

EFFECT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN READING COMPREHENSION IN GWER-WEST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF BENUE STATE

By

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the effect of literature circles on students' achievement in reading comprehension in Gwer-West Local Government Area of Benue State. The study adopted a pre-test pos-test quasi-experimental design of non-equivalent groups. A sample of 129 SS2 students (63 males and 66 females) was selected using a stratified random sampling technique, from four secondary schools. The instrument used for data collection was a Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (RCAT). Data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to test hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that literature circles have significant effect on reading comprehension. Results also showed no significant difference in the mean achievement between male and female students who were exposed to literature circles. However, there was a significant difference in the achievement of students in urban and rural schools who were exposed to literature circles in favour of the urban schools. The study recommended, among other things, that literature circles should be incorporated into the reading classroom as a teaching programme and that other professional bodies should encourage in-service training, seminars and workshops to expose teachers of English language to the use of literature circles for the development of reading comprehension skills.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is very fundamental to an individual's success in school and society. It is one of the basic language skills. Others are listening, speaking and writing. Out of these skills, reading is at the centre of every academic success and acquisition of general literacy (Todd, 2007). It is crucial to knowledge acquisition because knowledge is predominantly stored in writing form. Reading proficiency correlates highly with scholastic excellence and growth in professional career (Muodumogu, 2005). This explains that the success of further education depends entirely on the intensive and extensive reading a child is able to do because there is a strong relationship between reading and academic achievement.

Besides, the challenges of modern global economy demands that an individual needs to brace up with effective reading skills so that the person can participate and contribute meaningfully to the development of the society. Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body. It is an intellectual and mental activity, opening the imagination, simultaneously soothing and stimulating the mind (Reeves, 2004). Reading, however, is simply much more than just being able to translate the letters on the printed page into words, it is about understanding the thoughts and ideas of another person, about entering different imaginary and real worlds created by the author.

Indeed, reading and comprehension are inseparable. Meaningful reading, therefore, cannot be said to have taken place without comprehension of the reading material. Comprehension is therefore, an important ingredient of effective reading (Udu, 2004). Thus, comprehension is only possible when readers find meaning in whatever material they appear to be reading. Reading is an important school subject and deserves to be given proper attention in the school curriculum. This is necessary in order to achieve one of the goals of secondary education which stresses the importance of preparing an

individual for useful living within the society and for further education (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004).

It is therefore, an issue of concern among reading researchers and teachers that an average Nigerian secondary school student cannot sufficiently extract meaning from a text, and therefore, has reading problems (William, 2004). Reeves (2004) observes that most students are not explicitly taught and so do not understand that learning what a text says is not all there is to learning; the text does not have all the meaning, the reader's contribution to the reading process is also very important. Most teachers perceive reading instruction as a time to test students' ability to read a given text and answer a few recall questions. In Nigeria, reading is identified as problematic to students as many of them fail to learn to read and are unable to read to learn (Oyetunde & Muodumogu, 1999).

The direct consequence of this is that many Nigerian students pass through school without acquiring the skills that would make them independent and proficient lifelong readers. This could be responsible for high rate of failure recorded in the English language examinations conducted by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) as presented in the WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports for May/June (2004), (2005) and (2010). This report reveals that 47 percent of the candidates who take the examinations show evidences of lack of understanding of the content of the set reading comprehension and summary passages.

This problem of underachievement in reading has been attributed to a number of factors. Prominent among these factors is poor classroom instructional strategies, or simply put, ineffective methodology (Aliyu, 2010). Current reading instructional practices do not seem to emphasize basic skills and therefore cannot meet the child's

needs in adult life (Muodumogu, 2005). An ideal reading instructional strategy should encourage learners to engage actively in learning because proficiency in reading entails involvement during reading. This implies that for reading instruction to be effective, the classroom procedure should be tailored towards the purposeful task based interactive nature of psycholinguistic model of reading process. In other words, the classroom procedure should involve group work in which inter-learner discussion of a text and associated task is not only permitted but required (Udosen, 2008). It is therefore imperative that literature circles should be considered in the teaching of reading so that learners could be taught how to think critically, reason, solve problems and be self reliant (Muodumogu, 2004).

