

Solving Reading Comprehension Difficulties among English as a Second Language Learners in Nigeria: An Experience in Differentiated Instruction

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Abstract

The study determined the effect of differentiated instructional strategy on secondary school students achievement in English Reading Comprehension in Oyo Township, Nigeria. The retest-posttest control group research design was adopted. The participants were 235 students from six intact classes from six senior secondary schools in Oyo township. The instruments used were Reading Comprehension Achievement Test ($r=0.79$), Reading Proficiency Test ($r=0.76$), Students' Home Background Questionnaire ($r=0.81$), Teachers' Instructional Guide on Differentiated Instruction and Teacher's Instructional Guide on Modified Lecture Strategy. Findings revealed that students exposed to differentiated strategy with a mean of 12.56 performed better than their counterparts in the control group with a mean of 7.78, irrespective of their home background. It was recommended that reading comprehension instruction should utilise differentiated instruction for better results.

Keywords: *Differentiated Instruction, Content, Process, Reading Proficiency, Reading Comprehension*

Introduction

Reading is a literacy language skill which is inevitable for learning. English language reading skill is taught at all levels of education in Nigeria and it is also examined in form of reading comprehension at public examinations such as West African Examinations Council and National Examinations Council. Reading comprises composite skills which are required in curriculum areas at various levels of education, be it lower to upper basic, secondary, and tertiary. It is one of the most important skills to be learned by students; a student will learn little else in today's world if he or she does not first learn to read properly. Without ability to read, opportunities for personal mental development may not be realized.

However, in Nigeria, many students cannot read and understand well any given passage. This perhaps accounts for mass failure in English language in the Senior School Certificate Examinations organised by The West African Examinations Council every year. The WASCE results for a period of ten years (2005-2014) reviewed for this study show that the percentage of candidates who scored less than a credit pass in English language each year is very high.

As reported by Okere (2012), only 35.14% out of 1,307,745 candidates who sat for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in 2010 had credit and above in English language. Citing the WAEC Heads of Nigeria National Office, this result, even as poor as it is, is an improvement compared to WASSCE 2005 and 2006 results. This trend no doubt shows that there is a gap between the expectation of teachers and the performance of the students, and this has some

instructional implications, one of which is the need to give priority attention to teaching and learning of the language skills, especially reading.

The implications of the poor performance in the English language as evident in the results are enormous. For instance, less than 45.0% of candidates qualify for admission into tertiary institutions. The consequences of not gaining admission into tertiary institutions as a result of failure to obtain credit pass in English Language is that the majority of the candidates lose out in their bid to become professionals in their dream careers. The poor performance of students in English language yearly is closely connected to the performance of candidates in Paper I of the subject, which is made up of letter writing, reading comprehension and summary writing which are respectively allotted 50 marks, 40 marks and 30 marks (WAEC syllabus 2013-2017). A candidate who has read well will have sufficient ideas which will help him/her to develop the plot or body of the essay. In the same vein, Adigun (2016) asserts that a good summary writing is dependent on effective reading comprehension. That is, a candidate who wants to score a high mark in summary writing should be able to read and comprehend any given passage. From the foregoing, one could deduce that about 60 marks out of 120 marks allotted to paper 1 is reading-comprehension based.

The foregoing justifies the assertion of Fakeye (2018) that reading is an inherent part of the writing process. Failure in any of these aspects (writing, summary and reading comprehension) is synonymous to failure in English Language. Therefore, any candidate who wishes to do well in

English Language must do well in Paper 1 which involves reading comprehension. The WAEC Chief Examiner Reports between 2017 identify some factors for poor performance of students in English language as lack of textbooks on comprehension; complete lifting of sentences from texts to present their responses; failure to construct meaning from a text; lack of imagination and failure to critically read and answer questions on comprehension passages correctly. Some other identified factors are poor linguistic background (Bateye, 2017), and lack of modern teaching methods, (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2002) and poor reading habits (Ezeokoli, 2005).

