Literal Level of Student's Comprehension in Nigeria: A Means for Growing a New Generation African Scholars

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Abstract

The concern of this study was to examine students' attainment in literal level of reading comprehension under reading for exact meaning, for information and for gist in a text. Two research questions and two hypotheses were formulated to guide in the study. An expost-facto research design was also employed. The researcher used an adapted Literal Reading Comprehension Test (LRCAT) for data collection. Out of a population of 1,803 SS2 students in Uyo L.G.A, 109 students formed the sample by   a stratified and   a hart and draw simple random sampling technique. Data collected were analyzed using the mean, standard deviation and paired dependent t-test.The mean score of students in reading for exact meaning was higher than reading for information and gist. The major findings were that with a df of 108 there is significant difference in students' mean attainment scores in reading for exact meaning and reading for information. Also, there is significant difference in students' mean attainment scores of reading for exact meaning and reading for gist. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that, learners should consciously be taught how to develop their literal reading comprehension in order to encourage the acquisition of other comprehension levels at the senior secondary level, if   comprehension must have been attained.

Keywords: Literal Reading Comprehension, Reading for Gist, Reading for Information

1.   Introduction

In second language situation, the attainment of reading comprehension attainment has remained the ultimate desire of any students, parents and society at large, for the realization of educational goals. Students' level of reading comprehension is the pivot to all other subjects, as it   directly affected student attainment in the entire academic process. Therefore, it becomes pertinent that students acquire reading skills for comprehension from literal, inferential and evaluative levels.

However, the problem of low reading comprehension has led to poor academic attainment, which has resulted in failure, frustration and drop out from schools. Consequently, it has led to examination malpractice which had bedeviled the entire education system. Despite all measures to reverse the situation, the recent 2010/2011 results released by West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) have left more to be desired.

Moreover, the basic factor has remained that students cannot comprehend the concepts they read to the point of recall and application. Thus, students' level and type of understanding of texts varies. This is dependent on the students' independent reading level and their background or experience that interplays with the coded message in any text (Oyetunde, 2002). Hence, level of comprehension has to do with the students' level of reasoning and meaningful interpretation of written symbols during the reading process. During reading comprehension, the readers' ability to read and recognize the form and supporting points of an argument; to grasp details; to recast using their own senses, complex ideas presented in a given text is very important.

By implication, literal comprehension is technically a basic form of reading comprehension involving understanding those facts and descriptions that are explicitly stated, not alluded to or inferred in the text. Students need to develop

this comprehension skill because it creates a grasp of literal information and establishes a foundation for the assimilation of more complex reading skills.To support this view, Goff (2010) asserts that literal comprehension is a process that involves reading to understand the surface meaning or identifying information explicitly stated within a passage. It could also be referred to as thinking within the text. Nevertheless, at this level of reading comprehension, students' ability to identify exact meaning of vocabulary used in the passage (reading for exact meaning at the word and sentence level), read for information (understanding the central point the author is trying to get across) as well as their ability to give a paraphrase or summary of what they understand from the text, among other factors that come to play.

In line with this view, Onukaogu (2003) asserts that reading occurs during interplay of visual and non-visual elements which are grammatical constituents of the written text and background or experience of the reader. This also includes the understanding of language as used in the text, reading skills and the reader's familiarity with concepts presented in the text. Comprehension according to Ngwoke (2006) implies showing understanding of a reading text. The pattern of comprehension of a reading text is evident in the readers' ability to respond correctly to the issues raised in the text in question form. Therefore, comprehension is operationally defined as the ability to respond correctly to questions derived through 'wh'-questions transformations on the syntactic structure of given passages.

Based on the foregoing, reading and comprehension are inseparable as students can never be interested in reading what they cannot understand. In this regard, reading and comprehension have come to operate as one concept due to their synonymous relationship. Therefore, comprehension as a by- product of reading does not occur in the absence of reading neither is reading meaningful without understanding (Ngwoke, 2007). Literal comprehension deals with and does not go beyond facts and details. Tests items used to assess literal comprehension include the 'wh' questions like 'what', 'when', and 'where' (Huggins 2009). Thus mastering this component of reading development means being able to understand literally what the author said.

