

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE FOR EFFECTIVE READING HABITS IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

Inclusive education plays a vital role in enhancing English language proficiency and fostering effective reading habits among primary school pupils in Nigeria. This study explores the significance of inclusive education in English language instruction, highlighting its impact on literacy development and academic success. It examines the challenges faced in implementing inclusive education, such as inadequate teacher training, lack of resources, and large class sizes. The study also discusses the role of differentiated instruction, assistive technologies, and parental involvement in promoting inclusive learning environments. Findings suggest that fostering inclusive education in English language instruction improves reading habits, enhances comprehension skills, and supports overall cognitive development. The study recommends increased government funding, specialized teacher training, curriculum modifications, and policy enforcement to ensure effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigerian primary schools. By addressing these challenges, inclusive education can contribute to a more equitable and literate society.

Keywords: Development, Inclusive education, Reading habits, Literacy, Modification

Introduction:

Education is a fundamental tool for national development, and language plays a crucial role in the learning process. English language, as the official language of Nigeria, is the primary medium of instruction in schools and a critical factor in literacy development (Olanrewaju & Adegbite, 2022). Developing effective reading habits among primary school pupils is essential for enhancing comprehension, cognitive skills, and lifelong learning. However, many Nigerian primary school pupils struggle with reading proficiency due to various challenges, including inadequate teaching methods, lack of inclusive learning strategies, and limited access to reading materials (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023).

Inclusive education ensures that all learners, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have equal opportunities to access and benefit from quality education (UNESCO, 2023). It promotes teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning needs, particularly for pupils with learning disabilities, linguistic barriers, and socio-economic disadvantages (Eze & Okonkwo, 2021). When effectively implemented in English language instruction, inclusive education can improve reading habits by providing tailored interventions, differentiated instruction, and assistive learning tools that support struggling readers (Adediran & Uche, 2022).

Despite the benefits of inclusive education, its implementation in Nigeria faces significant challenges, such as inadequate teacher training, overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, and insufficient policy enforcement (Ogunleye & Alabi, 2022). Additionally, the lack of reading culture among young learners, coupled with socio-economic constraints, further hinders reading proficiency in primary schools (Ojo & Adeyemi, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates inclusive teaching practices, government support, community involvement, and the use of digital technology to enhance literacy development. This study explores how fostering inclusive education in English language teaching can enhance

reading habits among primary school pupils in Nigeria. By examining best practices, challenges, and potential solutions, the study aims to provide recommendations for improving literacy outcomes and promoting equitable education for all learners.

Concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is an educational approach that ensures all learners, regardless of their abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, or special needs, have equal access to quality education in mainstream schools. It promotes equity and diversity by addressing the individual learning needs of every student within the same classroom setting (UNESCO, 2023). According to Ainscow (2022), inclusive education goes beyond merely integrating students with disabilities into regular schools; it focuses on transforming educational policies, teaching methodologies, and school environments to accommodate diverse learners effectively.

The concept of inclusive education is rooted in the belief that every child has the right to education, as reinforced by global frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (World Bank, 2023). In Nigeria, the implementation of inclusive education has gained recognition, but challenges such as inadequate teacher training, poor infrastructure, and limited resources have hindered its full adoption (Ogunyemi & Adeyemi, 2023).

Research has shown that inclusive education benefits all students by fostering a sense of belonging, promoting social interactions, and improving academic performance (Eze & Okonkwo, 2022). Additionally, inclusive teaching strategies such as differentiated instruction, assistive technology, and collaborative learning have been effective in addressing learning difficulties among students with special needs (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023). However, successful implementation requires strong government policies, teacher capacity-building, and community support (Ojo & Alabi, 2023). However, inclusive education is a transformative approach that seeks to remove barriers to learning and create an equitable educational system where all students can thrive. To achieve this in Nigeria, stakeholders must prioritize policy implementation, teacher training, and infrastructure development to support inclusive practices in schools.

English language

The English language is one of the most widely spoken languages globally and serves as the official language of Nigeria, playing a crucial role in education, governance, and communication (Adegbite & Olanrewaju, 2023). It is the primary medium of instruction in Nigerian schools, from primary to tertiary levels, making proficiency in English essential for academic success and social mobility (Ojo & Alabi, 2023).

