

COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH AS A TOOL FOR RELATING READING AND WRITING SKILLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study dwells upon communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills in early childhood education in a developing economy. The quantitative data was gathered through the use of structured questionnaires and was analysed using SPSS version 17. This study confirms that teachers in the selected early childhood education centres (ECEC) have no professional early childhood education qualifications and, as a result, are not qualified to effectively carry out their teaching responsibilities. It is hoped that this study can contribute to a deeper understanding of how early childhood education teachers perceive language teaching and consequently assist in the development of teacher education programmes and activities. Teacher training and education courses must play a more active role in informing trainee teachers of the instructional value of communicative approach in the teaching and learning of the English language. This study provides parents, teachers, researchers, the public and those who manage education systems with new data that will help them to answer questions about the failing state of education in Nigeria.

Key words: *communicative approach, reading and writing, early childhood, education, professionalism, teaching competencies*

Introduction

The initiation of this research reflects a Nigerian academic concern and preoccupation with the declining standard of education in the country. Academic experiences provided the background and aroused interest in a research endeavour focused on teachers' professional competencies, in part, because of the limited materials on this subject in a Nigerian context. This study thus came about after a detailed examination of the segment of society that required improvement so as to enhance the developmental growth of children in relation to their reading and writing skills.

The communicative approach was developed in the 1960s and 1970s for teaching and learning the English language. The English language instruction in Nigeria had recently been expanded with the establishment of comprehensive schools. The communicative approach was to be used to teach virtually all children and is not limited to the teaching of oral skills. The communicative approach is used develop reading and writing skills needed to ensure pupils' confidence in reading, summarising, translating, discussing and debating, by using elements encountered in variety of situations to make language more fluid and the manipulation of language more fluent (Brown, 1994). English is the language of education, public relations and administration, commerce, science and technology, as well as a major language of global communication in general. It is the major medium through which nearly every Nigerian gains access to information and knowledge both internally and externally. The ability to speak and write English effectively has, therefore, become an essential skill in schools and workplaces across Nigeria.

Failure in the effective use of the communicative approach in relating reading and writing skills in early childhood education has lowered educational standards in Nigeria. This is evidenced in the inability of most Nigerian primary, secondary and university graduates to communicate effectively in written and spoken English (Ololube, Kpolovie, & Egbezor, 2009).

According to Ololube et al. (2009), educators in Nigeria have forgotten the important connection between teachers' professional competencies and the quality of early childhood education as high-quality teachers more effectively meet the predetermined goals of early childhood education. According to Poetter (1997), the most valuable resource right in our very own backyard has been overlooked – our early childhood pupils. Early childhood pupils are central to our practice as they are authentic reflections of the quality of our national development. They also have much to teach us about learners and the processes of learning. Not surprisingly, teachers in early childhood schools are often among the most powerful and the most exhausted adults in any society. They are powerful because of their influence over young minds and exhausted because of the responsibilities that are often disproportionate to their authority (Clark, 1995). The reality is that early childhood centres/schools will change and develop only if the teachers within these systems are empowered to develop themselves professionally (Bayne-Jardine, 1994).

Realising from the onset the importance of early childhood education, it is not difficult to comprehend early childhood education as a powerful instrument of social progress without which individuals cannot realize their full social and economic potential. It is then that enhancing ECE instruction through early childhood teacher education programmes is of immediate importance. These programmes are central to building and augmenting teachers' professional competencies in communicative approaches for relating early reading and writing skills. Such programmes are meant to help individual teachers grow and develop as professional early childhood teachers, provide them with the skills and professional abilities to motivate children to learn and assist them in acquiring the right understanding of the concepts, values, and attitudes needed, not only to manage classroom instruction, but also to contribute to society in which they are born, grow and live (Ololube, 2009). Thus, early childhood teacher education is designed to produce a highly motivated,

sensitive, conscientious, and successful classroom early childhood teacher who will handle students effectively and professionally and work towards better educational achievement.

The National Policy on Education (2004) Section 2, Sub-section 11–13 considers early childhood/pre-primary education to be education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and kindergarten. ECE refers to a comprehensive approach to policies and programmes for children from birth through early childhood, their parents and caregivers, the objective of which is to protect the child's rights to develop their full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential. Most often this education is provided for children from the birth to 3 years in day care centres or nurseries and for children from 3 to 6 years in kindergarten classes in schools (Uzodinma & Akinware, 2001). The purposes of this early childhood education are to effect a smooth transition from the home to the school, prepare children for primary level education, provide adequate care and supervision for children while their parents are at work, inculcate social norms, a spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music, and playing with toys, develop a sense of cooperation and a spirit of teamwork, teach good habits, especially good health habits and finally to teach some of the fundamentals of learning, such as letters, colours, shapes and forms.