Reading has been described variously by different scholars. To Oguniji (2004), to read is to grasp language patterns from their written representation. Reading is a process of communication involving the writer and the reader, the encoder and the decoder. Simply put, reading is a process of extracting meaning from written language. This implies that a student cannot claim to have read until he/she is able to comprehend and bring out meaning from what he/she has read. According to Adediran (2019), reading is the interpretation based on the ability of the reader to understand the purpose of the author as well as what the author is saying. Reading is not only a rapid recognition of verbal symbols but also an understanding of the thought and idea for which they stand. In a sense, reading comprehension has not taken place unless the reader is able to interpret what he/she has read.

The main purpose for reading is to comprehend the ideas in a text. Comprehension is the ultimate outcome of the act of reading. Reading comprehension is among the most critical academic skills to be attained in school (Awolere, 2016). However, most teachers take reading comprehension for granted, while they forget that until students are capable of giving meaning to what they claimed to have read, they have not read in the real sense of it.

As central to academic achievement as reading is, Nigerian students have not fared well in reading comprehension. Studies have shown that Nigerian secondary school students cannot read with adequate comprehension and are rated the third poorest readers in the world. (Awolere, 2016). In addition to this, the *Chief Examiner Reports in English Language* (2010) reveal that failure rate in English language has been predominant in the aspect of reading comprehension.

To overcome the problems associated with reading comprehension, researchers such as Awolere (2016) and Bateye (2017) have suggested the use of

instructional strategies that could be of help to students in reading comprehension. These strategies include: evoker strategy, forced retrieval and questioning strategy and text-previewing, among others. Although the foregoing strategies are learner-centred and are in favour of engaging students in the teaching learning process of reading, none of them takes into consideration the varying students' abilities, background and their readiness. However, Tomlinson (2006), posits that in order to teach effectively, educators must respond to students' varying abilities by teaching them at their particular readiness levels. It is against this backdrop that this study has focused on differentiated instructional strategy

Differentiated Instruction is a strategy in which teachers acknowledge, respect, accommodate and build upon a wide array of students' differences to facilitate optimal growth for all (Tomlinson, 1999). It recognises the spectrum of differences among students and enables the teacher to attend to the specific learning style of each student, by adjusting what they teach and how they teach it (Tomlinson, 2003). Through DI, teachers are able to identify students' starting points, rather than simply starting at the front of a curriculum guide. In Tomlinson model, the teacher adjusts the content and process of a lesson to improve the likelihood of students' engagement and achievement. Emphasis is placed on demonstrating scaffolding and lesson design, in order for students to understand and extend their knowledge of the subjects. This may be done in a variety of ways, using a wide range of materials, such as visual aids, manipulative, audio recordings and supplementary text. The teacher may also differentiate the way that students demonstrate their understanding, by designing tiered activities or several of different products that meet the same learning goals to allow students the opportunity to choose how to express and display their understanding, each student gains access to the curriculum and receives tangible support as knowledge is demonstrated.

The justification for this strategy lies in the fact that today's classrooms are diverse, and classrooms in Oyo town, the locale of this study, are not exceptions. Oyo town has a population of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. There are children of educated elites (predominantly civil servants) who had started reading before coming to school and as a result do well in reading comprehension and other school subjects. On the other hand, there are children of the illiterates who had little or no encounter with reading materials before coming to school. Thus, students' ability in English reading comprehension in Oyo town

is unequal, and perhaps this has been responsible for the gap in their academic performance.

Although differentiated instructional strategy has been used successfully by researchers outside the shores of Nigeria, not much work has been done in this area in Oyo town, Nigeria especially in the teaching of reading comprehension.