The significance of English in Nigeria can be traced back to colonial rule when it was introduced as a tool for administration and education. Since then, it has remained the dominant language in formal settings, serving as a unifying force in the country's multilingual society (Eze & Okonkwo, 2022). English proficiency is vital for literacy development, as it enhances reading, writing, and communication skills, which are essential for educational advancement (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023).

However, despite its importance, many Nigerian primary school pupils struggle with English language proficiency due to factors such as inadequate instructional materials, poorly trained teachers, and lack of exposure to English outside the classroom (Ogunyemi & Adeyemi, 2023). The challenge is further exacerbated by socio-economic disparities, where students from rural areas have limited access to quality English education compared to their urban counterparts (UNESCO, 2023).

To improve English language learning and literacy development, scholars have advocated for innovative teaching strategies, including phonics-based instruction, interactive reading activities, and digital learning tools (Akinsola & Bello, 2023). Additionally, fostering inclusive

education that accommodates diverse learners can enhance English language comprehension and literacy rates among Nigerian pupils (World Bank, 2023). However, English language remains a key driver of educational and socio-economic development in Nigeria. To ensure effective learning, policymakers must invest in teacher training, provide adequate learning materials, and promote inclusive teaching methodologies that support all learners in acquiring strong English language skills.

Reading Habits

Reading habits refer to the regular practice of reading for knowledge acquisition, academic success, and personal development. Strong reading habits are essential for literacy development and lifelong learning, particularly among primary school pupils (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023). In Nigeria, the cultivation of reading habits has been recognized as a crucial factor in improving educational outcomes, yet many students struggle with poor reading culture due to inadequate learning resources, lack of parental support, and insufficient exposure to books (Ogunyemi & Adeyemi, 2023).

According to Eze and Okonkwo (2022), the development of reading habits at an early age enhances cognitive skills, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension abilities, which are essential for academic success. Research indicates that students who engage in regular reading activities demonstrate better language proficiency and perform better in school than those with weak reading habits (Akinsola & Bello, 2023). Additionally, a positive reading culture fosters critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Adegbite & Olanrewaju, 2023).

However, challenges such as limited access to reading materials, poor reading environments, and ineffective teaching strategies hinder the development of reading habits among Nigerian primary school pupils (UNESCO, 2023). Studies have shown that children in rural areas face more difficulties in cultivating reading habits due to inadequate library facilities and limited parental involvement (Ojo & Alabi, 2023). To improve reading habits among pupils, scholars have recommended various strategies, including the use of interactive storytelling, digital reading tools, and phonics-based instruction (World Bank, 2023). Schools and policymakers must also prioritize the establishment of well-equipped libraries, teacher training on reading strategies, and community-based reading programs to encourage a strong reading culture (Akinsola & Bello, 2023).

The Role of English Language in Literacy Development

English language plays a pivotal role in literacy development, particularly in Nigeria, where it serves as the official language of education, governance, and communication (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023). Literacy, which encompasses reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension skills, is essential for academic success, cognitive development, and social mobility. The following are key roles that the English language plays in literacy development:

1. Medium of Instruction in Education

English is the primary language of instruction in Nigerian schools from primary to tertiary levels. Proficiency in English enhances students' ability to comprehend and engage with educational content across various subjects (Ogunyemi & Adeyemi, 2023). According to Ojo and Alabi (2023), students with strong English literacy skills perform better academically compared to those with limited proficiency, as they can easily understand and interpret instructional materials.

2. Access to Educational Resources and Global Knowledge

English literacy provides learners with access to a vast array of educational resources, including textbooks, academic journals, and digital learning platforms (Eze & Okonkwo, 2022). With the majority of scholarly publications and online learning tools available in English, students who are proficient in the language can explore global knowledge and enhance their intellectual

capacity (Akinsola & Bello, 2023).

3. Enhancement of Reading and Writing Skills

Developing literacy in English improves students' reading and writing abilities, which are essential for effective communication and academic performance (Adegbite & Olanrewaju, 2023). Studies have shown that early exposure to English literacy through phonics-based instruction and storytelling significantly improves children's reading habits and comprehension skills (UNESCO, 2023).