Education in the second half of the twentieth century was characterized by increases in the provision of educational programmes for pre-school aged children (Cotton & Conklin, n.d.). However, the age at which children have a legal right to attend free, school-based early childhood education and care varies across countries (OECD, 2002). It is increasingly acknowledged that high-quality programmes are needed to give all young children a strong start in lifelong learning. Unequal beginnings in education have become increasingly costly to remedy and have damaged the learning ability of many children invariably resulting in social, political and economic disruptions throughout the country. In order for a nation to develop, its pre-school education must be based on a solid foundation, and the national, state and local facilities needed for enhancing it ought to be provided. Yet, in a number of countries (including Nigeria), policy making and programme coverage in the early childhood years remains fragmented and piecemeal (OECD, 2002; Song & Young, 2008). The road to quality Education for All (EFA) presents enormous challenges including the need to hire and train (and retain) massive numbers of new teachers over the next decade. Success in this endeavour will in turn determine whether EFA objectives are themselves successful and sustainable (Mingat & Sosale, 2003; Ololube, Kpolovie & Egbezor, 2009).

In Nigeria, attempts to improve ECE professional development through the establishment of colleges of education are unrealistic. These colleges and other similar institutions have consistently demonstrated inadequate training and specialisation in early childhood education. At the same time, there is minimal or no specialized programming in early childhood education in the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) and university bachelor degree programmes. As a result, little has been achieved in the realm of early childhood education, and, while we have always expected that teachers with specialisation in early childhood education would be employed to handle the instructional processes in pre-schools, the reality is that non-specialist teachers continue to carry out the teaching and supervision (Ololube, Kpolovie, & Egbezor, 2009).

Objectives and purpose of the study

An education system is functional to the extent that it makes use of the available human and material resources to achieve its stated aims and objectives. The major objective of every school system, irrespective of the level of education, is to provide high quality education for learners. In addition, the success of any education system depends on the methodological competence, educational qualification levels and administrative aptitude of its teaching staff (Ololube, 2006). Professionalism in these three related skill areas is thus essential to teaching success.

There has been a general conception in Nigeria among teaching and non-teaching staff that the ability to teach with enthusiasm is both in-born and acquired. It has been further suggested, in discussions and evaluations with post-secondary professors and researchers, that academic qualification, without an accompanying period of professional or specialized training, is all that is required for teaching competence in early childhood education. In this paradigm, public perception sees intelligence, interest and other personal traits as the only qualities needed for effective ECE teaching. Consequently, they concluded that teacher education is unnecessary. As a result, many unemployed Nigerian college and university graduates see teaching as a short-term employment opportunity to sustain them until they get a job more in line with their interests and qualifications. Fortunately from their perspective, they do not have to wait long to be offered a job by the Ministry of Education or private sector education administrators (Ololube, 2007).

Again, not only is there growing academic dissatisfaction with the achievement of students in ECEC, but with the quality of instruction that children in general receive. Research has shown that the quality of instruction that children receive in schools affects their academic achievements thus the competencies of the teaching staff gain increased importance (Kerry & Wilding, 2004; Wylie & Thompson, 2003; Scheerens, 2000; Wheldall & Glynn, 1989). The study also examines the utilisation of available instructional materials, motivational process competencies, evaluation competencies and the method/instructional process competencies of teachers.

This research on the communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills in early childhood is a part of a wider study that discussed the need to accelerate and redesign early childhood education preparation programmes. In identifying the need for early childhood education centres (ECEC) to adapt to changing social circumstances and to successfully meet the learning requirements of all young people, a renewed emphasis must be placed on the professional quality and capacity of the teaching workforce (Ololube, Kpolovie, & Egbezor, 2009).

Conversely, given that there were limited research publications in Nigeria on this area of study, and those that did exist were very narrow and did not focus on other possible features that might improve teachers' professional competencies. This does not mean to suggest that this research is an end in itself; rather it is a means to help resolve the education aforementioned challenges. It seeks to fill the intellectual gap in the understanding of the key educational achievement issues in Nigeria, with a particular reference to ECEC teachers' job effectiveness. To this end, the researchers enter into the

global debate on educational improvement and student academic achievement from the perspective of a developing country.

The study objective is to analyse teachers' professional competencies as a way of improving their job effectiveness. This study is a demonstration of the everyday practices in the real world of instructional effectiveness and improvement.

This research yields knowledge about the characteristics of teachers' professional and academic competencies in the communicative approach used to relate reading and writing in ECE, and how they affect educational objectives. This study seeks to examine teachers' professional competencies in employing the communicative approach in several purposefully selected preschools in the Delta and Rivers State of Nigeria. This study seeks to theoretically and empirically ascertain the extent to which Nigerians are contending with compromised educational standards. Four research hypotheses have been formulated.

1. There is no significant difference between the professional competencies of teachers and the motivational competencies used to improve their job effectiveness in the communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills in early childhood education.
2. There is no significant difference between the professional competencies of teachers and the methods/instructional processes used to improve their effectiveness in the communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills in early childhood education.
3. There is no significant difference between the professional competencies of teachers and their evaluation competencies used in the communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills in early childhood education.
4. There is no significant difference between the bio-data of respondents and their overall perception of the variables related to the communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing.

