

Understanding the Effects of L1 Oracy Skill on Phonological Awareness among Yoruba Beginner Readers

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Abstract

One of the major baggage that beginner readers in second language take into literacy lessons is oracy in the first language. Using the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, this paper aims at examining the effects of Yoruba oracy skills on Yoruba phonological awareness among beginner readers in order to have an empirical understanding of how oracy skills affect literacy development. The study conducted Yoruba phonological awareness test for 147 Basic One pupils using the adapted form of Hastings & Prince Edward District School Board's phonological assessment tool. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings show that oracy in Yoruba enhances word awareness in the language while syllable, onset-rime and phonemic awareness are dormant in Yoruba beginner readers prior to literacy instructions in the language. The study recommends investigating influences of oracy on other metalinguistic abilities like morphological and syntactic awareness.

Keywords: *Oracy, phonological awareness, second language reading, Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, Descriptive Statistics*

1. Introduction

Oracy implies being able to communicate effectively, it involves using the right words to convey your ideas and being able to organize them in a way that makes sense to other people. Oracy is the most common and fundamental type of human communication. It is essential for expressing oneself and taking part in civic life. According to Kaldahl, et al. (2019, p. 1), oracy creates the foundation for the development of language learning system by providing access to the vast world of words and ideas which aids the learning of written code and other languages. Oracy is productive, it entails sharing one's thoughts with others by converting them into sounds.

Children experiences in utilizing language orally before entering the educational system do have big impact on them. Oracy is one of the primary language skills that a child learns in the family, at home. Children frequently interact using secondary discourses away from the home, such as in school. Through an intensive process, they learn oral proficiency in addition to a variety of other cognitive and social abilities. In Nigeria, many school children learn literacy in Yoruba as their first language and English as a second language. More often than not, majority of the children embark on their literacy journey with a baggage of oracy skills in their first language. Phonological awareness is a metalinguistic knowledge that many researchers have described as the highest predictor of success in reading (Rubba, 2003; Durgunoglu, 1993). understanding how the effortlessly acquired oracy skill can affect phonological awareness will apparently uncover some pedagogical insights.

2. Literature review

This section discusses key terms that are related to the study.

2.1. Reading and metalinguistic knowledge

Reading is a very complex process which involves deciphering the written form of a language. Alderson (2000, p. 3) opines that an individual's ability to process, much less to synthesize everything that is written is reading. Carrell & Grabe (2010, p. 234) assert that "a definition of reading requires some recognition that a reader engages in processing at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and discourse levels". Reading scholars have stressed the goal of learning to read around meaning. Truly, the goal of reading is to get meaning from print and obtain meaning from written language, but this

falls short of specifying what is actually learned. Perfetti & Zhang (1995, p. 25) propose a definition to capture what is learned in learning to read thus: “learning to read is learning how one’s writing system encodes one’s language”. This submission basically claims that reading is about converting graphic input (letters, words, characters) to linguistic-conceptual objects (words, morphemes). Learning to read is essentially learning to navigate between the spoken form and the printed form of the language.

Chomsky (1975) defines the field of metalinguistics as the subject knowledge of the characteristics and structures of language. Metalinguistic knowledge gives the ability to reflect on the nature of language. According to Tunmer et al. (1988), metalinguistic ability is developed in tandem with language acquisition. It allows individuals to detect errors as they speak. Oracy is an output linguistic skill whereas reading is one of the input language skills. Oracy cannot affect reading directly, rather it influences phonological awareness which is a metalinguistic skill to impact reading just as knowledge of lexemes in a language (morphological and vocabulary awareness) aids reading in that language. Tunmers et al. (1988) opine that the transfer between metalinguistic and linguistic abilities are bidirectional. Fig 1. Shows the process of the transfer.

