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Effects of Literature Circles on Selected Senior Secondary School Students' Achievement in English Reading Comprehension in Niger State, Nigeria

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Abstract

There is ample evidence that students perform poorly in English language reading tests mainly because of methodological challenges in the area of reading comprehension instruction. Many teachers do not apply learner-centred reading comprehension instruction strategy where students may take active part in the learning process. Rather, they rely on the strategy that gives them total dominance during lessons. This study investigated the effects of learner-centred Literature circles instructional strategy on senior secondary school students' achievement in English reading comprehension in selected schools in Niger State. The study adopted a pretest, posttest, control group, quasi-experimental design. Three schools were purposively selected from each of the two local government areas that were randomly selected for the study and assigned to experimental and control groups. Instruments used for the study were the Teachers' Instructional Guides, Reading Comprehension Achievement Test, and Verbal Ability Test. Treatment lasted eight weeks. Data were analysed using Analysis of Covariance and Scheffe Post Hoc test at 0.05 level of significance. Results showed a significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement ($F_{(1,293)}=16.385; P<0.05$). Participants in Literature circles group had higher posttest achievement mean score ($X=53.45$) compared to the control group ($X=38.90$). Also, verbal ability had significant effect on achievement. The High verbal ability group had the highest posttest achievement mean score ($X=53.16$), followed by the Average ability ($X=48.44$) and the Low ability groups ($X=43.23$). The study concluded that Literature circles instructional strategy could be effective in improving reading comprehension achievement in the senior secondary school, irrespective of verbal ability level, and therefore recommended its use at that level of education.

Background to the Study

The English Language is a popular international language. Among the over 450 languages spoken in Nigeria, the prominence of English is undeniable. In education, English language is not only the medium of instruction in schools from the fourth year of the primary education to the tertiary level; it is also the language of most textbooks (Ezeokoli, 2005). It is also a compulsory subject of study at the primary and secondary school levels of education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

In view of the strategic position of English language as the official language of Nigeria and its importance to students' academic advancement and success in other school subjects, it is expected that literacy level would be high in it especially, among students at various levels. This is, however, not the case. The general performance of students in the Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) in Nigeria has been below average (Kolawole & Olatunji, 2006). Many students fail English language examinations every year while only a few obtain a credit pass, according to West African Examinations Council (WAEC). The WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports year by year identify lack of imagination, lack of text comprehension, and failure to critically read and answer questions correctly on comprehension passages as a cause of failure in English language examinations. Instead

of interacting with the text and constructing meaning from it, candidates indulge in wholesale lifting of sentences from texts to represent their responses.

Reading is a major instrument for the exploration of intellectual resources. One of the major goals of education is to produce a literate citizenry who have acquired the "appropriate skills" necessary for effective reading and writing (Federal Republic of Nigeria: FRN, 2004). It is therefore a very important tool for effective functioning in all academic disciplines. Reading with comprehension is important because it is the only gateway to academic advancement of any individual irrespective of the career or discipline. Without good reading skills, an individual will find it difficult to perform literate functions in a literate society.

However, the reading comprehension skills seem to be eluding many Nigerian secondary school students going by their inability to read with comprehension and consequent poor performance in examinations. The underlying philosophy for teaching reading comprehension in schools is to enable students to develop competence in reading. It is, thus, a great concern that reading instruction is one area that has not been given sufficient attention in the secondary school curriculum (Ohia & Ochoba, 2015; see also Onukaogu & Ohia, 2003). Research has shown that students attitude to reading comprehension instruction in Nigerian schools is poor (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1991; Olabisi, 2002). Hence, the challenge before language teachers is how to prepare learners of different abilities to read and successfully access information from different text types with ease.