2.   Statement of the Problem

In most times, in Nigerian secondary schools reading problems abound. Apart from the relative lack of interest and poor reading habits among students, there is adequate evidence to prove that students simply do not comprehend what they read in and outside the classroom. The reading challenges at this level are enormous, as reading cannot be attained without comprehension. Students are faced with the trouble of reading and comprehension task in content area as well as in English language which is very demanding, especially in second language situation like ours. This situation has continued to be a source of worry and embarrassment to both educational stakeholders and the nation as a whole, as students who have gone through twelve years of schooling continue to lag behind in their performances in most academic subjects at the end of secondary education.

However, as a backdrop, the situation has bred more vices like examination malpractice. This incompetence displayed depends on the level of reading comprehension students attain, whether it corresponds with the required comprehension level for such a class. Their low literal comprehension level is evident in students' inability to read for exact meaning, for information and for gist in a given text. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to ascertain the attainment of students at the initial or literal level of reading comprehension urgently, if the educational system in Akwa Ibom State is to be sanitized.,

3.   Purpose of the Study

The study was to determine the mean attainment score of SS2 students in reading for exact meaning, information and gist in literal level of reading comprehension.

4.   Research Questions

* What is the difference in the mean attainment scores of student between reading for exact meaning   and reading for information in literal reading comprehension?

* What is the difference in the mean attainment scores of students between reading for exact meaning and reading for gist in literal reading comprehension?

5.   Hypotheses : The following hypotheses were formulated to guide in the study:

* There is no significant difference in the mean attainment scores of students in reading for exact meaning and reading for information.

* There is no significant difference in the mean attainment scores of students in reading for exact meaning and reading for gist.

> This study is premised on cognitive psychology by Barlett and Schema. Cognitive psychology is the study of the structures and components for processing information. Students organize information into goals and sub goals in a fraction of a second and achieve remarkable results (Ellist, Kratochwill, Cook and Travers, 2000). According to Barlett and Kinsch (1954) a study on memory was conducted in 1932. He presented exotic stories to his research participants and then asked them to recall the stories at different times. The title was "the war of the ghosts."When the listeners or readers were asked to tell or rewrite the story, most readers imposed an order and organization on it that are frameworks that modify incoming data so that they 'fit' a person's experiences and perception (Phye & Andie, 1986). They are the basis of memory and result from our previous experiences, which we organize in an individual manner. The organization of information in at the heart of the concept of schema. Thus, Barlett believed organization is important on three levels.

According to Chapman (1974), the hierarchical theory, postulates that the literal reading comprehension process can be divided into separate skills that are distinguishably different from each other and which are hierarchically related with the application of the simpler skills providing knowledge which serves as input for the application of the more complex.

However, operationally focus shall be on reading for exact meaning of words, for information and for gist. In agreement, Goff (2010) stipulated that the components of literal comprehension are context, facts and sequence. To comprehend a text literally, the reader has to integrate these three components, understanding context as the whole picture created by the relation between facts, facts as a key information provided in the text and sequence as a process over time. These components combine in the reader's mind to create comprehension.

This is based on the reason that, according to Tizon (2009) reading for exact meaning of vocabulary in context is an aspect of literal comprehension which deals with readers' knowledge of vocabulary in context. Here the reader can understand meaning of words or phrases through the use of context clues like synonyms, antonyms, examples, prior knowledge, substitution and inference.

Reading for information or the main idea is the central point the author is trying to get across. It is easy to identify because the author explicitly states it at the beginning of the passage or in the concluding paragraph. The passage could be written to inform or entertain readers.

However, abilities to differentiate supporting ideas (summary) entails extracting facts, ideas, or descriptions that further explain or support the main idea of a reading passage. A reader's ability to differentiate it from the main idea, enables him to summarize. Thus, to achieve reading comprehension the reader employs skills such as identifying the main idea of a passage, summarizing the context of a text, generating questions about the information in the text and looking for clues that answer those questions (Neufeld 2006 & Mercurio 2005).

Moreover, reading attainment at the higher level of comprehension usually builds on reading ability at each of the proceeding lower levels (literal, inferential and evaluative).   In this study, emphasis is on the subdivisions at the literal level of comprehension. Many studies have been carried out to elicit reading comprehension of students. Some of the studies were those of   Akabogu (2002) which investigated the effect of contextual clue exposure to English registers on SS2 students' achievement in reading comprehension. The research was carried on the assumption that students have difficulty in comprehending passages as a result of unfamiliar content and registers.