Literature circles can be described as a form of group discussion. They are formed when group of readers gather together to have in-depth talk about text they have read (Shoebottom, 2003). In a school setting, literature circles are characterized by students who usually read a selection of literature on their own before they come to discuss it in small groups of four or six. The discussions are often guided by students' responses to a read text and not on the list of questions from a teacher. Students who read a particular book come together to share ideas and discuss the book they have read. Because group members share their thoughts, feelings, impressions, personal connections, ideas and problems about the books, they naturally engage in intensive reading in order to participate effectively (Wilfong, 2009).

Daniels (2002) defines literature circles as peer-led discussion group whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, articles or book. Within these groups, students create their own reading and meeting schedule while in a discussion about a book they are reading. Literature circles give students a chance to guide and direct their own learning as well as become reflective readers. The use of literature circles may

increase quality talk, meaningful discussion and critical thinking skills (Young, 2007). Literature circles might lead to greater achievement in reading comprehension since each student is encouraged to read a particular text before a group meets for effective discussion. Thus, this study investigated the effect of literature circles on students' achievement in reading comprehension.

However, gender is a factor to be considered in students' literacy development. Gender, generally refers to ways in which social and cultural factors shape the reality and sense of human identity. It is a social category of shared meaning and characteristics of male and female (Odey, 2012). In Nigeria, parents are known to have a stronger belief about male children's abilities to achieve more than female children. According to Odey (2012) gender differences in literacy achievement basically takes the following form: Boys take longer to learn to read than girls do; boys read less than girls. Girls tend to comprehend narrative texts and most expository texts more than boys do; boys tend to do better at information retrieval and work related literacy than girls are. By implication, boys and girls have different approaches and ways they engage in reading and this might influence their achievement in reading comprehension.

School location could also be a factor of students' achievement in reading comprehension. The fact is that no two school environments are the same (Muodumogu & Unwaha, 2013). Location of a school determines learning facilities, infrastructure, number and quality of teachers and class size, among other things (Okoye, 2009). Thus, availability or lack of these learning materials and quality instructors may improve or impair students' achievement in reading comprehension. This study, therefore, seeks to determine the effect of literature circles on students' achievement in reading comprehension across gender and school locations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Achievement in reading, according to WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports for May/June (2010), is very poor in secondary schools. It is, therefore, an issue of concern among reading researchers, teachers, parents and students that an average Nigeria secondary school student cannot efficiently extract meaning or information from a text, and therefore, has reading problems. The direct consequence of these poor reading skills is that massive failure is recorded in public examinations conducted by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO). This problem of poor performance in reading has been attributed to the methodology and strategies teachers utilize in classroom instructional procedure (Muodumogu, 2005 & Aliyu, 2010). In Gwer-west local government Area of Benue state, the situation is not different. Students find it difficult to read and comprehend. Considering the importance of reading in education and human development, it becomes imperative to seek an effective method of teaching reading in order to improve students' performance in reading comprehension in secondary schools. The problem of the study therefore is: will literature circles affect students' achievement in reading comprehension in secondary schools?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions guided the study:

1. What would be the difference in the mean reading comprehension scores of students taught reading using literature circles and those taught using the conventional method?
2. What is the difference between the mean achievement scores of male and female students taught reading using literature circles?
3. What is the difference between the mean achievement scores of students in the urban and rural areas taught reading using literature circles?

HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant difference between the mean scores of students who were exposed to literature circles and those who are exposed to conventional method of reading.
2. There is no significant difference between the mean achievement scores of male and female students who were exposed to literature circles.
3. There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students in urban and rural schools who were exposed to literature circles.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a pre-test, post-test quasi- experimental design of non-equivalent groups. Both experimental and control groups were given a pre-test and post-test. However, only the experimental group was exposed to literature circles. The control groups remained under the conventional teaching of reading. The reason for adopting quasi-experimental design for this study is that intact classes were used. This is in agreement with Emaikwu (2012), that the use of intact classes is one of the considerations for quasi-experimental design.

The population of this study comprised all the 2,162 SSII students in Gwer-West local government area (Gwer-West Area Education Office, 2014). The choice of SS II students for the study is made out of the belief that they have acquired a good knowledge of reading skills that could enable them undertake some independent reading exercises. The sample of this study consisted of 129 SSII students (63 males and 66 females). Four schools (two from the urban and two from the rural areas) were selected in the local government area. Stratified random sampling technique was adopted by the researcher because the targeted population was in both the rural and urban areas. This is in

agreement with (Akem, 2011) who states that where the population of the study is spread across different locations, stratified random sampling should be used. In each of the schools, one intact class was used for the study.

