

# Vocabulary Knowledge, Attitude and Gender as Correlates of achievement in Poetic Literature among Senior Secondary School Students in Akure, Nigeria

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## Abstract

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*This study was carried out to investigate students' vocabulary knowledge, attitude and gender as predictors of their academic achievement in poetry in Akure, Nigeria. The ex post facto research design was adopted. Participants were drawn from 13 schools in intact classes were purposively selected. The three instruments used were Students' Achievement Test in poetry ( $r=0.78$ ), Vocabulary knowledge Test ( $r=0.76$ ) and Questionnaire on Students' Attitude to poetry ( $r=0.73$ ). Four research questions were answered at 0.5 level of significance. Data were analyzed using frequency counts and simple percentage. Multiple regression analysis was also used to provide answers to the research questions. Findings revealed that there was a significant relationship between students' vocabulary knowledge and their academic achievement ( $r=.295, p<.05$ ), and between students' attitude and their academic achievement in poetry ( $r=.138, p<.05$ ). There was, however, no significant relationship between gender and students' academic achievement in poetry. There was a significant joint contributions of all the independent variables to academic achievement in poetry ( $F_{(3,390)}=12.712, p<.05$ ) accounting for 10.5% of the variance. There was a significant relative contribution of each of the variables to achievement in poetry. Based on these findings, teachers should note the variables when planning lesson and use effective strategies to improve students' attitude.*

**Keywords:** Vocabulary knowledge, Attitude, Gender, achievement, Poetic literature

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## Introduction

The various subjects in the school curriculum contribute in different ways to human and national development. The emphasis placed on certain subjects in comparison to others, may, to some extent, reflect their contributions to human and social developments. One of such subjects is literature-in-English. It is perhaps, a subject that attracts many readers because of its entertaining value. It is included among the subjects in the humanities required for students to be admitted into tertiary institutions read courses like Mass Communication, Classics, English Language, Language Arts and a host of others. Buchman, (2000) sees literature as an expression of human quest for perfection. It also reports that it is an attempt to understand the universe and without it, human existence would be shapeless, tasteless and dull. For the purpose of this study, literature is an imaginative writing that gives representation of various human experiences.

Literature, according to Kolade-ojo (2012) is beneficial to both students and teachers as it opens the mind and illuminates it, purging the mind of prejudices and making it free and active. Through the study of literature, students learn the humane approach of examining thoughts and actions. It helps one to understand human nature and expands their scope of knowledge as it assists the students to know more about the diversity of human beings. To Iguabor

(2014), literature serves as a model for good writing; it is memorable, non-trivial and challenging, and it helps students assimilate the rhythm of a language; thereby facilitating intelligence and sensibility training. From these characteristics, one can conclude that literature helps improve form and discourse processing skills as well as vocabulary expansion and reading skills.

There are three genres of literature (prose, drama and poetry) and each of these makes a unique impact on the people exposed to them. Prose is the most typical of form of language, applying ordinary grammatical structure and natural flow of speech rather than rhythmic structure. It is a kind of writing that is not poetic (Ibitola, 2005). Normal everyday speech is spoken in prose and most people think and write in prose form. Prose comprises of grammatical sentences which consist of paragraphs and forgoes aesthetic appeal to clear and straightforward language. Prose can be fictional or non-fictional. The fictional include the allegory, autobiography, letters, publications, book reviews and literary criticism (Heidi, 2012). The elements of prose are theme, characters, setting (place, time and social), point of view (first person, third person etc) and plot (initiating event, the rising action, conflict, climax, falling action and with resolution). Drama is an aspect of literature that represents works of art meant for performance on the stage (Collins English Dictionary, 2009). This aspect of Literature-in-English represents all plays or anything meant to be acted on stage. In this way, one can argue that all scripted

television shows are a part of drama: they are written with the purpose of being acted on for an audience (Janovsky, 2016). Drama is literature meant for acting on stage which is frequently accompanied with music and dance, as in [show](#) and [musical theatre](#). A [play](#) is a type of this class of literature that refers to the written dramatic work of a playwright that is projected for presentation in a theatre. This type of literature includes essentially [discourse](#) amidst [characters](#), and generally aims at theatrical or dramatic presentation instead of reading.