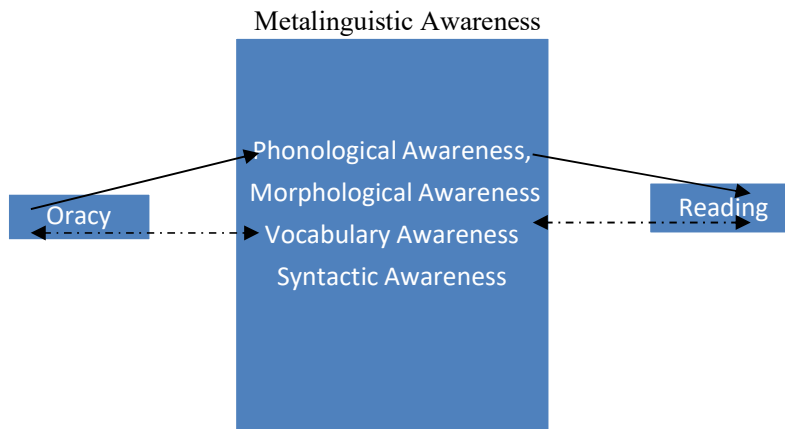


Fig. 1. Transfer between Linguistic and Metalinguistic Abilities

2.2. Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness (PA) refers to an individual's ability to reflect and manipulate the sound structure of spoken words. It is the ability to attend explicitly to the phonological structure of spoken words rather than just to their meanings and syntactic roles. Phonological awareness involves the understanding that sentences are made up of words, words are made up of groups of sounds (syllables), and syllables are made up of individual sounds, or phonemes. It is linked to oral language development because it basically concerns the knowledge that smaller and discernible units that make up a word. Stahl and Murray (1994, p.221) defines this skill as '...an awareness of sounds in spoken (not written) words that is revealed by such abilities as rhyming, matching initial consonants, counting the number of phonemes in spoken words'. Phonological awareness is a cognitive skill that can transfer between languages and is considered an important reading predictor in alphabetic languages, not only for the mother tongue, but for an L2 as well.

This ability to detect, distinguish between and manipulate the constituent sounds of words: syllables, onsets, rimes and phonemes has been closely linked to success in reading; in fact, it is the most common difficulty for learners with reading disabilities such as dyslexia. The relationship between reading and phonological awareness is considered to be reciprocal: literacy increases phonological awareness, and a certain level of phonological awareness is necessary for reading to be successful. Durgunoglu, et al. (1993) argue that phonological awareness and its relationship to reading acquisition is not tied to a particular language, it is a meta- or common underlying linguistic ability that has cross-linguistic repercussions.

The relationship between reading and phonological awareness has been shown to be bidirectional, with certain aspects of phonological awareness playing a fundamental role in facilitating early reading acquisition, while reading acquisition itself facilitates the emergence of yet other, more sophisticated aspects of phonological awareness (Adams, 1990). The causal role of phonological awareness in reading acquisition is also supported by intervention studies that show that children with difficulty learning to read exhibit statistically significant gains in reading ability following training in phonological awareness and also various research that show that poor and good L1 readers differ significantly from one another on tasks that tap

phonological awareness, suggest that phonological awareness is a decisive factor (Durgunoglu et al. 1993).

Lundberg, et al. (1988) submit that training preschool children in phonological skills before beginning reading instruction has proven effective. Similarly, Ehri et al. (2001) reveal that there is considerable evidence that many children need literacy instruction to lead them to the knowledge of phonological awareness. Ehri et al. (2001) suggest that phonological awareness in the L2 can be developed through direct intervention, even if L2 oral development is itself somewhat limited. Durgunoglu et al. (1993) stand on the fence and revealed that phonemic awareness develops through experience at home and in school in a child's first language.

On the other hand, Yavas (1998) opines that it is the meta linguistic knowledge that should not be taught in class as it develops through experience at home in a child's first language. Meta linguistic knowledge gives the ability to reflect on the nature of language. The pre-school experiences that learners have with adults in their environment affect their development of oral and listening skills which invariably have non-negligible impacts on their reading development. Yavas (1998) cited in Gillon (2017, p. 2) discovered that:

Long before children become explicitly aware of the phonological structure of words, they have developed implicit phonological knowledge that allows them to gain mastery of speaking and listening in their native language. Implicit phonological knowledge for example, enables children to make a judgment about whether a word is part of their native language, allows for the self correction of speech errors, and enables children to discriminate between acceptable and unacceptable variation of a spoken word.

This submission by Yavas beams the light on covert complexities in the language faculty of the beginning reader in a second language. How will the syllable structure, phonotactics of a language one only speaks affect his reading in another language?