The general structure of the early childhood education system in Nigeria

The Nigerian government commits itself to setting and monitoring minimum standards for early childcare centres across the country and ensuring the full participation of governments, communities and teachers' associations in the development, operation and maintenance of early childhood education facilities (Ololube, Kpolovie, & Egbezor, 2009). Standards in this context are the degree of excellence required for a particular purpose – an accepted or approved example against which phenomenon are judged or measured. Excellence in this context includes generally accepted best practices in education in search of distinction in teaching and learning. Best practices, as an essential component of the excellence formula, create quality-teaching strategies that produce improved scholarship (Ololube & Ubogu, 2008).

The National Policy on Education (2004) compels the various levels of government in Nigeria to establish pre-primary school sections in existing public schools and encourages both community and private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education. The National Policy also calls for provisions in teacher education programmes for specialisations in early

childhood education, ensuring that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and developing the orthography of additional Nigerian languages and textbooks in the Nigerian languages. The Policy also stipulates that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play; the curriculum shall be oriented to achieving, regulating and controlling pre-primary education and its learning objectives. To this end, the teacher-pupil ration is set at 1:25.

Categories of teachers found in early childhood education centres in Nigeria

This paper discusses the various levels of teachers and those presently believed to be teaching in early childhood education centres (ECEC) in Nigeria:

- teachers holding the teachers' grade two certificates with:
 - five years of training in education and the study of academic subjects after primary school certificate;
 - two years of training in academic and professional subjects after full secondary school education without a certificate;
 - one year of training in predominantly education after obtaining a secondary school certificate;
- teachers holding the teachers' grade one certificate: those with teachers' grade two certificates, at least two subjects at the General Certificate of Education Advance level and a teaching practice level examination;
- teachers holding the teachers' grade two certificate and the Associateship Certificate in Education obtained after one year of professional studies at a university-level faculty of education or an institution affiliated with the faculty of education at a university;
- teachers with the Nigeria Teachers' Institute (NTI) certificate which is obtained after two or three years of professional training;
- teachers holding the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) "Primary" after three years of professional studies at the College of Education;
- teachers holding a Bachelor of Education degree (B.A /B.Sc. Ed, B.Ed.);
- teachers with secondary school certificates;
- teachers without secondary school certificates;
- teachers with Bachelor of Education Degrees in Early Childhood Education.

However, the National Policy on Education (2004) Section 8, Paragraph 70b, emphasized that the Nigeria Certificate in Education will ultimately become the minimum basic qualification for entry into the teaching profession.

Teachers' professional competencies

Teacher's modes of thinking and beliefs guide their behaviour and decisions both inside and outside the classroom. The challenges that teachers encounter inside the classroom are

many. Besides having to master various academic subjects, they must have command of a wide repertoire of different teaching methods and strategies (pedagogy) and understanding of the learning processes of pupils (Ahtee & Salonen, 1995). Approaches to achieving sustainable excellence in pedagogical content knowledge are related to methodological competencies and the act of teaching, motivational competencies, instructional process competencies, material utilisation competencies and evaluation competencies.

Shulman's (1987) introduction to the term pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) surveys the combination of content knowledge and pedagogic skills that are necessary for the organisation of classroom situations and activities of learners. He (Shulman, 1987) defined pedagogical content knowledge as the particular form of content knowledge that embodies the aspects of content most germane to its teachability. It means that both teachers' expertise and teachers' knowledge of subject matter differ from ordinary scholarly knowledge and pedagogy.

There are considerable diversities in the terminology used in the study of professional competence. The main reason for this is the early developmental status of the field and the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon being studied. Most of the research work to date has been occupation specific, so the concepts and terminology reflect the perspective of a given profession.

Kirschner and Thijssen (2005) described the competency concept as a cluster of person-related qualities suitable for dealing in a fitting manner with a clearly defined problem situation. Their definition includes three competency characteristics on which a reasonable level of agreement exists.

- Competency is person-related. People possess different competencies in varying degrees.
- Competency is criteria-related. Different criteria must be defined and used to assess the acquisition of a competency.
- Competency is context-related. A competency can manifest itself in different ways in different contexts as opposed to knowledge, which is context independent.

Eraut (1994), in trying to distinguish between professional competence claims, noted that sometimes these are very general and mean little more than being adequately qualified, especially in professions where the unqualified are not permitted to practise. For instance, when clients or service users describe a professional as competent they usually mean that there is nothing detrimental known about his/her professional capabilities and history.

According to Willis and Dubin (1990), professional competence involves the ability to function effectively in the tasks considered essential within a given profession – in comparison to job competence, which is more focused on a specific organisation and job. Professional competence is reflected in the performance of the professional, and by observing the professional's performance one can access their level of competence. An important outcome of the maintenance of competence is professional vitality, which involves the ability to successfully meet forthcoming challenges.

To Kautto-Koivula (1996), professional competence involves at least two principal domains: (1) proficiencies specific to the profession, discipline or organisation that

include a discipline-specific knowledge-base, technical skills considered essential in the profession and the ability to solve the type of problems encountered within the profession; and (2) general characteristics of the individual that facilitate the individual's development and maintenance of professional competence. These include intellectual ability, personality traits, motivation, attitudes and values. She (Kautto-Koivula, 1996) further distinguished three cognitive domains of competence: (1) skills (manual or intellectual); (2) knowledge, which is simply information committed to memory; (3) the deeper learning variously described as understanding, conceptual learning or meaningful learning.