Poetry genre has a lot to do with feelings and senses. It appeals to the feelings of and by so doing develops the emotional and imaginative aspects of man. Poetry is a type of literary art which uses [artistic](#) and [musical](#) qualities of language to suggest meanings. Edgar (1832) sees poetry as the rhythmical creation of beauty. It is also an impulsive flow of strong feeling or thinking reminisced in a calm mind or an explanation of one's inner emotion when the mind is at peace (Wordsworth, 1850). It is also seen as an interaction between humans, be it man or woman or man and his environment which generally leads to some understandings or human feelings such as joy, sorrow, laughter, words which could be poetic (Dasyuva and Jegede 2005). One can also state that poetry is a unique and specialized form of self-expression, having some artistic features (Akorobaro, 2015). For this study, poetry is an expression of one's strong feelings. Poetry reveals the prospects of using language to control and illuminate on feelings, spiritual and intellectual experiences. Smith (2005) also remarks that exposure to the notions of metre and rhythm can enhance students' writing and their ability to value and relate with the notions. Poetry can easily be differentiated from [prose](#) by its feature which is in [verse](#). Prose is written in paragraphs and chapters while poetry is in lines and stanzas. The [sentence structure](#) of prose is dictated by meaning, while that of poetry is found across metre or the visual features of the doing and improves the emotional and imaginative aspects of man.

Haraldson (2011) states that what is so special when studying poetry is the process of learning which is the unique way of using language in poems. The language of the poem guides and reconciles the process of understanding. In poetry, the diction is not an apparent tool that simply explains the author's message; the language or diction of the poem is the author's message. Ayanniyi, (2009) characterises poetry as having language that is brief and compressed. To make it sound musical and

meaningful, the words are carefully selected and arranged for poetic effect. Poetry is written in stanza and can be best meaningful when it is recounted or sung. The reason for this is because a good poem is first and foremost meant to be sung. In today's world, this work of art can be an avenue for a lifetime education, for escaping from reality, for probing reality, for linking with history, and for moving towards the future. This potent work of art is however feared or despised by some secondary school students (**Sosnowski, 2002**).

The scholastic benefits of poetry are as follows: exposing learners to different perspectives of using language beyond the normal usages and rules of grammar, syntax and vocabulary, prompting indifferent learners to be open to examination and different interpretations of language, arousing feelings and thoughts in heart and in mind, making learners conversant with variety of literary devices (simile, metaphor, irony, personification, imagery) because of daily language use (Sarc, 2003). It can therefore be summed up that poetry, if it is selected cautiously and used creatively, may aid in developing the students' **affective, communicative, and intellectual** domains (Han and Omah, 2009).

Poetry helps people to know one another and build the community (Aquilar, 2013). Poetry allows children to give vivid images of their lives, using different figurative expressions and symbolic language to explain experiences that are too painful to share. Poetry gives one a chance to experiment with language and makes it give a profound meaning. When read aloud, poetry is rhythm, music, sounds and beats. It is the most rhythmic of all the aspects of literature; it is physical and is able to stimulate one's heart. From this perspective, one can explain that poetry brings genuine audience which encourages unwilling writers. Poetry is very helpful for English Language Learners (ELL). This is because poems flout rules and can be simplified for ELL. Poems can be easily scaffolded and the learners have the ability to express themselves in various ways even in their inadequate dictions.

Poetry is not easily understood when read and research has confirmed that among these three genres of literature, poetry seems the most difficult, Ayanniyi (2009) and Kolade-ojo (2012). This, according to them, is because of its ambiguity, obscurity, unfamiliarity of words and elliptical nature. Despite the fact that literature is a subject that features prominently in the school curriculum, the failure rate in this subject has become a big concern to stakeholders. This is because the dreams of students to

gain admission to read the aforementioned courses are shattered.

