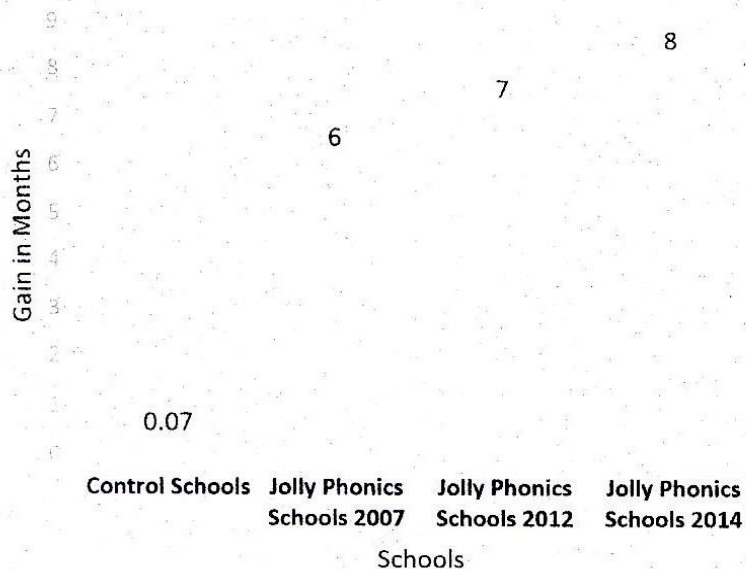
**Table1: Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) Analysis Showing Pupils' Reading Level Before and After Treatment**

S/N	Schools	Groups	N	Pre-test mean	SD	Post-test mean	SD	Post- test Gain Score
1	1	Exp.	15	0.13	0.35	4.91	2.85	2.50
		control	15	0.06	0.26	.31	.35	
2	2	Exp.	20	0.10	0.31	5.10	4.38	4.12
		control	20	0.00	0.00	0.05	.22	
3	3	Exp.	14	0.00	0.00	4.64	5.60	4.84
		control	14	0.07	0.27	.50	.76	
4	4	Exp.	13	0.00	0.00	10.00	7.54	6.45
		control	13	0.08	0.28	77	1.09	
5	5	Exp.	22	0.32	0.65	15.18	8.26	6.39
		control	22	0.00	0.00	1.36	1.87	
Total			168	Average				5.80

At a glance one finds that the post mean scores of the experimental groups far outweigh those of their counterparts in the control groups. The pre-test mean score reveals that both groups could not read at the initial stage and did not differ much. But there was a remarkable difference in their reading ages with the treatment group showing an average gain of 5 years 8 months.