Effective classroom instruction in communicative teaching and learning

Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. In other words, the teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. Unlike the audio-lingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can leave students in suspense as to the outcome of a classroom exercise, which will vary according to their reactions and responses. The real-life simulations change from day to day and students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics (Orellana, n.d.).

It is the belief of the proponents of meaning-focused instruction, crystallized in what is known as the intensive version of the communicative approach, that learners acquire language skills best when their attention is focused on meaning rather than on language forms. This approach to language teaching quickly acquired a number of supporters based on which several theories and models of language acquisition have since been developed (Baleghizadeh, 2010). While some still considered phonics and the whole language approach to be the unrivalled solution to the reading and writing achievement problem, critics of whole language frequently cite the lack of research-based evidence as justification for not putting it into practice in classrooms. They also argued that phonics was strongly supported by scientifically based research and was thus the indisputably legitimate approach to teaching reading and writing (Song & Young, 2008).

Offering a bit more context to the issue, Song and Young (2008) noted that, while flawed instructional approaches are widely perceived as contributing to the reading and writing achievement problem, many of their study participants did not think it fair to blame it all on teachers. Song and Young (2008) argued instead that inadequate pre-service and in-service training left teachers ill-prepared for effective teaching, which, in turn, has led to reading and writing problems. They also observed that a major issue yet to be resolved is the insufficient time spent in teacher preparation programmes teaching how to teach reading and writing skills. The causal chain is extended by one link, and the origin is traced to teacher preparation programmes that did not equip teachers with the knowledge and skills they needed. Compounding this is the fact that school systems failed to provide adequate in-service training to help teachers augment and implement effective instructional practices. Another major problem identified was the issue of resources – both fiscal and non-fiscal. According to the study participants, educational resources were nearly always

insufficient, in addition to the lack of funding for professional development. Thus, they attributed the reading and writing problem, in part, to the deficit of resources with respect to class size, qualified teachers and books and libraries.

Research has demonstrated that teachers' behaviour in the classroom is positively related to pupils' achievement (Scheerens, 1992; Ololube, 2009). Especially important in this respect is the allocation and use of teaching methods and classroom management, which is aimed at attaining an orderly atmosphere that promotes learning. It also involves several other components of teaching such as structuring the content, questioning, evaluation, feedback and corrective instruction. It has been suggested that teachers who succeed in these behavioural areas have positive effects on students' academic achievement.

The complex causal agent of reading and writing problems in schools according to Song & Young (2008) is the lack of a single state entity responsible for developing educational policies. The education policy environment is complex. There are several state institutions that speak to and about education and they tend to overlap, conflict and consequently fragment state influence. This confusion and fragmentation has an effect on the school and curriculum-level abilities and confidence of teachers. Nonoyama-Tarumi and Bredenberg (2009) argue the problem is extremely complex. Therefore, specialized interventions which provide early childhood education readiness skills to develop children early in the school years to enhance children's learning performance in core curriculum areas when they move into more formalized schooling are needed.

Research procedure

This study explores and analyses the need to accelerate and redesign early childhood education preparation programmes, and this poses key challenges for Nigeria in relation to the communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills in early childhood education. It provides insights that may be useful for education planners, administrators and policy makers. This study used a combination of observation and text-based materials, which are valuable sources of records about educational research. For the observation component, the researchers participated in the activities of ten early childhood education centres by examining teachers' academic profiles and classroom settings (Maxwell, 1996). The type of observation used in this study does not imply a research strategy of immersion. However, observations were still made of the physical settings of selected early childhood education centres and the quality and skills of the academic staff working in them.

This study employed a benchmarking technique that incorporates quantitative assessment design aimed at improving the best available practices, processes and performance so as to help improve the quality of early childhood education management (Ololube, 2005a, b). Benchmarking was adopted because it makes use of the hypotheses in this study to initiate a process focused on creation, the development of excellence and the discovery of new ideas. Benchmarking enables individuals to compare phenomenon, identify relative strengths and weaknesses, and improve working practices accordingly. It

offers the opportunity to learn from other regions and countries, including whether or not their early education systems and strategies have been identified as best practices (Ololube, Kpolovie, & Egbezor, 2009). Figure 1 depicts the research design of this study.