Report from the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) reveals that for seven consecutive years (2009-2015), only about 42.0% of Literature-in-English students who wrote the examinations passed at credit level, 33.0% had a mere pass, while the failure rate is 21.0%. For instance, in 2009, out of 401,890 students that sat for the examinations, only 40.4% had a credit pass while 15.3% had a pass and 38.4% failed the subject. In 2010, out 376,134 students that sat for the examination, 36.0% obtained a credit pass in the subject, 20.0% had a pass and 38.0% failed. The situations were not different in 2011 and 2012 where 41.0% and 40.2% obtained a credit pass respectively and 40.2% and 31% failed the subject. In 2013 and 2014, 19.9% and 25.5% had a credit pass while 35.8% failed respectively. In 2015, 18.0% obtained a credit pass and 44.5 failed the subject respectively.

This poor performance in literature-in-English has been linked to the poor performance of students in the poetic aspect of the subject according to the chief examiner's report (2015). "Their poor performance in this section has always been far below expectation and woefully disappointing." The report has it further that most students approach poetry with a lot fear and trepidations. The poor handling of this aspect of literature by teachers using traditional teacher-dominated lecture methods has been identified by scholars as a major cause of the difficulty students have in poetry, Hwang and Embi (2007), Ayanniyi (2009), Lundberg (2010) and Idialu (2014). All these are confirmations that the teaching of poetry is poor because most teachers have not fully motivated their students to learn by encouraging students' maximum participation and integrating their reaction into the teaching and learning situations. In order to address the situation, researchers have searched for effective and students-centered instructional strategies aimed at maximizing students' active participation in the learning process. Prominent among the solutions proffered is the adoption of various effective strategies of teaching poetry, particularly. Among the strategies experimented with are; lecture, discussion and activity methods (Aluko, 1990), scaffolding strategy, (Baart, 2002), graphic organizer (Ayanniyi, 2009), stylistic and thematic approaches (Kolade-Ojo, 2012).

Despite the significant contributions of these strategies towards demystifying the teaching and

learning of poetry in secondary schools, the spate of poor performance has not been abated while ethno-religious crisis and altercations among rival groups continue to grow by the day. This then, calls for a frantic effort on the part of the scholars to shift their research focus. It is perhaps in line with this thought that researchers have advocated a shift of research focus from teaching strategies to students' factors that could affect students' achievement in poetic literature. Among the students' factors documented in literature are motivation, maturation, physical and mental development, self-efficacy, verbal ability, vocabulary knowledge, attitude, gender and a host of others. This research therefore, focussed only on vocabulary knowledge, attitude and gender. This is because these areas have not enjoyed much attention especially in Akure Metropolis of Ondo State.

Students' vocabulary knowledge is one factor that affects the poor performance of students in poetry in particular and literature-in-English, in general. Vocabulary knowledge refers to the knowledge of the words as well as the meaning of the words. It is more than just citing the definition of a word. It requires that the reader uses the words appropriately based on a given context. Shanker and Cockrum (2010) see vocabulary knowledge as the ability to go from the printed form of a word to its meaning. Weiser (2013) looks at vocabulary knowledge as a process of acquiring new words to use in daily life, and more specifically, the basis of learning any language.

It can, therefore, be affirmed that vocabulary knowledge is not a unitary competency; rather, it can be broken down into separate competencies or masses of cognition. One of such is the 'breadth' and 'depth' of vocabulary knowledge. This breadth, or size, of vocabulary simply refers to the number of words known by a speaker of a second language. On the other hand, depth is defined as the extent of knowledge that one has about each word. In other words, breadth and depth imply the quantity and quality of lexical knowledge, respectively (Mehmet, 2019). These breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge do not grow in a parallel fashion, yet the two aspects are related and contribute to one another. So, a student needs a good mastery of these two, though at different rates, to achieve success in learning, particularly in language learning.

This is corroborated by Iyamu (2005) that vocabulary knowledge is a necessity if a child is to learn in school. It states that students' deficiency in the range and control of language is an important contribution of educational failure which is likely to generate a vicious circle of difficulties as school life progresses.