This study used Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (RCAT) for data collection. The RCAT had 10 comprehension questions on a chosen passage adapted from English Comprehension and Summary by Noble (1968). The questions cut across the three levels of comprehension (Literal, Inferential and Critical). The RCAT consists of two sections; A and B. Section A required students to supply their personal information, while section B contains a passage and questions. A marking guide was produced for the test. Each question carried two marks so that the entire test was rated over 20 marks.

The researcher conducted a pre-test on the study groups to collect the students' comprehension ability prior to the treatment. The experimental group was exposed to a two-month instructional process via literature circles using extracts from Intensive English Language for Senior Secondary Schools book two. The control group was not exposed to any treatment. Afterwards, a post-test was conducted on all the study groups. The study used a Literature Circle Guide (LCG) to organise the treatment procedure. The LCG contained information that the teacher could use to organize and facilitate literature circles. Information and tips contained in LCG include how to introduce a literature circle, facilitating a group meeting, roles to be taken by students in book selection process.

RESULTS

Research questions raised by the study were answered using mean and standard deviations, while hypotheses were tested using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 level of significance. The decision rule was that where the p value is below the set alpha

of 0.05, the null hypothesis is not accepted. However, where the p value is above the alpha level, the null hypothesis is accepted.

Table 1: Mean achievement scores of students in experimental and control group.

Group	N	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
		\bar{x}	σ	\bar{x}	Σ
Experimental group	76	5.18	2.18	10.26	3.78
Control group	53	6.04	1.48	8.09	3.43
Mean difference		0.86		2.17	

Table 1 shows that the mean scores of students in experimental group at pre-test is 5.18 and standard deviation is 2.18 while that of control group is 6.40 and standard deviation of 1.48. The result of post-test reveals that the mean achievement scores of students in experimental group is 10.26 and a standard deviation of 3.61 while that of control group at post-test is 8.09 and a standard deviation of 1.79. The mean difference between students' achievement at post-test was 2.17.

Table 2: ANCOVA Table for Effect of Literature Circles on Students Achievement in Reading Comprehension.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	582.489	2	291.24	52.00	.000
Intercept	191.49	1	191.49	34.19	.000
Pretest	435.61	1	435.61	77.78	.000
Gp	266.19	1	266.19	47.53	.000
Error	705.65	126	5.60		

Total	12619.00	129
Corrected Total	1288.140	128

Results in Table 2 reveals that $F_{(1,126)} = 47.53$, $P = 0.00$. Since $P = 0.00 < \alpha = 0.05$ which was the significance value set for the study, the null hypotheses that there no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students who are exposed to literature circles and those who are not exposed was not accepted.

Table 3: Mean achievement scores of male and female students in experimental group.

Sex	N	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
		\bar{x}	Σ	\bar{x}	Σ
Male	39	5.44	2.43	10.69	3.76
Female	37	4.92	1.89	9.81	3.43
Mean difference		0.52		0.88	

Table 3 reveals that the mean achievement score of male students at pre-test is 5.44 and a standard deviation of 2.43 while that of female is 4.92 and a standard deviation of 1.89, The mean achievement scores of male students at post-test is 10.69 and a standard deviation of 3.76 while that of female is 9.81 and a standard deviation of 1.89. The mean difference between male and female students at post-test is 0.88.

Table 4: ANCOVA Result of Mean Achievement Scores of Male and Female Students Exposed to Literature Circles

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	436.88	2	218.44	29.65	.000
Intercept	235.52	1	235.52	31.97	.000

Pre-test	422.13	1	422.13	57.29	.000
Sex	1.87	1	1.87	.25	.616
Error	537.85	73	7.37		
Total	8980.00	76			
Corrected Total	974.74	75			

Table 4 presents ANCOVA result of mean achievement of male and female students in experimental group. The result reveals that $F_{(1,73)} = 0.25$, $P = 0.62$. Since $P = (0.62) > \alpha = 0.05$, the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of male and female students who are exposed to literature circles was accepted. This implies that there is no significant difference in the achievement of male and female students who were exposed to literature circles.