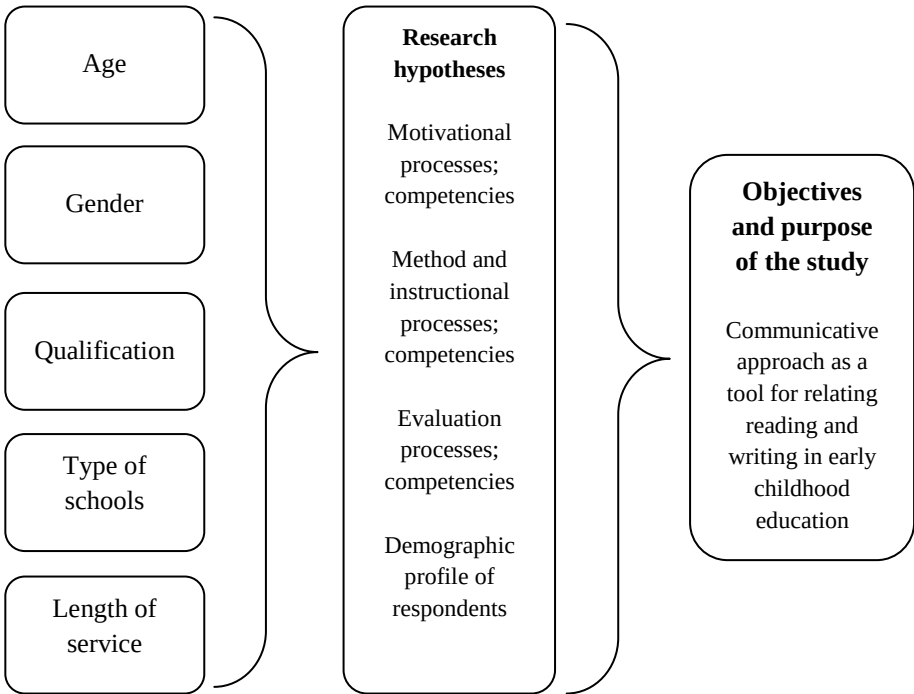


Figure 1. Bio-data of the respondents, the research hypotheses and the purpose of the study

The sampling was purposive, which is characterized by the use of judgment and deliberate effort to obtain representative samples by including the most probable typical groups in the sample. Purposive sampling was selected instead of a random cross-section of the population so that we could identify a small number of early childhood education centres in both public and private sectors with specific characteristics, behaviours and experiences. This was done to facilitate broad comparisons between the groups that the researchers identified as likely to be important. This technique is typically used to overcome problems associated with geographically dispersed populations where it is time and resource-intensive to construct a sampling frame for a large geographical area, such as the Rivers and Delta States.

Table 1. Bio-data of the respondents

Bio-data of respondents	Groups	Freq.	%
Gender	Male	39	34.8
	Female	73	65.2

Sequel to Table 1 see on p. 44.

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Age	20–30	77	68.8
	31and above	35	31.3
Qualifications	Secondary School Certificate/Diploma	21	18.8
	NCE	42	37.5
	BEd/BScEd/BAEd	46	41.1
	Degree in Early Childhood Education	0	0
	Postgraduate degree	3	2.7
Type of schools	Public (6)	47	42
	Private (6)	65	58
Length of service	Less than 1 year	7	6.3
	About two years	28	25.0
	About 5 years	42	37.5
	About 6–8 years	28	25.0
	Over 9 years	7	6.3
	Less than 1 year	7	6.3

The central materials for this study were theoretical sources (textbooks, articles and reports). These categories of documents provided us with insight into what has already been written on this subject and were used extensively. To be able to make full use of the theoretical sources located and accessed, we needed to assess their validity and importance. Four overlapping validity criteria can be used in such cases: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. The acceptance of the retrieved information was dependent on the selection of information from the review and its interpretation. It is hoped, nonetheless, that the representation gleamed here is a relatively balanced and logically precise one. Though no researcher is independent of his/her own normative evaluation of a research problem. If any part of the analysis should bear the hallmark of the researchers' stance, it should be overlooked and considered as part of the researchers own over-sight (Ololube, Ubogu, & Egbezor, 2007).

The respondents for this study (N=112) responded to a two-page questionnaire, which included two major sections: A and B. Section A was comprised of five items, which focused on respondents' bio-data: gender, age, qualification, type of school and length of service. Section B was comprised of eighteen items, including possible competency variables, in which respondents were asked to determine the value of their perceptions of their competencies (motivational competencies, method/instructional processes, evaluating competencies). Section B employed a seven-point Likert-type scale (7 = strongly agree; 6 = agree; 5 = partly agree; 4 = neutral; 3 = partly disagree; 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree). The rating scale was considered to be of approximately equal attitude value to which subjects responded with degree of agreement or disagreement (Ololube, 2009). The data for the study was gathered between 15 June and 16 July 2010 from twelve early childhood education centres (ECEC) (six public school and six private schools) out of the hundreds of public and private ECECs in the Rivers and Delta States of Nigeria.

Statistically appraising the reliability of the responses to the questionnaire was regarded as appropriate as the respondents may have answered the questions randomly given that they were directly affected by the study. This study, in part, focused on their qualifications, competencies and effectiveness. Consequently, a quantitative analysis of the inquiry was performed to statistically test the reliability of the research instrument. In

research statistics, when the reliability of a research instrument has been established, it provides a basis for continuity. The instrument was tested with the Cronbach alpha coefficient and a reliability coefficient of .902 was obtained. Thus, the research instrument was accepted as very reliable as it was able to measure the consistency or repeatability of what we set out to measure.

A number of statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 17: mean point value and standard deviation, Pearson product moment and chi-square of significance. Pearson product moment was employed to test the relationship between variables and respondents' bio-data information. Chi-square was used to find statistically significant differences in the variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ to assess if the level of confidence observed in the sample also existed in the population.