The teaching methods adopted by teachers in order to promote learning are of utmost importance. The teacher's teaching methods are capable of encouraging or discouraging learning and influencing comprehension in any subject area. Research shows that many language teachers lack knowledge of the appropriate methods of teaching reading and hence tend to rely on the conventional method (Uwaifo, 1979; Ogunaike, 2002). Such traditional, teacher-centred methods are inefficient and not sufficient and appropriate to impart necessary literacy skills. Hence, Skehan (1996) and Aliyu (2002) advocate intellectual and active engagement of learners which traditional instruction has failed to provide in a situation where the teacher does the talking and students passively do the listening. Recent studies on strategies to improve reading comprehension achievement in the secondary school reveal that learners learn better when they are actively engaged in the learning process (Adelabu, 1998; Adebileje, 2001).

The need to shift focus from teacher-centeredness which promote passive learning and expose learners to active learning strategy informed the choice of Literature circles (LC) strategy studied in this work which exposed learners to creating meaning from texts using active collaboration. The use of this student-centred and participatory strategy in this study is to expose learners to active participation in reading comprehension lessons and also promote personal construction of meaning in order to equip them with comprehension and interpretative skills. Literature circles strategy is both student-centred and participatory.

Literature circles (LC) have been described as small peer-led temporary discussion groups where members of diverse backgrounds and abilities meet to select, read books, make notes and contribute to the up-coming discussion meeting where every member comes with ideas to share (Daniels, 2002). LC involves using literature discussion groups to elicit responses from students who get involved in grand conversation according to assigned roles and freely offer interpretations of a selected text after reading (Gunning, 2002). As they discuss together, they debate and challenge each other and ultimately deepen their comprehension skills. By playing different roles and presenting and discussing the roles with group members, participants become more exposed to good reading, thinking and reflection skills and are motivated to stretch their abilities to meet the groups' expectations. Collaboration is at the heart of literature circles practices where discussions are guided

by students' responses to what they have read. In LC, students who are struggling readers specially benefit by being in heterogeneous literature circles groups which can provide them modeling of comprehension strategies and critical thinking to enable them connect to books on a deeper level.

The purpose of LCs is to develop in students the skills of personal response to texts, make them experience peer sharing of understandings, interpretations and comments about a text, empower them to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read and respond to books. It also guides them to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). Thus, Sandman & Gruhler (2007) state that literature circles provide opportunity to small groups of students to make meaning from what they are reading, independent of the teacher.

As an instructional strategy, literature circles have been found to enhance reading attitude, promote students' motivation to read, promote learners engagement with text and improve students' reading levels and performance in tests (Finke & Edwards, 2003; Stringer, Reynolds & Simpson, 2003; Snyder, Coffey & Kolawole, 2007; Sanusi, 2010; Ezenandu, 2012). Despite its effectiveness as an instructional strategy in prose literature lessons elsewhere, much attention has not been paid to the use of Literature circles to teach reading comprehension passages in senior secondary schools in Niger State, Nigeria. Available literature shows that most of research on LC has been done abroad. It is difficult to find any documented empirical study that has been carried out in Niger state and indeed in Nigeria that focused on the use of LC to improve English Language reading achievement. Therefore, this study investigates the effects of Literature circles on English reading comprehension achievement of selected senior secondary school students in Niger State, Nigeria. The moderating effects of verbal ability are also determined.

Verbal ability has been described as an important factor in language learning. Herman (1990), states that the verbal ability of an individual language learner will determine performance in that language at both reading and writing levels. Verbal ability of a person could be high, average or low. Thus, Ayanniyi (2009) argues that learners with high verbal ability perform better than others with lower verbal ability. Also, other studies (Nwosu, 2002; Odiaka, 2002), have shown that learners that have high verbal ability tend to achieve higher than learners that have lower verbal ability in reading comprehension. But, on the contrary, Berkman (2002) states that a learner with a high verbal ability may not perform better than a learner with lower verbal ability if enabling environment is provided. Ezenandu (2012) also finds no significant effect of verbal ability on senior secondary students' achievement in and attitude to prose literature. In view of differing statements on the place of verbal ability on learners' achievement, this study further determined its moderating effects on the reading comprehension achievement of senior secondary school students.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated for this study and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