4. Development of Critical Thinking and Cognitive Skills

English literacy contributes to the development of cognitive and analytical skills necessary for problem-solving, decision-making, and creative thinking (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023). Research indicates that students with strong English language skills are more likely to engage in critical discussions, express their thoughts effectively, and develop higher-order thinking abilities (World Bank, 2023).

5. Improved Career and Economic Opportunities

English literacy is a key determinant of employability and career success in Nigeria and globally (Ogunyemi & Adeyemi, 2023). Many job opportunities require proficiency in English, particularly in industries such as business, technology, and international relations. According to Ojo and Alabi (2023), individuals with strong English communication skills have better chances of securing well-paying jobs and advancing in their careers.

6. Bridging Communication Gaps in a Multilingual Society

Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country with over 500 indigenous languages. English serves as a unifying language that bridges communication gaps and promotes national integration (Akinsola & Bello, 2023). Literacy in English allows individuals from different ethnic backgrounds to interact, share ideas, and collaborate effectively (UNESCO, 2023).

7. Promotion of Digital Literacy and Technological Advancement

In today's digital era, proficiency in English is essential for navigating technological tools, digital resources, and online learning platforms (Eze & Okonkwo, 2022). Many digital applications, programming languages, and software systems are designed in English, making literacy in the language critical for technological advancement and innovation (World Bank, 2023).

Importance of Reading Habits in Primary Education

Reading is a fundamental skill that plays a critical role in a child's cognitive, academic, and social development. Establishing strong reading habits at the primary education level lays the foundation for lifelong learning, literacy development, and overall educational success (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023). Reading habits influence children's ability to comprehend texts, develop critical thinking skills, and communicate effectively. Below are key reasons why reading habits are essential in primary education.

1. Enhancing Literacy Skills: Reading regularly helps children develop proficiency in language, vocabulary, and comprehension skills, which are crucial for literacy development (Ogunyemi & Adeyemi, 2023). According to Eze and Okonkwo (2022), children who develop good reading habits in their early years are more likely to excel in reading comprehension, writing, and oral communication.

2. Academic Performance and Knowledge Acquisition: Reading is linked to academic achievement across all subjects, including English, Mathematics, and Science (Akinsola & Bello, 2023). Research by Ojo and Alabi (2023) found that students who read regularly perform better in school because they can understand instructions, interpret questions, and engage with

learning materials effectively.

3. **Cognitive Development and Critical Thinking:** Reading stimulates cognitive functions such as memory, problem-solving, and logical reasoning. It encourages children to analyze, interpret, and think critically about texts, which enhances their intellectual development (Adegbite & Olanrewaju, 2023). UNESCO (2023) emphasizes that reading helps children develop imagination and creativity, making them more innovative learners.
4. **Improved Concentration and Focus:** Regular reading fosters patience and concentration which are essential skills for learning and academic success (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2023). When children engage in reading activities, they develop the ability to focus for extended periods, improving their attention span and learning capacity (World Bank, 2023).
5. **Strengthening Communication Skills:** Exposure to books enhances vocabulary, sentence structure, and language fluency, which are crucial for effective communication (Eze & Okonkwo, 2022). According to Ogunyemi and Adeyemi (2023), children with strong reading habits can express themselves more clearly and confidently in both written and spoken communication.
6. **Emotional and Social Development:** Reading allows children to explore different perspectives, cultures, and emotions, fostering empathy and social awareness (Ojo & Alabi, 2023). Akinsola and Bello (2023) argue that reading fictional and non-fictional texts helps children understand human emotions, relationships, and societal values.
7. **Encouraging Independent Learning:** Good reading habits enable children to learn independently, reducing their reliance on teachers or parents (Adegbite & Olanrewaju, 2023). With access to books, children can explore topics of interest, conduct research, and expand their knowledge beyond the classroom setting (UNESCO, 2023).
8. **Long-Term Educational and Career Benefits:** Early reading habits influence a child's lifelong learning ability and career prospects. According to the World Bank (2023), children who develop strong reading habits are more likely to succeed in higher education and secure better job opportunities.