Results and discussion

This section focuses on empirical data presentation, interpretation and analysis. The first step is to present the results of the experimental data in their raw form as drawn from questionnaires. The data for this study is provided in table form and were analysed to support or refute the research hypotheses. The second step is the discussion of the information provided by the respondents in relation to the already existing research on the subject. The clear merit of this section is that the results are connected to the information assessed in the literature review.

Motivational competencies in the communicative approach

To answer research Hypothesis 1, the responses on items 1–5 of section B of the questionnaire were tallied and analysed and the results are presented in Table 2. The statistical analysis of respondents' answers to these items shows significant differences between specialist teachers and non-specialist teachers in terms of their familiarity with and ability to motivate students effectively ($X^2=53.375$, $p<.000$). The data also revealed differences in the ability of specialist and non-specialist teachers to encourage students to learn effectively ($X^2=32.375$, $p<.000$). There are likewise significant differences in abilities to effectively use reward and punishment to motivate student learning ($X^2=87.500$, $p<.000$). There are significant differences in terms of using planned lessons to motivate students to learn ($X^2=66.500$, $p<.000$). Significant differences were found between the specialists and the non-specialists in terms of mastery of subject matter and motivating reading and writing ($X^2=42.875$, $p<.000$). Thus, $H_0 1$ was rejected.

The cross tabulation analysis revealed that over 96% of non-specialist teachers teaching in early childhood education centres do not find a job interesting and believe that they do not have the motivational competencies in the communicative approach to reading and writing. Interestingly, 70% of children in private ECECs do better than those in the public system. The insinuation is that government at various levels uses the public system to create and maintain a docile, undereducated majority. It can then be presumed that actual

education is not and has never been the goal of public schools. Public schools are warehouses of mediocrity, centres of government indoctrination for the country's children, and easy employment for poorly trained teachers and other adults (Song & Young, 2008). 90% of the respondents believe that their qualifications determine the kind of skills and knowledge they need to be effective in teaching in an early childhood setting (Ololube, Kpolovie, & Egbezor, 2009). In addition, 82.9% of the respondents believe that students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful and interesting ways about meaningful topics (Orellana, n.d.)

More than 94% of the respondents think it is not easier to teach in an early childhood education centre using the communicative approach. They also believe that teaching and learning in early childhood education centres do not happen randomly but must be systematically structured if results are to be achieved. The results of this study further revealed that just over 88% believe that the type of English that students speak and write today is linked to the calibre of their teachers (Umoh, 2006).

Table 2. Chi-square analysis of respondents' motivational competencies in the communicative approach

S/N	Motivational competencies in the communicative approach	Chi-square	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Demonstration of familiarity with students will motivate them learn	53.375 ^a	2	p < .000
2	Encouraging students will make them learn effectively	32.375 ^a	2	p < .000
3	Effective use of reward/punishment will motivate students to learn	87.500 ^b	3	p < .000
4	Planning lessons will motivate students to learn	66.500 ^b	3	p < .000
5	Sufficient mastery of subject matters is a motivator in teaching	42.875 ^a	2	p < .000

Methods/instructional competencies in the communicative approach

Analysis of items 6–12 was performed to determine if there were significant differences between respondents. X^2 showed that there are significant differences between the specialists and the non-specialists in their early childhood education teaching methods and instructional competencies on six out of the seven variables tested. SPSS version 17 displayed it as $p < .001$ significance levels. This does not mean that the probability is 0. It is less than .005. Table 3 shows the highest X^2 value as 22.750 and the lowest X^2 value as 50.750, meaning that professional competence in methods and instruction lies in the hands of trained early childhood teachers. No significant differences were found in children learning reading and writing more easily when they engaged in role playing at $X^2 = 3.500$, $p > .321$.

The methods and instructional competencies in classrooms significantly determine the academic achievement of students. Song and Young (2008) noted that flawed instructional approaches are widely perceived as contributing to the reading and writing achievement problem. Using cross tabulation to test the relationship between variables, it was

determined that more than 85% of non-specialist early childhood teachers teaching in early childhood education centres do not use the appropriate methods of teaching in their instructional processes (Ololube, Kpolovie, & Egbezor, 2009). 98% of the respondents are of the opinion that inadequate pre-service and in-service training has left teachers ill-prepared for effective teaching, which in turn leads to reading and writing problems among students (Song and Young, 2008).

Table 3. Chi-square analysis of the employed methods/instructional competencies of the respondents

S/N	Employed methods/instructional competencies	Chi-square	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Children having opportunities to move around in the English classroom	50.750 ^a	5	p < .000
2	Children guided on how to read and write in English	40.250 ^a	5	p < .000
3	In learning English language, it is important to repeat and practise a lot	22.750 ^b	6	p < .001
4	Playing English videos for children to imitate and learn from it	47.250 ^b	6	p < .000
5	Pronouncing a word wrongly, I would correct him/her at once	45.500 ^a	5	p < .000
6	Children learn English easily when they engage in role plays	3.500 ^c	3	p > .321
7	For children to learn, you must demonstrate teaching situation effectively	22.750 ^b	6	p < .001

Evaluation competencies in the communicative approach

To examine the research hypothesis: *There is no significant difference between the professional competencies of teachers' and their evaluation competencies used in the communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills in early childhood education*, the responses on items 13–18 of section B of the questionnaire were tallied and analysed, and the results are provided in Table 4. The statistical analysis of responses shows significant differences between the skills of specialist and non-specialist teachers in questioning as a teaching method, constructing evaluation instruments, developing effective curricula for evaluation, keeping accurate records of individual students, evaluating data to improve job situations and assessing children's behaviour effectively. The test analysis indicated $X^2=14.875$, $p<.005$; $X^2=47.250$, $p<.000$; $X^2=71.750$, $p<.000$; $X^2=66.500$, $p<.000$; $X^2=45.500$, $p<.000$, and $X^2=32.375$, $p<.000$ respectively. Thus, H_0 3 was rejected.