According to Gillon (2017, p. 5), the phonological awareness skills and tasks are of four levels which include: word awareness,

syllable awareness, Onset-rime awareness and phoneme or phonemic awareness.

2.2.1. Word Awareness: Assessing learners' phonological awareness, it is recommended that teachers should start from the level of the whole word because it is considered the basic level (Rubba, 2003). That means, the learners should first be able to identify and isolate large units of language construction. This will be a movement from simple to complex, as word awareness is not just the basics; it is also the simplest of the other forms of awareness. This level achieves the tasks of word identification and segmentation.

2.2.2. Syllable Awareness: Syllable awareness is the ability to hear parts of phonemes that comprise the word. The tasks that are achieved on the level of syllable awareness include:

Syllable segmentation; Example: "How many syllables are there in the word picture?"

Syllable completion; Example: "Here is a picture of a lorry. I will say the first part of the word. Can you finish the word lor ____?"

Syllable identity; Example: "What part of compete and compare sound the same?"

Syllable deletion; Example: "Say polish, now say it again without the po"

2.2.3. Onset-Rime Awareness: Yule (1996, p. 45) describes the onset "as the initial consonant or consonant group before the vowel and the rime, in turn, as the group combining the nucleus and the coda". Onset-rime awareness is the ability to manipulate syllables and work on rhyming words. Hence, the purpose is to develop the learners' attention to the sounds of language. Simply, rhyming is the ability to identify words that have identical final sound segments. The tasks achieved on the level of onset-rime awareness include:

Rhyme recognition, example: "Do these words rhyme: shell and bell?"

Rhyme detection or rhyme oddity, example: "Which word does not rhyme: fish, dish, bat?"

Rhyme generation, example: "Tell me words that rhyme with cat?"

2.2.4. Phoneme Awareness: Phoneme awareness is the ability to identify, isolate, blend and segment the sounds that are representative of letters in a certain language. Phoneme awareness is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read Ehri, et al. (2001). The tasks achieved on the level of phoneme awareness include: phoneme identification, phoneme isolation, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation, phoneme deletion, phoneme addition and phoneme substitution. Ehri, et al. (2001, p.255) suggested the following phonemic awareness tasks:

- i. Phoneme isolation, which requires recognizing individual sounds in words; Example: "Tell me the first sound in pot." (/p/)
- ii. Phoneme identity, which requires recognizing the common sound in different words; Example: "Tell me the sound that is the same in: take, toy, and tell." (/t/)
- iii. Phoneme categorization, which requires recognizing the word with the odd sound in a sequence of three or four words; Example: "Which word does not belong? bus, bun, rug." (rug)
- iv. Phoneme blending, which requires listening to a sequence of separately spoken sounds and combining them to form a recognizable word; Example: "What word is /s/ /k/ /u/ /l/?" (school)
- v. Phoneme segmentation, which requires breaking a word into its sounds by tapping out or counting the sounds or by pronouncing and positioning a marker for each sound; Example: "How many phonemes in ship?" (/ʃ/ /i/ /p/)
- vi. Phoneme deletion which requires recognizing what word remains when a specified phoneme is removed; Example, "What is smile without the /s/?" (mile)

3. Theoretical Framework

In discussing the transfer of language skills as they affect reading, this study employs Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis and Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis. The Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis proposes that fundamental similarities exist between first and second language skills, and that they are interdependent, however, reading ability in L1 automatically transfers to L2. Cummins (1979, p. 222) argues that when bilingual pupils were asked to perform school reading tasks in two languages, they seem to draw on the same knowledge base. He further explains that once reading ability has been

acquired in the first language, it is available for use in the second and subsequent languages. This submission implies no second language reading is necessary for such a learner. This is to say language operations are transferrable across languages.

The Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis is a complementary hypothesis to Cummin's (1979) Linguistic Independence Hypothesis. It aligns with interdependence hypothesis that L1 reading ability transfers to L2 but before this transfer can happen, a threshold level of L2 language ability is necessary. It postulates that readers will need to develop a certain level of language proficiency in the target language before they can transfer L1 reading skills or strategies to improve L2 reading. According to Grabe (2009), the thrust of the argument in Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis is *when* transfer occurs. Although this study centres on intra-transfer of language skills the transferrable status that Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis and Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis posits for language skills remains the major reason for their choice as frameworks for the study.