Statement of the Problem

English language is a core subject in secondary school curriculum and success or failure in it determines the extent to which students will go in their educational pursuit in life. However, reports from public examination bodies on yearly basis have indicated that students perform poorly in English language. Poor comprehension skill of secondary school students has been identified as the major cause of this problem. Research efforts aimed at improving students' achievement in reading comprehension has led researchers to come up with learner-centred strategies such as reciprocal teaching, pre-reading discussion and partner reading for teaching of reading comprehension. These studies provided useful insights into the teaching and learning of reading comprehension, but they have not translated to significant improvement in students' performance. This might be because most of the strategies do not tailor the instruction to individual needs of learners. Consequently, scholars have advocated adoption of Differentiated Instructional Strategy in order to fill this obvious gap. Studies have shown that these two strategies improve students' learning outcomes in Social Studies, Mathematics and the sciences. However, the effects of the strategy on students' achievement in reading comprehension have not been adequately investigated in Oyo town. This study, therefore, determined the effects of differentiated instructional strategy on the achievement of senior secondary school students in reading comprehension in Oyo town.

Hypotheses

Based on the stated problem, the following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H₀₁: There is no significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement in reading comprehension

H₀₂: There is no significant main effect of home background on students' achievement in reading comprehension.

Scope of the Study

This study covered SS two students in six intact classes from six purposively selected senior

secondary schools from three local government areas (Atiba, Oyo West, Oyo East) in Oyo Central Senatorial District of Oyo State. It also determined the effect of differentiated instructional strategy and the moderating effect of home background on students' learning outcomes in reading comprehension.

Significance of the Study

This study is beneficial to all students as it would expose them to English reading instruction using Differentiated strategy which was found to have improved students' achievement in reading comprehension. This would in turn lead to a reduction in the problem of mass failure in English language examination in schools, and, ultimately, an improved performance in public examinations (WAEC and NECO). Also, it would give language teachers insight into the potential in differentiated instruction strategy in promoting reading comprehension. The findings of this study will also improve teachers' knowledge and skills in the teaching of reading comprehension. Similarly, the findings of the study would provide useful information to curriculum planners and policy makers in education on alternative but viable options in teaching strategies that could enhance reading comprehension instruction. Thus, this strategy could be part of the recommended strategies in the reading instruction curriculum.

Methodology

The study adopted the pretest- posttest, control group quasi-experimental design using 3x2 factorial matrix. The design is shown schematically as follows:

O ₁	X ₁	O ₂	experimental group I (Differentiated Strategy).
O ₃	X ₂	O ₄	control group (Modified Conventional strategy).

The participants were 235 Senior Secondary Two (SS II) students drawn from six intact classes in Oyo East, Oyo West and Atiba local government areas of Oyo State. The instruments used were Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (r=0.79), Reading Proficiency Test (r=0.76), Students' Home Background Questionnaire (r=0.81), Teachers' Instructional Guide on Differentiated Instruction and Teacher's Instructional Guide on Modified Lecture Strategy

Two qualified teachers of English Language from the selected schools were contacted to obtain their consent to participate in the study. The researcher thereafter embarked on one-week training for teachers in the use of the strategy. At the end of the training, each research

assistant was selected (from each school) based on the training performance scale. All the SSII students in the experimental and control groups were exposed to pretest of reading comprehension achievement test. The pretesting lasted oneweek.The treatment was carried out on the experimental and control groups. During this period, students in the experimental group were exposed to English reading comprehension instruction through differentiated strategy, while the control group was taught with modified conventional strategy.All the SSII students in the experimental and control groups were exposed to posttestof reading comprehension at the end of exposure to treatment.

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean as well as inferential statistics of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) which was used to test all the hypotheses. In addition, estimated marginal means were computed to show differences in the mean scores of experimental and control groups, while Scheffe Post-hoc analysis was used to find out the source of significance between the groups.

Results

Ho₁: There is no significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement in reading comprehension

Table 1: Summary of Analysis of covariance of posttest, achievement by treatment, home background and self concept.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	2368.810 ^a	13	182.216	28.299	.000	.627
Intercept	1445.287	1	1445.285	224.457	.000	.506
Pre-achievement	1197.077	1	1197.077	185.909	.000*	.459
Treatment	415.052	2	207.526	32.229	.000*	.227
Home background	.936	1	.936	.145	.703	.001
Treatment Home Background	.511	2	.255	.040	.961	.000
Error	1410.152	219	6.439			
Total	32038.000	233				
Corrected Total	3778.961	232				

Significant at P<.05

Table 1 shows that treatment had significant main effect on students' achievement in English reading comprehension ($F_{(2,219)} = 32.229$; $p < 0.05$; $\eta^2 = .227$). Therefore, Ho₁ is rejected. Table 2 presents the estimated marginal of students' achievement scores in English reading comprehension across the groups.