Table 5: Mean achievement scores of students from urban and rural schools in the experimental group

School Type	N	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
		\bar{x}	Σ	\bar{x}	Σ
Urban	41	5.93	2.17	10.15	3.77
Rural	35	4.31	1.88	10.40	3.46
Mean Difference		1.62		0.25	

Table 5 indicates that the mean achievement scores of students from urban schools at pre-test is 5.93 and a standard deviation of 2.17, while that of rural schools is 4.1 and a standard deviation of 1.88. The mean achievement score of students at post-test from urban school is at 10.15 and at post-test is 0.15 and a standard deviation of 3.77 while that of rural school was 10.40 with a standard deviation of 3.46. The mean difference between students from urban and rural schools at post-test is 0.25.

Table 6: ANCOVA result of mean achievement scores of students from urban and rural schools who were exposed to literature circles.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	525.46	2	262.73	42.69	.000
Intercept	131.59	1	131.59	21.38	.000
Pre-test	524.24	1	524.24	85.18	.000
Sch-location	90.44	1	90.44	14.69	.000
Error	449.28	73	6.16		
Total	8980.00	76			
Corrected Total	974.74	75			

Table 6 presents ANCOVA result of mean achievement scores of students' from urban and prural schools in the experimental group. The result in Table 6 reveals that $F_{(1,73)} = 14.69$, $P=0.00$. Since $P=0.00 < 0.05$, the hypothesis was not accepted. This means that there is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students in urban and rural schools who are exposed to literature circles

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The evidence from the findings of this study reveals that students who were exposed to literature circles have higher mean gain in their reading comprehension test than those who were exposed to conventional method. This finding agrees with the findings by Agada (2009), Oriin (2012) and Daniel (2002). These studies reported a positive effect on students' comprehension ability when teachers adopted a small group based programme in teaching reading comprehension.

Daniels (2002) reported that students who engaged in literature circles made more gain in reading comprehension than their counterparts who are not so engaged. This is because literature circles provide students the opportunity to engage in interactive book

talks in a very natural way. Thus, students are able to secure a connection between the stories they read and their life experiences leading to a better understanding of what is read. The result also agrees with Udosen (2008) who shows that intensive reading and better comprehension occurs when group members share their thoughts, feelings, impressions, ideas and problems about the book they read.

The results of this study further showed that there was no significant difference between the achievement of male and female students taught reading comprehension via literature circles. This implies that both male and female students benefited from the treatment. The result is in agreement with the findings of Muodumogu and Unwaha (2013), Odudu (2014) and Agbenge (2014). These studies reported that there was no significant effect of gender on students' achievement in language skills when learner friendly methods were adopted.

The study revealed a significant difference in reading comprehension ability between students in the urban and rural areas in favour of those in urban areas. This result agrees with Onimisi (2005) who reported that urban students perform better than their counterparts in rural areas in language skills. However, the results of this study contradicted the study by Anizoba (2004) and Muodumogu and Unwaha (2013). These studies revealed that there was no significant difference in the achievement of students located either in the urban or rural areas.

It is, therefore, clearly observed that the incorporation of literature circles as a programme for teaching reading comprehension skills has improved the reading comprehension ability of students across gender. The implication of this is that if more friendly and interactive programmes are utilized in the reading class, students'

comprehension skills would improve. This will go a long way to help students become lifelong readers and more enlightened citizens.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was undertaken to find out the effect of literature circles on students' achievement in reading comprehension. It also attempted to find out the effect of the programme on gender and school location. The result of the study revealed that literature circles have significant effect on students' achievement in reading comprehension. Results of the study also showed that there was no significant difference in the achievement of male and female students who were exposed to literature circles. However, there was a significant difference in the achievement of students in urban and rural schools in the experimental group in favour of the urban schools.

Based on the findings derived from this study, it can be concluded that, literature circles have been successfully used to improve students' achievement in reading comprehension. This study lends credence to the notion that literature circles have significant effects on students' reading comprehension ability. Therefore, English language teachers should consider literature circles as a learning programme in teaching reading. Teacher-education programmes should be redesigned to incorporate strategies that will help prospective teachers acquire skills that will enable them to help students develop sound reading skills. Workshops, seminars and symposia should be organized by reading associations, ministry of education and other concerned bodies for teachers on the application of literature circles in teaching reading. Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should emphasize that teachers embrace innovation strategies such as literature circles while implementing the curriculum.

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