The researcher adopted quasi experimental design. Eight public secondary schools were selected from the urban and rural areas of Enugu, using the stratified random sampling technique. Two intact classes randomly selected and assigned to experimental and control groups. A total of two hundred and sixty students comprising of 133 male and

female students from urban and rural schools form the treatment group. The control group consisted of 127 male and female students from urban and rural areas. The treatment group was taught reading comprehension using contextual clue exposure to English registers. On the other hand, the control group was taught same content using conventional method of background knowledge of text. Data was collected using a Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (RCAT). The data was analyzed using mean, standard deviation and Analysis of Co-Variance (ANCOVA). The result of the study revealed that contextual clue exposure to English registers significantly enhanced students' achievement in reading comprehension than the conventional method of background knowledge of text.

Also a research designed to find out what reading strategies secondary school students use when processing print was conducted by Oyetunde (2002) in Jos. Cloze test was used for data collection from 282 senior secondary two (SS2) students drawn from five schools in the study area. The four cloze passages consisted of one expository and one narrative passage at the readability level of the grade tested while the other two passages were at two readability levels below the grade. In the result, the percentages of students for whom all the passages were on frustration level were extremely high. The result also indicated that students performed better on higher level expository text than the lower text. This is an indication that the FOG readability index failed to predict accurately the relative difficulty of the passages for the students tested.

However, evidence proved that students who read the passages at both frustration and instructional levels were stronger in their ability to use semantic clues than ability to use syntactic clues. Again, students for whom the passages were on frustration level were limited in their ability to use information between and within sentences. The finding revealed that poor reading strategies of the students was due to language background, lack of adequate control over English and poor instructional practice in schools. This is the 'crux of the matter' as students at the tertiary institution reading comprehension can barely exceed the literal level of reading comprehension.

A similar research by Ogundipe (2004) was carried out in a Nigerian polytechnic. It also identified some of the reading problems of the learners which are associated with the language of their learning. To also determine their reading levels (literal, inferential and creative), the result analysis showed their performances were low and quite insufficient for learning at higher institution.

Other researchers have carried out studies on literal comprehension. For instance a study conducted by Luke (1984) to find out the relationship among the levels of achievement in literal and inferential reading comprehension skills and the cognitive functions of analytic field approach cognitive styles. A population of 305 sixth-grade students was selected from two Dade County, Florida. The respondents were given petriel reading comprehension test. Based on their reading scores a sample of 48 students were assigned to four sample reading comprehension groups of low literal-low inferential, high literal-low inferential, low literal-high inferential and high literal-high inferential. The respondents were given three cognitive instruments. The data collected were analyzed by means of t-test, discriminate function analyzes, and Cohen Kappa. The hypotheses in the directional form, were tested at the 0.05 level.

These two discriminating variables were measuring significantly different discriminating dimensions for each comparison and had little shared variance. Common thinking processes were found in both the cognitive functions which were exhibited in the types of concept attainment strategies and conceptual tempos, and the reading comprehension skills. Thus, the stronger discriminative power between certain reading comprehension groups gave possible clues about the relationships between literal and inferential comprehension processes.

Tizon (2009) in Philippines, a study on reading competencies of the 2nd years high school students of Diplog City Division: Basis for strategic reading programme. The study was conducted to find out levels of reading comprehension skills for the 2nd for high school students of Diplog City Division for S.Y. 2008 – 2009. significant difference on the level of reading comprehension skills of the student when grouped according to sex, educational attainment, and type and exposure to varied media were also determined. A teacher made test was used for data collection. Statistical tools like percentage weighted means and F-test (ANNOVA) were sued to answer the objective of this investigation. Results showed that of the three levels of reading comprehension, application and integration obtained the highest weighted mean of 56.02 with a verbal interpretation of poor whereas in the critical level the students obtained only a weighted mean of 39.43 with a verbal interpretation of very poor. All together the reading comprehension level of the students had a grand mean of 50.39 with a verbal interpretation of poor. Finally, there was no significant difference found in the level of reading comprehension skills when grouped accordingly. This is

why students' comprehension level must be taken into consideration by consciously teaching them skill that will develop their early enough.