Challenges of Teaching English Language in Inclusive Classrooms

Inclusive education aims to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities, learning difficulties, and diverse linguistic backgrounds. However, teaching English in inclusive classrooms presents various challenges that impact both teachers and students (Ainscow, 2022). The following are some of the key challenges associated with teaching the English language in inclusive classrooms:

2. **Lack of Specialized Training for Teachers:** Many English language teachers lack the necessary training and skills to handle students with special needs (Obi & Adeyemo, 2023). According to UNESCO (2023), most teacher education programs do not adequately prepare teachers for inclusive education, making it difficult for them to implement effective teaching strategies in diverse classrooms.
3. **Inadequate Teaching Resources:** Teaching English in an inclusive classroom requires specialized learning materials such as Braille textbooks, audio-assisted learning tools, and visual aids (Eze & Okonkwo, 2022). However, most schools lack access to these resources, making it challenging for teachers to cater for the needs of all students (Akinsola & Bello, 2023).
4. **Language Barriers and Communication Challenges:** Some students in inclusive classrooms have speech or hearing impairments that hinder their ability to communicate effectively in English (Ojo & Alabi, 2023). Additionally, multilingual settings, where students speak different mother tongues, make it difficult for teachers to ensure effective English language instruction (Glew, 2022).
5. **Large Class Sizes:** Overcrowded classrooms constitute a significant challenge in inclusive education, particularly in public schools (Adegbite & Olanrewaju, 2023). Teachers struggle to provide individualized attention to students with special needs, which affects their learning progress and English language development (Mitchell, 2023).

6. Limited Parental Involvement: Parental support plays a crucial role in helping children with special needs develop language skills (UNESCO, 2023). However, many parents lack awareness or resources to support their children's learning at home, which affects their progress in English language acquisition (Ogunyemi & Adeyemi, 2023).

7. Assessment and Evaluation Difficulties: Assessing English language proficiency in inclusive classrooms is complex, as traditional evaluation methods may not be suitable for all students (Florian & Spratt, 2022). Teachers face challenges in designing assessments that accurately measure language skills while accommodating diverse learning needs (Ainscow, 2022).

8. Negative Attitudes and Stigmatization: Some students with disabilities face stigmatization from peers, leading to low self-esteem and reduced participation in learning the English language (Akinsola & Bello, 2023). Teachers may also struggle with bias or lack of confidence in handling inclusive classrooms effectively (UNESCO, 2023).

9. Insufficient Government Support and Policies: While inclusive education policies exist, their implementation remains a challenge due to inadequate government funding and lack of proper monitoring (Obi & Adeyemo, 2023). Schools often lack the necessary infrastructure, trained personnel, and resources to support inclusive English language instruction (Glew, 2022).

Conclusion

Fostering inclusive education in English language instruction is crucial for developing effective reading habits among primary school pupils in Nigeria. Inclusive education ensures that all learners, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have equal access to quality learning opportunities. By integrating inclusive teaching strategies, such as differentiated instruction, assistive technology, and culturally responsive teaching, educators can create an environment where every child can develop strong literacy skills. However, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, lack of resources, and large class sizes must be addressed through policy reforms, increased funding, and professional development programs. Ultimately, a well-structured inclusive education system in English language learning will enhance reading habits, improve literacy rates, and contribute to the overall academic success of Nigerian primary school pupils.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that;

1. The government should provide adequate funding for inclusive education to ensure that schools have the necessary resources, including assistive learning materials and technology.
2. Teachers should receive specialized training on inclusive teaching strategies to effectively support diverse learners in English language instruction.
3. Schools should implement differentiated teaching methods to accommodate pupils with varying learning abilities and enhance their reading habits.
4. Parents should be actively involved in their children's literacy development by encouraging reading activities at home and collaborating with teachers.
5. Curriculum developers should design inclusive English language curricula that address the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities.
6. Education policymakers should enforce and monitor the implementation of inclusive education policies to promote effective English language learning in primary schools.
7. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should partner with schools to provide additional support, training, and resources for inclusive education.
8. Teachers should utilize assistive technologies such as audiobooks and speech-to-text tools to support students with reading difficulties.
9. School administrators should ensure that classroom environments are inclusive, accessible, and conducive to learning for all pupils.

10. Stakeholders should conduct regular assessments and research on the effectiveness of inclusive education strategies to improve reading habits among primary school pupils in Nigeria.

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