4. Methodology

Participants for the study were drawn from three (3) primary schools in different communities across Asa Local Government Area of Kwara State. Yoruba is spoken across all the indigenous households in the local government. Yoruba is the language spoken in public places such as markets and motor parks across the local government. Hausa and Fulfulde are other languages spoken in the area mainly by migrants from the northern part of the country.

147 Basic One learners who are Yoruba natives were selected across 3 public primary schools that use the Jolly Phonics approach in Asa Local government Area of Kwara State. All the children were typically developing with no identified hearing, visual, or speech impairments. They have all acquired oracy in Yoruba (L1) and are set to learn literacy in Yoruba and English. As against the National Policy on Education in Nigeria which stipulates that the language of instruction for the first three years should be the language of the environment, all the schools selected like many others in the Local Government use English language as language of instruction right from Basic One.

Procedures

The Quick Phonological Awareness Screening (QPAS) which is a phonological assessment tool designed by Hastings & Prince Edward District School Board (HPEDSB) to screen the phonological awareness skills of kindergarten, Basic 1 and 2 learners was adapted for Yoruba and administered to the 147 Basic One learners. The QPAS was designed for the purpose of obtaining an overview of a learner’s phonological awareness skills by testing rhyming recognition and production, word awareness, syllable awareness, sound identification, segmentation, blending and deletion. Considering the ages of the learners (6-7 years), the researchers conducted the test one-on-one with the learners.

5. Presentation of data and analysis

The testing tool adapted (QPAS) presents 5 questions to examine the growth in the phonological awareness skills of the learners. The aggregate average scores of the learners on word awareness is 3.1, syllable awareness is 1.47, Onset-rime awareness stands on 0.61, while sound identification, segmentation, blending and deletion are 0.16, 0.13, 0.14 and 0.13 respectively. Fig 2 and 3 show the results of all the 147 learners tested.

	Word awareness	Syllable awareness	Onset-rime awareness	Phonemic Awareness			
				Identification	Segmentation	Blending	Deletion
Average Score	3.1	1.47	0.61	0.16	0.13	0.14	0.13
Maximum Score	4	3	2	1	1	1	1
Minimum Score	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
% Above Aggregate Average	42%	51%	46%	16%	13%	14%	13%
% Below Aggregate Average	58%	49%	54%	84%	87%	86%	87%

Fig. 2: Yoruba phonological awareness scores of Yoruba beginner readers before literacy instruction

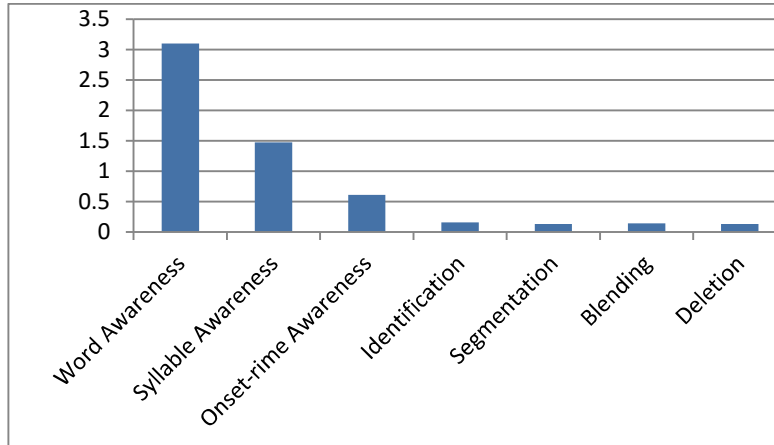


Fig. 3. A Chart showing the Yoruba phonological awareness scores of Yoruba beginner readers before literacy instruction

Discussion

Relationship exists among the language skills and abilities in an individual, for instance, reading aids writing while listening enhances speaking. In literacy lessons, language learners bring additional resources or abilities that are linked to the oral forms of their first language. Yoruba uses the left to right alphabetic writing system. Our test results reveal that Yoruba beginner readers have little or no challenge with regards to Yoruba word awareness. The following sentences were presented to the learners:

1. Ajá gbé ẹja. ‘The dog took the fish.’
2. Mo fẹ̀ ra ẹ̀pà sísè. ‘I want to buy boiled groundnut.’
3. Mo fẹ̀ràn olùkọ̀ wa. ‘I like our teacher.’
4. Olú ló jí àga gbé. ‘Olu is the boy that stole the chair.’
5. Bọ̀dà Túndé ti sùn. ‘Brother Tunde has slept.’