- HO₁:** There is no significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement in reading comprehension
- HO₂:** There is no significant main effect of verbal ability on students' achievement in reading comprehension
- HO₃:** There is no significant interaction effect of treatment and verbal ability on students' achievement in reading comprehension

Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivist Theory

Constructivism has been traced to Dewey (1859-1952) who introduced and championed active participation of learners in a learning environment. Thus, readers actively build meaning as they

read, rather than passively receiving messages. The social context of learning emphasizes that children acquire new knowledge through meaningful interactions with other people. Social constructivists, such as Vygotsky (1978), believe that involvement with others creates opportunities for students to evaluate and refine their understanding as they are exposed to the thinking of others and as they participate in creating shared understanding.

This theory is relevant to literature circles because social constructivism focuses on social interaction with other learners in the learning environment as well as on the learner's own past experiences. In demonstration of this, students are the main actors in Literature circles, where they take control of, initiate and carry out the learning activities, including knowledge sharing (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). The collaborative environment it offers, guides learners into discovering meaning from their interactions with others and with texts materials. In taking ownership of learning, they explore and discover things on their own, meet their own needs and thus, learn better.

Methodology

This study adopted a pretest, posttest, control, quasi experimental design, with one experimental group (Literature circles) and a Control group.

Selection of Participants

The population for the study comprised all Senior Secondary School II students in Niger State public schools. Simple random sampling method was applied to select two local government areas in the state. Three schools were purposively selected from each selected local government areas and assigned to treatment and control groups. The purposive sampling was to ensure that only schools of similar academic features were used for the study.

Instructional Guide

Instructional guides were given to the participating teachers in the LC group and also in the Control group. The guide on LC was based on the model proposed by Daniels (2002). The guide for Control group showed the step-by-step conventional procedure used during the lessons.

Verbal Ability Test (VAT)

This instrument was meant to test students' ability to reason, to measure their verbal intelligence and also to categorize them into High, Average and Low verbal ability groups respectively. It consisted of 30 multiple choice objectives test items with five response options. VAT was administered on all student participants before commencement of treatment. Each item was allotted 1 mark and percentile ranking was used to assign students to different verbal ability levels of High, Average and Low.

Validation of VAT

VAT was adapted from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) that test both mental and verbal abilities and subjected to face and content validity. It was given to two university lecturers in Teacher Education Department, University of Ibadan for review of appropriateness of items and clarity of language of instrument. Their corrections were affected on the items. To determine reliability of VAT, the reviewed copy was administered on 30 senior secondary school II students who were not part of the main study. Kuder Richardson (KR-21) formular was used to determine the internal consistency and reliability of the test items. The reliability value of 0.68 was obtained.

Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (RCAT)

The RCAT passages were adapted and modified by the researchers to measure the achievement level of the students before and after exposure to treatment. Passages were designed to test students' ability to read, understand, and interpret text contents. There were two passages: A and B. The passages were modeled after the WASSCE standard with six questions which each student responded to after the reading. The questions, as structured by the researcher, were open-ended to enable students to freely express themselves in demonstrating text comprehension. The new version of test blue print which emphasises three levels of cognitive domain: Knowledge, Understanding and Thinking (Onocha, Okpala & Oyediji, 1993) was adopted. The test consisted of 12 questions, and its' administration lasted for fifty minutes

Validation of RCAT

For face and content validity of the instrument, the reading comprehension passages were presented to one doctoral student in Language Unit (English option), Teacher Education Department, University of Ibadan, one lecturer in Teacher Education Department, University of Ibadan, as well as one lecturer in Educational Evaluation Department of the same university for expert review, criticism and advice. The review was to ascertain the appropriateness of items to participants' level and the clarity of the language of the instrument. It also ascertained the relevance of the instrument to stated objectives. The contributions of the various experts were used to modify the test items. Then the test items were presented to two SSII English language teachers and their suggestions were also applied to the final draft of the items. The modified test was administered on 40 senior secondary school II students, who did not form part of the main study. To determine RCAT reliability, the Coefficient Alpha formula was applied and the reliability value of 0.65 was obtained.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering which lasted for eight (8) weeks adopted the following procedure: Selection of schools, Training of teachers, Pretest administration, Treatment, Posttest administration and Analysis of Data. Treatment lasted for eight weeks.