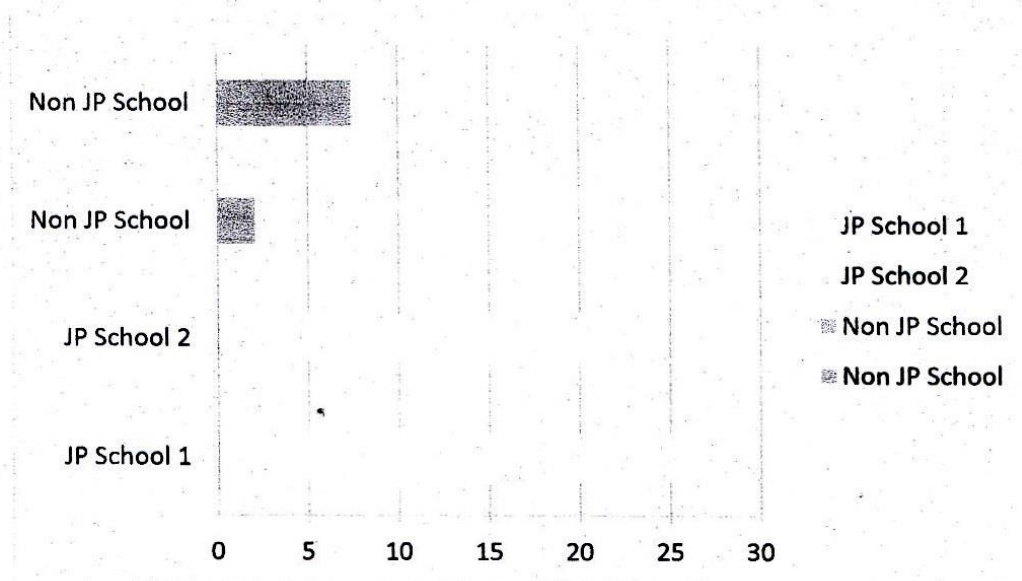


**Fig. 1 Graph Showing Average Gain in Chronological Reading Age With and Without Jolly Phonics in Akwa Ibom State**



It is also revealed in fig. 1 that the further test of Primary One pupils' reading ability from 2007 to 2014 revealed that the reading age had consistently increased from 6 to 8 years among Jolly Phonics pupils'; While the control groups have remained at 0.07 years.

**Fig. 2 Chart Showing Average Number of Words Read Correctly using Burt Reading Test by Primary 5 Jolly Phonics and Non Jolly Phonics Pupil's**

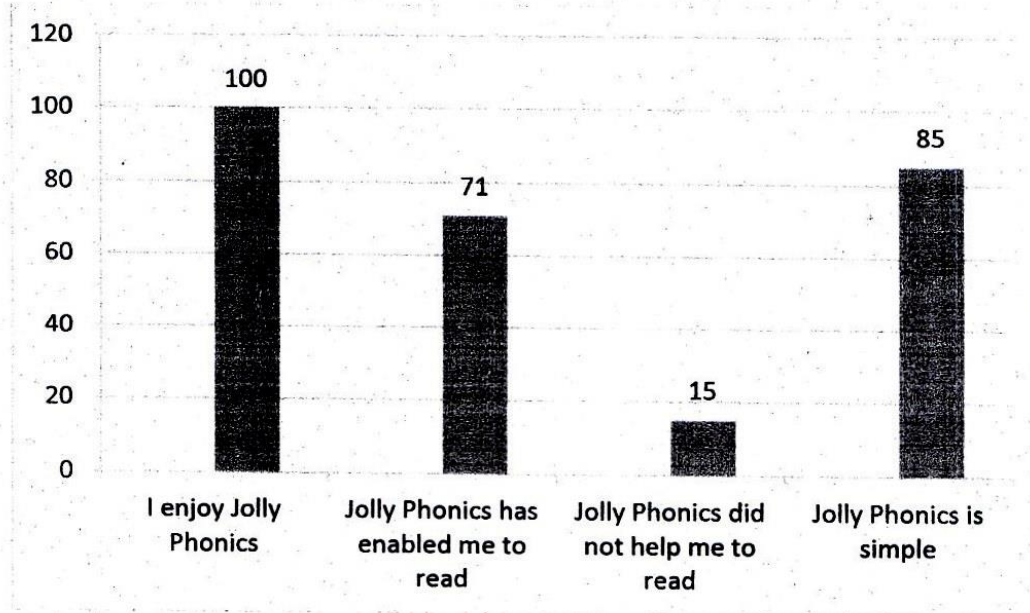


Similarly Fig. 2 reveals that the Jolly Phonics children at Primary five could read an average of 25 words, whereas the pupils of the non-Jolly Phonics schools could read an average of 6 words. This means that according to Burt reading age norms, the Jolly Phonics children were reading 12 months ahead of their non-Jolly Phonics peers.



RQ 2. *What is the pupils' opinion of Jolly Phonics?*

Fig. 3 Percentages of Pupils; Response to items on their Opinion of Jolly Phonics.



In fig. 3 displays graphically the results of; interviews with the children learning with Jolly Phonics. It reveals in percentages the children's opinion of Jolly Phonics. All the pupils interviewed (100%) enjoy learning to read with Jolly Phonics and 75% of them said that they were able to learn reading faster due to the use the JP resources and method.