The evaluation competencies exhibited in the communicative approach when relating reading and writing skills in early childhood education centres determine the academic achievement of students. The teachers evaluated themselves on competency statement items of the questionnaire, which were tallied along the lines of "agree and disagree" (Table 4). The results from the analysis revealed that specialist teachers tend to employ and use appropriate evaluation methods more than non-specialists teachers do. For instance, using appropriate questioning skills, constructing various evaluation instruments, using evaluation data to improve job situations, keeping accurate records of individual students and effectively assessing student behaviour are among the first-hand competencies of

specialist teachers. The cross tabulation analysis shows that 93.3% of the respondents hold this view on the professionalization of early childhood education teaching.

Table 4. Chi-square analysis of evaluation competencies of the respondents

S/N	Evaluation competencies	Chi-square	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Appropriate questioning skills in teaching children	14.875 ^a	4	p < .005
2	Constructing various evaluation instruments	47.250 ^b	6	p < .000
3	Developing effective curricula for evaluation	71.750 ^c	5	p < .000
4	Keeping records of individual students accurately	66.500 ^c	5	p < .000
5	Evaluation data to improve job situations	45.500 ^c	5	p < .000
6	Assessing children behaviour effectively	32.375 ^a	4	p < .000

Bio-data of the respondents and the overall perception of the variables tested

The results from the Pearson product moment analysis indicate that there are no significant differences in the overall analysis based on the respondents' bio-data profiles. With gender as an independent variable and items 1–18 in section B of the research questionnaire as dependent variables, no significant gender effect on the opinions of female and male respondents can be found. The mean score of 5.4615 for male and 6.2877 for female, with $r=.014$, $p>.882$ illustrates that both male and female respondents hold early childhood education specialists as the path forward for the development of early childhood education. The analysis also reveals that age has no significant effect on the opinion of respondents when it comes to the communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills. From Table 5, it can be seen that the means of the respondents appear at the same score level (6.1688 and 6.6286), while $r=.071$, $p>.457$ depicts likewise. Age, at this stage, did not have an effect on respondent views. Thus, all the respondents, regardless of age differences, held specialisation as the best outcome for ECE and ECE students.

The relationship between qualifications and opinions on the communicative approach to reading and writing education disclosed a similar situation. Here again, specialisation was the preference among respondents for making sure that young children receive a good education. The inequality between the postgraduate degree holders and other qualification groups is not sufficient enough to meet the requirements to falsify the null hypothesis. This slight shift in their view might be because of their experience and/or their broad educational background. The inability to falsify the null hypothesis was also because $r=.035$ but does not exceed $p>.446$, as it has to occur 35 times in every 1000.

The respondents were grouped into two categories based upon type of school: public or private. Their mean consistently fell in the same mean score level of between 4.5000–4.5256. Thus, no significant differences existed in their views as per the indications of $r=.021$ and $p>.589$. Different categories of teachers all hold professionalism in high esteem.

The respondents' bio-data on length of service did not result in a contrary view. The region of rejection was not reached either. None of the five categories in years of service had a mean score of less than 5.8000 with $r=.012$, and $p>.836$. The results reveal that all

five categories of teachers, based on length of service, show a positive attitude towards specialisation.

The overall Pearson product moment analysis reveals that all respondents, irrespective of gender, age, qualifications, school type and length of service showed unwavering support for the importance of professionalization in early childhood education. Since the results show no significant differences existed in the respondents' opinions, the null hypothesis was true, and it was accepted (Table 5).

Table 5. Pearson product moment analysis of respondents' perception of the variables tested

Bio-data of respondents	Groups	Freq.	%	Mean	r	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	Male	39	34.8	5.4615	.014	.882
	Female	73	65.2	6.2877		
Age	20-30	77	68.8	6.1688	.071	.457
	31-above	35	31.3	6.6286		
Qualifications	Secondary School Certificate/Diploma	21	18.8	6.0000	.035	.446
	NCE	42	37.5	5.5000		
	BEd/BScEd/BAEd	46	41.1	6.1304		
	Degree in Early Childhood Education	0	0	0.0000		
	Postgraduate degree	3	2.7	4.5000		
Type of schools	Public (6)	47	42	4.5256	.021	.589
	Private (6)	65	58	4.2740		
Length of service	Less than 1 year	7	6.3	6.0000	.012	.836
	About two years	28	25.0	6.2500		
	About 5 years	42	37.5	5.8333		
	About 6-8 years	28	25.0	5.6900		
	Over 9 years	7	6.3	5.8000		

Concluding remarks

This study stems from our intense belief in the value of the teaching profession, its functionalist importance to society and its role in children's educational experiences. This paper is a piece of academic writing for teachers whose daily lives are driven by the imperatives of educational planning and policy-making so as to help young children learn effectively. This study is addressed, first and foremost, to those teachers who seek empirical evidence and who want to be at the very top of their profession. It is also for parents, researchers, education planners and policy makers in developing countries, especially those in Africa, who wish to come to terms with the everyday reality (Kerry & Wilding, 2004), of the failing state of Nigerian early childhood education.