The three intact classes assigned to treatment were exposed to Literature circles with roles using the following steps:

1. Teacher gave mini lesson to explain the LC procedure and participation.
2. Students form circles of five members of mixed gender and abilities.
3. Students assigned roles to group members and gave out role sheets.
4. Students began silent and independent reading of selected texts, made entries into their role sheets.
5. Students presented entry of assigned roles to group members for discussion.
6. Teacher provided guide and ensured active participation of each group member.
7. Teacher gave another mini lesson based on observation made during discussion session.

The Control group did not receive any treatment but was taught with the conventional instructional strategy.

Data Analysis

Data collected was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test all hypotheses using pretest scores as covariates while Scheffe Post hoc test was used as pair-wise comparison to detect sources of significant main effects. Line graph was used to explain points of significant interaction.

RESULTS

Hypothesis One

HO1: There is no significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement in reading comprehension.

Table 1: Summary of ANCOVA of Achievement scores of participants according to Treatment and Verbal Ability

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	7387.696 ^a	6	1231.283	7.097	.000
Intercept	116320.962	1	116320.962	670.501	.000
PRETTEST	118.170	1	118.170	.681	.410
Treatment	2842.579	1	2842.579	16.385	.000*
VerbalAbility	3282.554	2	1641.277	9.461	.000*
Treatment x Verbal Ability	19.514	2	9.757	0.056	.945
Error	49789.801	287	173.484		
Total	588300.000	294			
Corrected Total	57177.497	293			

*Significant at $P < 0.05$

Table 1 shows that there was significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement in reading comprehension ($F_{(1,293)} = 16.385$; $P < 0.05$). This implies that the posttest scores of students in English reading comprehension differs significantly across the experimental group and control group. Therefore, HO1 is rejected.

To find the hierarchy of effectiveness of teaching methods and direction of significance in respect of treatment, the Scheffe Post Hoc test was carried out and findings are as on Table 2.

Table 2: Scheffe Test Post-Hoc Analysis of main effect of Treatment on Achievement

Main Effect	N	Mean	Treatment	Control
Treatment	147	53.45		
Control	147	38.90	-14.55*	

*Significant at $P < 0.05$

From Table 2, the mean score for treatment group is 53.45 and that of the control group is 38.90. The treatment group is significantly different from the control group in the posttest students' achievement scores. This implies that Literature circles strategy is more effective in enhancing students' achievement in English reading comprehension than the conventional strategy.

Hypothesis Two

HO2: There is no significant main effect of verbal ability on student's achievement in reading comprehension

Table 1 shows that there was significant main effect of verbal ability on students' achievement in reading comprehension ($F_{(2,293)} = 9.461$; $P < 0.05$). This implies that the posttest scores of students in English reading comprehension differs significantly across the verbal ability groups. Therefore, HO2 is rejected.

To find the hierarchy of effectiveness of verbal ability and direction of significance in respect of treatment, the Scheffe Post Hoc test was carried out and findings are as on Table 3.

Table 3: Scheffe Post-Hoc analysis of main effect of Verbal ability on Students' Achievement

VERBALABILITY	N	Mean	Mean Difference
LOW	83	43.23	Average -5.216
			High -9.929*
AVERAGE	45	48.44	Low 5.216
			High -4.713
HIGH	19	53.16	Low 9.929*
			Average 4.713

*Pairs of group significant at $P < 0.05$.

In Table 3 above, the mean difference between High and Low verbal ability groups is significant at $P < 0.05$. The mean differences between Average and High, Low and Average are not significant. The High verbal ability group had a mean score of 53.16, followed by average verbal ability group. The Low verbal ability group had the lowest mean score of 43.23.