In identifying the numbers of words in the sentences, the study recorded 3.1 as the average score. We got this average using (Sum of Scores) ÷ (Total number of Scores):

$$456 \div 147 = 3.1$$

Based on this performance (Average of 3.1 of 5), we claim that oracy skill in Yoruba aids word awareness in the language because oracy is the most prominent language skill of the learner prior to the administration of the test. Lexemes as a linguistic unit are easily detectable for a learner that speaks a language.

The syllable is a linguistic unit that grows with literacy instructions. Despite the usage of ‘clapping strategy’ (clapping to a word to discover the number of syllables in the word) by the researcher to examine this skill, the average score for the skill stands as 1.4. The words presented to the learners are:

- 6. wá ‘come’
- 7. kẹ̀kẹ̀ ‘bicycle’
- 8. ajá ‘dog’
- 9. àgbàdò ‘maize’
- 10. àgbálùmò ‘African star apple’

Out of the 5 words tested, only a few of the examined learners got the first 3 words that are mono- and bi-syllabic correctly. Our results apparently negate the notion that the awareness of syllable as a phonological unit develops in an individual without literacy experience. This awareness depends greatly on literacy instruction. The following questions were used to examine onset-rime awareness and phonemic awareness:

Onset-Rime Awareness: Pick the odd word that does not rhyme with the other words.

11a. ajá ‘dog’

12a. ìjà ‘fight’

13a. adé ‘crown’

b. ojà ‘market’ b. ajá ‘dog’ b. etí ‘ear’

c. oba ‘king’ c. ojú ‘eye’ c. otí ‘wine’

14a. ilé ‘house’

15a. àdà ‘cutlass’

b. ijó ‘dance’ b. idà ‘sword’

c. òjò ‘rain’ c. òbẹ̀ ‘knife’

Phoneme Awareness

Phoneme Identification: What is the first sound in:

16. apá 'hand'
17. iwé 'book'
18. pépéye 'duck'
19. páálí 'carton'
20. bàtà 'shoe'

Phoneme Blending: Pronounce:

21. i + l + á =
22. à + gb + è =
23. a + s + o =
24. à + g + a =
25. i + l + è + k + è =

Phoneme Segmentation: Break the following words into phoneme segments:

26. bàtà 'shoe'
27. pákó 'wood'
28. ijóba 'government'
29. àga 'chair'
30. èjiká 'shoulder'

Phoneme Deletion: What word will remain after deleting the first sound of the following words?:

31. igbá 'calabash'
32. ojà 'market'
33. ata 'pepper'
34. ikú 'death'
35. filà 'cap'

The examiner used examples to illustrate what was expected in the onset-rime awareness but the learners could not get a grip of the words given despite the fact that instructions on the tests were explained in Yoruba. The highest point reached by each learner out of the possible 5 points is 2-points. These poor points can be ascribed to mere guesses. Lowest points were recorded in phonemic awareness, the average points of the learners stand on 0.16, 0.13, 0.14 and 0.13 for

phoneme identification, segmentation, blending and deletion respectively.

6. Conclusion

This study has revealed that the emergence of phonological awareness follows a continuum in which sensitivity to large phonological units develops first, followed by sensitivity to smaller phonological units. In other words, children first develop sensitivity to words, and syllables, which are the largest phonological units, followed by their sensitivity to onsets and rimes, and finally their sensitivity to phonemes, which are the smallest phonological units. The poor performance of the learners in syllabic and phonemic awareness also revealed that memorization of different rimes that dominates pre-Basic one lessons does not translate to phonological awareness. This study has therefore established that the abysmal performance of the learners in phonemic awareness does not outrightly point to its non-existence in the learners, rather, some forms of literacy instructions are needed to supply the required linguistic threshold which will awaken the dormant phonological awareness domains.

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