This paper examined a problematic perspective on the early childhood teaching profession in Nigeria, that all one needs to be an effective early childhood education teacher is a university certificate. It has, at the same, taken an inventory of teachers' competencies

and looked at options for enriching early childhood teachers' use of effective teaching techniques (Ololube, Egbezor, & Kpolovie, 2008). The research findings suggest that specialized interventions, which provide school readiness skills to children early in the school years, enhance children's learning performance in core curriculum areas, such as reading and writing as they move into more formalized schooling (Nonoyama-Tarumi & Bredenberg, 2009).

This research has outlined the complex role of early childhood education (ECE) teachers and explicitly stated the significance of the need for professionalisation and development in the ECE community.

The professional characteristics, knowledge and skills of teachers, which help promote the stability of the academic environment, have a close connection with activities and potential activities within a school. The results in this study show that the professional characteristics, knowledge and skills of teachers have a role in effecting quality teaching in ECE. Non-specialist teachers should not be encouraged to remain in the ECE teaching profession. Staff education and training are one means of professional updating, which deal with all developmental functions, directed towards the maintenance and enhancement of one's professional competence. It is evident in this study that teachers who are dedicated to improving their competence are likely to contribute, directly or indirectly, to the growth of students' achievement.

Providing professional development, especially for ECE teachers, is a challenge in teacher education. There has been little or no system of ongoing professional development and consequently no culture of professional development in Nigerian ECE schools. The ongoing professional development of ECE teachers is particularly important given the poor performance of students in national and international examinations. Early development of children using the communicative approaches will yield positive results in the years to come. It is necessary for educators to understand the problems that plague ECE schools and to formulate relevant programmes to prepare and support ECE teachers. Furthermore, current changes in technology, new advances in learning and the inherent challenges arising from curriculum renewal and reform require radical changes in teaching and learning methodologies. Once the desirability of adopting rich and flexible curriculum frameworks has been recognized, alternative ways of promoting teaching and learning methodologies will be necessary. This will involve moving away from a rigid, prescriptive approach to classroom work (Pillai, 2001).

Nigeria, like other developing countries, needs effective ECE teacher education programmes. Teacher training is broadly divided into what is provided before and during employment. This includes pre-service or initial education and training and continuing professional development or in-service education and training (Day & Sachs, 2004; Bolam & McMahon, 2004). Teacher training is commonly acknowledged as one of the most important factors in developing quality teachers. In-service training might take any form, such as sandwich programmes organized by the faculties of education at most Nigeria universities during the vacation period of eight weeks per session, workshops, seminars, and symposiums, which are aimed at remedying the inadequacies of pre-service training.

Implication for research and practice

This study has both practical and conceptual elements that can facilitate a broad understanding of the issues surrounding early childhood education policies and teachers' preparation programmes in line with quality Education For All (EFA). This study has given considerable attention to the divergent factors and, as a result, might fill an intellectual gap in understanding the key issues surrounding early childhood educational achievement in Nigeria, with particular reference to the main themes of this research study. This study breaks new academic ground by focusing on the under-researched area of early childhood education teachers' qualification and their teaching effectiveness.

The professional competencies of ECE teachers and their relationship to teaching quality and improvement are part of an area of increasing importance in ECE educational policy and practice. ECE teacher competencies have become a focal point for motivation and commitment among both new and experienced teachers. The research findings are particularly helpful not only to practicing ECE teachers, but also to all those involved in ECE research, policy making, planning and those who work in initial ECE teacher education programmes and in-service teacher education in developing countries.

The need to instantaneously revitalise ECE and ECE teachers through effective ECE teacher education agendas is of paramount importance. According to Owens (2004), work towards this goal is guided by basic principles:

- programmes for the education of the nation's ECE educators must be viewed by institutions offering them as a major responsibility of society and must be adequately supported and promoted and vigorously advanced by the institution's leadership;
- programmes for the education of ECE educators must enjoy parity with other professional education programmes, full legitimacy and institutional commitment and renewal for faculty geared to the nature of the field;
- programmes for the education of ECE educators must be autonomous and secure in their borders, with clear organisational identity, constancy of budget and personnel and decision-making authority similar to that enjoyed by the major professional schools.

This study has implications for government, administrators, policy-makers, instructors and other actors involved in early childhood education. Further quantitative research on the topic is highly encouraged as there are some limitations of this study. A new perspective on the professional competencies of early childhood teachers in the use of communicative approach as a tool for relating reading and writing skills that does not only take into consideration the unique characteristics of the variables used in this study, but also other factors and their cultural derivation is recommended.

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