Lerpattaramanat (2010) studied on developing reading skills through the use of real-life reading activities. Using sample purposive random sampling 23 students study in 7th-grade at Muany Chumpomwittava high school in Thailand. The study was carried out for 18 periods in the second semester. The findings were that real-life reading text designed by the reading for gist is effective 81.9684. 92 as criteria the effectiveness index of the real life reading text equals 0.8502 it showed that after studying the scores increased (85.02%) the achievement test studying is significant at (0.01).

6. Method

The research design adopted was ex-post facto. This was used because the researcher attempts to align some existing effect to one variable as causative agents. The population consisted of all 1,803 Senior Secondary Two (SS2) public school students in Uyo local government area of Akwa Ibom State. Current record in the State Secondary School Board shows that there is estimated population of 1,803 SS2 students in the 11 public secondary schools in the area of study. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select schools in Uyo LGA. Schools were selected on the ratio of 4:1 (four schools from urban and rural areas each) using hart and draw simple random sampling technique as each   of the urban and rural area has at least not less than 4 public secondary schools. Therefore, 8 schools were used and due to inequality of SS2 population in each school, 15 students from each school population formed the sample size of 120.

An adapted Literal Reading Comprehension Attainment Test (LRCAT) was used for data collection. The comprehension passages were extracted and adapted to suit the students' class and background. Sources were Azikiwe (1998) and Ranjimanikum (2003). Twelve questions were developed for the three passages of LRCAT. Respondents were required to answer 5 questions which tested their ability to read for exact meaning, 5 questions tested their ability to read for information and 2 questions tested for the gist or summary of the passage. Face and content validity of the instrument was done by three professionals in the area of study. The reliability of the instrument was determined using test-retest method with a reliability index of 0.72, which was administered to 20 SS2 students who did not form the sample size of the study. The data was treated using Pearson's product moment. After the validation of instrument, 12 items survived out of the twelve sent out

The instrument was administered to 120 SS2 students, although with a mortality rate of 11, the total data collected was from 109 respondents. The researcher was assisted by English Language teachers from the schools under study. The respondents were required to fill in the required written reasoning responses respectively. Hence, the data was analyzed statistically using dependent t-test.

7. Results

  The dependent t-test analysis of mean achievement scores of students exposed to reading for exact meaning and reading for information in literal reading comprehension. Data collected were analyzed based on the hypotheses in the study.

Research Question

What is the difference in the mean attainment scores of student between reading for exact meaning and reading for information in literal reading comprehension?

Table 1: Mean attainment scores between reading for exact meaning and for information

Variables	N	X (Mean)	SD	Mean Difference
Reading for exact meaning attainment of students	109	3.6514	1.54785	
				2.8991
Reading for information attainment of students	109	.7523	1.27043	

Table 1 indicates that mean difference in the attainment scores of students in reading for exact is 2.8991 higher than their attainment in reading for information.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students in reading for exact meaning and reading for information.

Table 2:   Paired samples t-test analysis of the difference between reading for exact meaning and reading for information

Variables	N	X(means)	SD	std Error mean	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Reading for exact meaning attainment of students	109	3.6514	1.54785	.15374			
					18.735	108	.000
Reading for information attainment of students	109	.7523	1.27043	.12169			

S = Significant at 0.05 level (from 0.05 - .00 is significant); df 108

The result shown in table 2 indicates that the mean of reading for exact meaning is significantly higher than that of reading for information. By implication SS2 students scored higher in their attainment on questions relating to reading for exact meaning than they did in questions relating to reading for information. Also, the analysis shows a p-value of .000 which is less than 0.05 therefore the null hypothesis is   rejected

Research Question 2

What is the difference in the men attainment scores of student between reading for exact meaning and reading for gist in literal reading comprehension?

Table 3: Meaning attainment scores between reading for exact meaning and reading for gist

Variables	N	X (Mean)	SD	Mean Difference
Reading for exact meaning attainment of students	109	3.6514	1.54785	
				3.1009
Reading for gist attainment of students	109	.5505	.81065	

The mean scores of attainment in reading for exact meaning is 3.1009 higher than .5505 of reading forgist.
Hypothesis Two: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students in reading for exact

meaning and reading for gist.

Table 3: Paired samples t-test analysis of the difference between reading for exact meaning and reading for gist.