To ascertain the importance of vocabulary, numerous notions have been raised. Krashan (1989) reveals some of these notions. First, vocabulary appears to be a proper indicator of language ability because learners regularly make use of dictionary rather than a grammar book. This means that knowing a great amount of vocabulary is actually favourable since it assists learners to speak more and to have a good influence on other people as well. Second, a great amount of words is required for one to be competent in a foreign language. Iguabor (2014) believes that learning a foreign language fundamentally and immensely is dependent on vocabulary knowledge. It is therefore, not surprising that learners see vocabulary knowledge as one of the factors of second and foreign language proficiency (Iyamu, 2005; Shanker and Cockrum, 2010; Moghadama, Zainalb and Ghaderpour, 2012 and Mehmet, 2019). Hence, to achieve one's goal of better academic performance, one should make vocabulary expansion a top priority. From the foregoing, one can infer that most of the previous studies on vocabulary knowledge were done outside the shore of Nigeria. Besides, the extent to which this variable could predict students' academic achievement in poetry has not enjoyed much research attention in Akure Metropolis, Ondo State. This study, therefore, aimed at investigating vocabulary knowledge as a predictor of students' academic achievement in poetry.

There have been a continuous debate on the extent, or even the existence of gender differences in the mean level of IQ scores. While, Ayanniyi (2009) indicates that some differences exist between males and females on aspect of creativity related to academic achievement, even though creativity is shown to be related to academic performance for gender, other scholars like Ariyo and Ugodulunwa (2007) assert that the degree of creativity between male and female is similar but they also concluded that the most famous creative person are usually male. Some other researchers also reported that one gender is more creative and tend to do better academically than the other gender. Gender is the range of physical, biological, mental and behavioural characteristics pertaining to and differentiating between the feminine and masculine (female and male) population. The study of gender is justified in relation to the fact that gender is based primarily on the socio-cultural differences between girls and boys.

Gender issue has actually become the talk of today's research. Although the literacy rate is more among the boys than girls, it is quite interesting to observe

that girls are securing better ranks than boys in almost all competitive examinations. From the last ten years, it is very fascinating to note that the girls figure is more often in top ten, in tenth's class annual examination. Result have been consistently inconsistent on the influence of gender on academic achievement of students. Some researchers attribute the differences to methodological flaws, while others mention conditions that favour academic performance of boys and girls such as an aversion of girls towards physical sciences and this could be responsible for the observed performance variations between the two groups. Mwiigi (2014), found that boys performed significantly better than girls do and posited that there are things in learning process, which affect the understanding of girls and boys differently. Some researchers pointed out that there is no significant gender difference in students' academic achievement and retention in various subjects while others found significant difference with either the boys or the girls performing better (Adeyemi and Ajibade, 2011; Awofala, Adeneye and Nneji, 2011; Amosun, 2011; Apata, 2011 and Agbaje and Alake, (2014). Because of the inconclusive findings of researchers on the effect of students' gender on their academic achievement, this study therefore, investigated if gender could predict students' academic achievement in poetry, in particular.

Another factor that has the possibility to have influence on students' academic achievement, particularly, in poetry is their attitude. Daily experience of dealing and interacting with students revealed most students give less priority to this aspect of literature-in-English. As a result, most of them end up having low marks on this genre which simultaneously affects their academic cumulative grade points. It should also be noted that the learners' attitudes toward poetry, according to Danesh and Shirkhani (2015), significantly influence the success of any language teaching program which attempts to use poetry as a type of teaching material. Extensive past studies also affirm that there is a close relationship between students' attitudes towards academic subject and their overall achievement (Ayanniyi, 2009; kolade-Ojo, 2012 and Olanipekun, 2013). The definition of attitude is multifaceted as it includes not only the students' like or dislike, but also their perceptions of the usefulness, difficulty or value of a subject. According to Shajahan and Shajahan (2007), attitude can be defined as a learned predisposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to a given object.