Hypothesis Three

HO3: There is no significant interaction effect of treatment and verbal ability on student's achievement in reading comprehension

Table 1 shows that there is no significant interaction effect of treatment and verbal ability on students' achievement in reading comprehension ($F_{(2,293)} = 0.056$; $P > 0.05$). This implies that the posttest scores of students in English reading comprehension does not differ significantly between verbal ability groups. Therefore, hypothesis HO3 is not rejected.

Discussion of Result

This study investigated the effects of Literature circles on selected senior secondary students' achievement in English reading comprehension in Niger State, Nigeria. HO1 tested for significant main effect of treatment on achievement. Data revealed significant differences in the achievement mean scores of students exposed to Literature circles and Control group. Students exposed to Literature circles obtained a higher mean score than those exposed to the conventional strategy. This result confirms the findings of Davis, Resta, Davis & Camacho (2001) that Literature circles improve reading levels and performance in prose literature tests when results are compared with the rest of the class. Similarly, Daniels & Steineke (2004) and Ezenandu (2012), found that students with needs believed that LC helped them to read, analyze and gain significantly in comparison with the result of the rest of the class. This result also supports Richards (2003) findings, who pointed out that the use of LC led to enhanced comprehensions, retention of content and motivation to read. Along this same line Sweighar (1991), Daniels (1994) and Lehman (2007) findings suggested that LC were effective in improving active engagement with texts, increasing students' enjoyment of

texts and improving students' achievement scores. Also more recently, Jacobs (2015) in a study on using LC to increase comprehension and students' motivation observed that there was an increase in students' motivation towards reading and improved comprehension strategies. The students thought about the text more critically and how it related to their experiences, rather than only writing to complete an assignment. In addition, students participated in collaborative book clubs, thereby, promoting social engagement and further development of literacy skills. Thus the effectiveness of Literature circles could be attributed to the democratic environment of the strategy which accommodated different ability levels and encouraged active involvement of every participant and also promoted collaborative resolution of responses.

The second hypothesis (HO2) stated that there is no significant main effect of verbal ability on students' achievement in reading comprehension. There was no significant effect of verbal ability on students' achievement in reading comprehension. Though students with high verbal ability performed better than low verbal ability students. This finding agrees with findings of Olaboopo (1999) who found no significant difference among verbal ability groups in composition writing. Also, Nwosu (2002) found no significant difference among verbal ability groups in reading comprehension achievement. Sanusi (2010) did not find any significant difference in the summary writing achievement of different verbal groups. Similarly, Alimi (2012) found no significant effect of verbal ability on achievement of NCE pre-service teachers in Yoruba essay writing. Also, Ezenandu (2011) did not find any significant main effect on verbal ability on secondary school students' achievement in prose literature. However, studies, Obemeta (1993), Maduabuchi (2008), sounded contrary to this finding. Similarly, Oladunjoye (2003) stated that verbal ability does not necessarily guarantee good performance. The implication of this finding is that when appropriate instructional strategies are applied in the classroom, different verbal ability learners benefit equally from the lesson. Thus, achievement could be determined by instructional strategy adopted by the teacher rather than verbal ability.

In HO3, significant interaction effect of treatment and verbal ability was determined. Findings showed that there is no significant interaction effect of treatment and verbal ability on students' achievement in reading comprehension. This implies that irrespective of the verbal ability level of students, Literature circles are more effective in enhancing achievement than the conventional strategy. It also implies that rather than verbal ability levels of students, teaching strategy determines students' achievement.

Recommendation

Based on findings, it is recommended that Literature circles strategy be adopted for teaching English reading comprehension passages in Niger State. It is also recommended that English language teachers be trained on the application of Literature circles instructional strategy in the reading comprehension classroom.

Conclusion

From the result of this study, it could be concluded that active and collaborative engagement of students in the reading process using Literature circles could improve their achievement in reading comprehension tests. This implies that active participation of students in reading activities could be promoted and poor comprehension could also be eliminated using Literature circles instructional strategy in the senior secondary school.

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