Variables	N	X(means)	SD	std Error mean	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Reading for exact meaning attainment of students	109	3.6514	1.54785	.14826			
					21.999	108	.000
Reading for gist attainment of students	109	.5505	.81065	.07865			

 S= Significant at 0.05 level

Table 3 reveals that the mean (X) for reading for exact meaning is significantly higher than the mean of reading for gist. For as student to give a gist of a passage then he should possess the ability to understand the sequence as well as the main idea in the passage. In addition, he should be interacting successfully enough to retell the story in a paraphrased form called summary. This places a demand on a higher level of reading skill than reading for information. The mean scores seem to be retrogressing as it moves towards a higher level of reading skills. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis which stated that 'there is a significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students in reading for exact meaning and reading for gist' is upheld.

8. Discussion of Findings

The concern of this study has been on students' attainment in literal comprehension level. The findings revealed that difference in students' attainment in reading for exact meaning, reading for information and reading for gist in a text is significant. Based on research question one, the scores of students between reading for exact meaning and reading for information is significant by 2.8991. Whereas, in research question 2, the difference in mean attainment scores in reading for exact meaning and reading for gist is highly significant at 3.1009. This is an indication that students' attainment scores from questions designed for reading for exact meaning was higher than those questions designed for reading for information.. Also, the attainment of reading for exact meaning was higher than attainment in reading for gist.

However, the poor rate of mean difference in score reading for gist and exact meaning is significantly higher. This reveals that students scored too low on questions for reading for gist than question which reading for information and reading for exact meaning. Consequently, the SS 2 students are bound to perform poorly in most academic subjects

because they have poor literal reading comprehension level which does not match the senior secondary curriculum challenge. Furthermore, based on the hypotheses, it is deduced that there is significant difference in attainment scores of students' in reading for exact meaning and reading for information. This finding is however in agreement with the earlier findings of Oyetunde (2002) and Akabogu (2002) which in their independent studies showed that students' slow reading rate and poor level of comprehension are among serious reading problems faced by senior secondary students. This is revealed as at SS2 class majority of students can only attain reading for exact meaning in literal reading comprehension level.   By implication, the level of their comprehension cannot match the academic requirement at this level. Hence, the poor academic achievement often recorded in final examinations. Although, Horner, (1988) was able to improve the reading proficiency of his respondents at literal level of reading for exact meaning (meaning of words and sentences) and reading for information through the over use of glossary, the reason must have been that the study was on first language situation unlike the second language situation in Nigeria. In addition, the reason is that the students with well developed reading skills in the area of word and sentence recognition which as asserted by Obanya (2001) and Jude (2008) entails merely associating words and sentences with sound with the use of visual perception, attention and non-technical vocabulary. Consequently, they have not really been able to read along the lines to get the main idea of the passage approximately. The poor reading skills results in poor attainment in the use of elementary technical vocabulary which hampered full comprehension of the passage. This affirms earlier findings by Luke (1984). Tizon (2009) and Lertpattaramanat (2010) showing the relationship between the levels of reading comprehension as well as between ready for exact meaning and for gist respectively. Students first learn to read and understand texts that are story – like in nature that facilitate their learning to read. Thus, across the years of school they progressively shift from reading a story – like text to causal text which is reading for information (Akhondi, Makyeri & Samad, 2011; Gillet, Temple & Crawford, 2004). Hence, the need to improve students' reading literal skills.

Conclusion

The importance of ascertaining students' level of comprehension as a measure in enhancing their reading comprehension cannot be over emphasized. This is because it takes more than competence in reading for exact meaning, information and gist   which entails associating words and sentences with sounds to attain comprehension. Hence, the findings that there is significant difference in the mean attainment scores of students in reading for exact and reading for information. Also, there is significant difference in the mean attainment scores of students in reading for exact meaning and reading for gist. The high attainment in reading for exact meaning alone cannot take the students to the level of literal comprehension talk less of other levels of comprehension that can ensure ultimate comprehension of content presented at this level of education.

Recommendations

The development of literal level of reading comprehension should start from primary school so that as students approach senior secondary school they must have developed the inferential and evaluative reading comprehension levels. Reading materials used should be such that would consciously develop students' literal reading comprehension level. In addition, schools should ascertain the readability level of students, before recommending appropriate texts for use in the classroom.

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