The position of poetry within literature teaching is not simple because students tend to show negative

attitudes to it and consider it incomprehensible and distant from today's world and most teachers are afraid of working with it. In today's impersonal world, poetry can be a vehicle for a lifelong learning, for escaping from and examining reality, for connecting with the past and for moving towards the future (kolade-Ojo, 2012). But sadly, this powerful genre of literature is more likely to be feared or be despised by secondary school than be embraced and appreciated. The study of attitude towards poetry is justified from at least three viewpoints. First, the development of positive attitude is the goal of many educational systems to boost students' academic achievement and learning as a whole. Second, attitude is a learned predisposition that reflects the school ethos and the wider social context in which literature-in-English instruction occurs (Iguabor, 2014). So, attitude can be influenced by policy intervention. Third, some scholars have suggested that there is a positive relationship between attitude towards literature-in-English and academic achievement.

This confirms that attitudes can be changed through the learning process, if appropriate materials and teaching techniques are used. They also improve as a result of language learning as learners who learn well will acquire positive attitudes (Danesh and Shirkhani 2015). Accordingly, learners' attitudes toward poetry can be changed if the origins of negative attitudes are known and the learners are exposed to reality. Inappropriate selection of texts and ineffective ways of teaching and ignoring the learners' response and their personal exchange with the literary texts are considered to be the likely reasons for students' aversion to poetry. However, the focus of this study was aimed at investigating if students' attitude could predict their academic achievement in poetry, in particular, considering the conflicting reports of other scholars on the correlational relationship between attitude and learning.

#### Statement of the Problem

Literature-in-English is an important subject offered in the Senior Secondary School for its numerous benefits. However, the performance of students in the subject has not been encouraging. Efforts to address this problem has led researchers to experiment with various students-centered strategies with little focus on students-related factors such as vocabulary, attitude and gender. Studies have shown that the factors were strongly linked to the students' academic success in aspects of English language like essay writing, reading comprehension and summary writing with little emphasis on poetry especially in

Akure, Ondo State. This study, therefore, investigated the extent to which vocabulary knowledge, attitude and gender would predict students' achievement in poetic literature in Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria.

#### Research Questions

1. What relationship exists among students' factors (vocabulary knowledge, attitude and gender) and students' achievement in Poetic literature?
2. What is the relative contribution of students' factors (vocabulary knowledge, attitude and gender) and students' achievement in Poetic literature?

#### Significance of the Study

Findings from the study has shown the extent of relationship between vocabulary knowledge, attitude and gender of students and their achievement in poetic literature in Akure, Nigeria. It has also added to pool of research in efforts to find out lasting solution to problems of under achievement in Poetic Literature in senior secondary schools in Akure, Nigeria.

#### Methodology

A descriptive expo facto research design was adopted for this study because the variables studied have already manifested and the researcher had no control over them. The 13 secondary schools selected from Akure metropolis were purposively sampled for the study. In each of the schools, all the SS3 literature-in-English students participated in the study, making a total of 141. The instruments used were students' achievement test in poetry ( $r=0.78$ ), vocabulary knowledge test ( $r=0.76$ ) and questionnaire on students' attitude to poetry ( $r=0.73$ ). The procedure for the study was in three phases and it lasted twelve weeks. While the first phase was the training of the teachers on how the instruments would be administered, the second phase was the administration of the tests. The questionnaire was administered on the third phase. The data collected were analysed using frequency counts and simple percentage. In addition, multiple regression analysis was used to provide answers to the research questions all research questions were answered at 0.05 level of significance.

#### Results and Discussion

##### Results

Research Question 1: What relationship exists among the students' factors and their academic achievement in poetic literature?

Table 1. Correlations Matrix of Independent Variables and students' achievement in poetic literature.

	Sex	Vocabulary knowledge	Attitude	Achievement
Sex Pearson Correlation	1	.039	-.049	.053
Sig. (2-tailed)		.439	.332	.293
N	396	.396	.396	395
Voc. Know. Pearson Correlation	.039	1	-.001	.295
Sig. (2-tailed)	.439		.976	.000
N	396	401	401	400
Attitude Pearson Correlation	-.049	-.001	1	.138**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.332	.976		.006
N	396	401	401	400
Achievement Pearson Correlation	.053	.295**	.138**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.293	.000	.006	
N	395	400	400	400

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 1 shows that there is no significant relationship between gender of students and students' achievement in poetic literature. However, the table shows that the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic achievement of students is significant as  $r=.295$ ,  $p=.05$ . The relationship between students' attitude and their academic achievement is also significant as  $r=.138$ ,  $p=.05$ .