**HO:** *There is no significant difference in the post test means score of pupil's reading ability in the experimental and control groups.*

**Table 2: Analysis of Co-Variance (ANCOVA) On the Effects of Treatment On Pupils' Reading Ability**

Source	Type III Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2561.547	2	1280.773	44.377	.000
Intercept	3074.166	1	3074.166	106.504	.000
Re -test	10.165	1	10.165	.352	.554
Treatment	2445.970	1	2445.970	84.740	.000
Error	4762.633	165	28.864		
Total	107.4.400	168			
Corrected Total	7324.180	167			

R squared = 3.50 (adjusted R Squared = .342)

The table shows an F-ratio of 84.740. this indicates that treatment effect was significant and that the experimental group's performance was as a result of the potentialities of Jolly Phonics intervention.

## Findings

- Children in the experimental group had a reading gain of 1 month to 2 years, in their reading ages due to of their exposure to Jolly phonics.
- The children preferred the use of JP as they felt it helped them to learn how to read faster.



## Discussion of Findings

As shown in the first table, there was no marked difference in the pre- test mean scores for both experimental and control groups. A closer look at the table reveals that the post- test means scores for the experimental groups outweighed those of their counterpart in the control groups. The significant difference in performance of the experimental over the control group as indicated by the significant t- calculated (9.42) on table 3 can be explained by the fact that the children in the experimental groups were exposed to jolly phonics, It is observed that the synthetic phonics based approach has the potential to impact on children's reading ability. Similarly, the ANCOVA analysis in table 2 showed that the significant effect of the experimental group's performance was as a result of the potentialities of Jolly Phonics intervention. These findings further agrees with the findings of Rose, 2006; Stuart. 2004; and Johnson & Watson, 2005

### Recommendations:

The following proposals were made after the preliminary report

- Replication of the study in other parts of Akwa Ibom state.
- Replication of the project in other states in Nigeria.
- Initiative to influence the curriculum for the initial teacher training programmes nation-wide.
- The need to domesticate the learning resources (especially the decodable books).

The study has been replicated in over thirty States in Nigeria since 2007 as Jolly Phonics projects and in each case the findings have been similar, the Jolly Phonics method has been found to be very effective in teaching literacy to early grade pupils and for improving the overall literacy levels of public primary school children irrespective of their **circumstances**

### Initial Challenges with the project:

- Incessant transfer of Jolly Phonics teachers across states where the project is on
- Need to create a time slot for JP in school time tables
- Need for more refresher training for teachers in development plan
- This called for a systematic Teaching Development Plan
- Need for more involvement of Local Education Authority (LEA) secretaries and Education Officers
- Need for more support from SUBEB and encouragement for the project.
- Sustainability of the project: Need to influence the curriculum of teacher training for the primary school level

These challenges are being addressed systematically.

The Literacy Center at the Faculty of Education, University of Uyo has become a clearing house for the use of Jolly Phonics in Akwa Ibom State and the neighbouring states. The University of Uyo team works with a team of 30 expert teachers called, “Teacher network”. They monitor the project across the state and consult for other states.

Every State in Nigeria now has a contact for the systematic implementation of the fast-track strategy – Jolly Phonics.

If the tempo of the training in JP strategy is sustained the much needed Universal Literacy would be achieved and reading culture developed. The Innovation is systematically diffused

### Conclusion

The use of the Jolly Phonics method results in tremendous increased in early grade pupils reading ability. The pupils liked the method and felt they were able to read better due to the method.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings the study recommends that



1. The synthetic Jolly Phonics method should be incorporated into the curriculum of Colleges of Education and universities.
2. State and Federal governments should continue to support Jolly Phonics method through adequate training and monitoring of their teachers.
3. State should conduct similar studies to ascertain the efficacy of the method .

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