Table 4.2: Estimated marginal means of students' achievement in English reading comprehension among the treatment groups

Treatment	N	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Differentiated Strategy	131	12.563	.517	11.544	13.581
Conventional method	104	7.777	.375	7.038	8.517

Table 2 reveals that those exposed to differentiated strategy had higher post achievement mean scores (=12.56) than those exposed to conventional strategy (=7.78).

Ho₂: There is no significant main effect of home background on students' achievement in reading comprehension.

Table 1 shows that home background of the students had no significant main effect on students achievement in reading comprehension ($F_{(1,219)} = 15$; $p > 0.05$; $\eta^2 = .00$). Therefore, Ho₂ is not rejected.

Ho₃: There is no significant interaction effect of treatment of home background on students' achievement in reading comprehension.

Table 1 reveals that the interaction effect of treatment and home background on students achievement in reading comprehension is not significant ($F_{(2,219)} = .40$; $p > 0.05$; $\eta^2 = .00$). Therefore, Ho_{3a} is not rejected.

Discussion of Findings

Main Effect of Treatment on Students' Achievement in Reading Comprehension

Treatment had significant main effect on students' achievement in reading comprehension. Those exposed to differentiated strategy had higher posttest achievement mean score than the modified conventional strategy group. A possible reason for this may be because students in experimental group (differentiated strategy) were exposed to a strategy that took care of their individual differences and allowed them to work collaboratively with their teacher and peers. Also, the idea of differentiated timing might have contributed a lot to their highest achievement. The result of differentiated instructional strategy is in support of Tomlinson (2007), Tomlinson and McTighe (2006), Pearl (2006), and Elizabeth (2006) that differentiated strategy enhances students' achievements in reading comprehension. However, the findings of the study negate the findings of Protheroe (2007) who found differentiated strategy to be harmful and time-wasting.

Main and interaction effect of Students Home Background

Students' home background was found to have no significant main and interaction effect on their achievement in reading comprehension. This finding is surprising when one takes into consideration the fact home background has the potential to influence students' academic success. The result could be attributed to the fact that these strategies equalized learning opportunities for students from different home background groups such that the effect of home background was neutralized. In addition to this, the non-significant effect of home background could also be explained by the fact that the researcher provided reading passages to all students during the experiment and this downplay the effect of non-possession of reading text which is usually a function of students' home background. The finding agrees with those of Fakeye (2018) and Jire-Alao (2019) who reported in their separate studies that home background did not affect students performance in reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The results of the study have shown that differentiated instructional strategy is more effective in enhancing students' achievement in reading comprehension than the modified conventional strategy, while home background did

not affect students' performance. It could be concluded that students' poor performance in reading comprehension, reading comprehension instruction needs to be differentiated and scaffolded so as to cater for different reading ability groups in the class. In addition, conclusion can further be drawn that effective reading instructional strategies such as differentiated could compensate whatever deficiencies exist in learners' home background.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

Teachers at all levels of education should adopt differentiated strategy for teaching and learning of English reading comprehension since they involve students' participation in their learning process.

To achieve the above, seminars and workshops should be organized by the government to train teachers on the use of differentiated strategy. Experts in differentiated strategy should, as often as possible, engage in professional conversations about differentiation and scaffolding by agreeing to serve as mentors to teachers who are yet to be familiar with the details of the strategy. The Nigeria Union of Teachers and English Studies Association of Nigeria should organize regular conferences and seminars using differentiated strategy for English reading comprehension. English language teacher preparation programmes in colleges of education and universities should incorporate differentiated instructional strategy into their language curricula.

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