**Research Question2:** What is the relative contribution of students' factors to achievement in Poetic Literature?

Table 2. Relative contribution of the students' factors to their academic achievement in poetic literature.

Model	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	T	Sig.
	Beta $\beta$	Std. Error	Beta $\beta$		
(constant)	24.427	6.047		4.039	.000
Sex	1.564	1.455	.051	1.075	.283
Voc. Know	.266	0.47	.276	5.636	.000
Attitude	.199	.076	.127	2.618	.009

a. Dependent variable: score

Table 2 shows the relative contribution of each of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The relative contribution of students' vocabulary knowledge to academic achievement is significant ( $\beta=.276$ ;  $t=5.636$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Also, relative contribution of students, attitude to academic achievement in poetic literature is significant ( $\beta=.127$ ;  $t=2.618$ ,  $p<.05$ ). This is also the case with students' gender as its relative contribution to students' academic achievement is significant ( $\beta=.051$ ;  $t=1.075$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Thus, vocabulary knowledge is the highest contributor to students' academic achievement in poetic literature. This is seconded by students' attitude to academic achievement in poetic literature with the students being the least in facilitating students' achievement in poetry.

The results showed that there is no significant relationship between gender of students and their academic achievement in poetry. This is consistent with Ayannyi, (2009) and Umar, Yagana, Hajja and Mohammed (2015) who assert in their studies that gender is not a barrier to academic achievement. They stressed that language performance depends on many inter related variables other than sex of the learners and their sex roles. It is, however, inconsistent with Morgan (2007), Eurydice (2010) and Kang'ahi (2011)

who found significant difference in students' gender and their academic achievement. Masoud (2011) also found that gender is an issue with important theoretical and pedagogical implications in second language learning and this has received so much attention in language learning research. It was emphasised that gender has a significant impact on how students learn a language. However, it was discovered that the female students obtained slightly higher academic achievement score than their male

counterparts. This is consistent with Blume (2009) who reported that girls perform better than boys. From the table, we can also deduce that there is a significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic achievement of students. This is consistent with Manyak and Bauer (2009) and Rosell (2012) who found significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge and students' achievement. The results also supported the findings of Iyere (2010) and Siashaan (2013). Siashaan (2013) results revealed a significant correlation between students' mastery of vocabulary and their achievement in writing procedure texts. Iyere's (2013) appraisal of students' errors in English composition indicated that spelling errors, which is a result of poor vocabulary knowledge hinders the quality of students' essay. All these affirm that vocabulary knowledge is fundamental in academic achievement particularly in poetry because it functions as background knowledge in the comprehension of any text. So, vocabulary knowledge facilitates decoding, which is a significant part of reading.

The table also shows a significant relationship between students' attitude and academic achievement in poetry. This confirms the assertions of Fakeye (2012). Fakeye (2012) noted that negative attitude and prejudice could mar the proper understanding and learning of the genres of literature for which learners do have preference. If there is no motivating drive in the learning process, students are not likely to exert the effort required to learn poetry. This is consistent with the findings of Lemmouth (2010), Siashaan (2013) and Iyere (2013). Enoch (2014) concluded that there was a moderately strong positive relationship between attitude towards reading and academic performance. It also emphasised that the development of positive attitude in students produces adults who will continue to engage in sustained lifelong reading which tends to have effect on their academic progression and outlook.

### Conclusion

From this study, it can be concluded that students' factors (vocabulary knowledge, attitude and gender) influenced students' academic achievement in poetry in public secondary schools in Akure, Ondo State. It can therefore be concluded that students' factors are important and vital for academic success in poetry.

### Recommendation

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Measures that can encourage the development of students' vocabulary knowledge should be adopted.
2. Poetry instructors should note the variables when planning lessons.
3. Teachers should use effective strategies that can improve students' attitude to poetry.

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