Reading and Literacy Competence in the SSCE English Language of Students in Abeokuta South Local Government, Nigeria

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Abstract:
The centrality of reading to academic activities of students cannot be disputed and this is why scholars and reading experts are worried with the state of reading in the contemporary Nigerian society. The focus of this paper, therefore, is to examine how poor attitude to reading and literacy competence among students in Abeokuta South Local Government has been affecting their performance in the SSCE English language as reflected in their grades after examination. The school types adopted in the study are private and public secondary schools in Abeokuta South Local Government. A set of questionnaires are used as research instruments and they are structured in a way that they capture the biographical information of the respondents and the subject matter of the research. The data are analysed using statistical tools such as frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviation, t-test and ANOVA. The findings reveal that there is no significant difference between the attitude of students in the private and public secondary schools to reading and literacy competence.

Keywords: Literacy competence, reading, English language, academic performance in private and public schools

1. Introduction

The pervasive poor performance of students in the English language of Senior Secondary Certificate Examination conducted by West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) has been source of worry to parents, government and other stake holders of education at the national, state and local level. This situation has generated various opinions and positions about the nature and future of the language in future national and regional examinations.

Applied linguists, education and language experts have examined various sociological variables that have contributed to the poor performance of students in the SSCE English language and among these variables are mother tongue interference in the language learning of the students, defective teaching-learning process of the language and the home factor. The home factor is considered as one of the problems causing poor performance of students in the SSCE English language because it does not facilitate continuity between what is learnt in the school. Most homes do not revise the subject matter of what is learnt in the school and at the same time, they do not provide adequate and appropriate motivation for the learning and understanding of the language.

2. Reading and Literacy Competence: A Review

Studies and researches of reading experts and scholars such Ngwoke (2007), Onukaogu (2003), Maduabuchi (2009) and Sesan (2014) have proved that the centrality of reading cannot be ignored in the academic performance of students. These scholars and critics have offered different definitions of reading and at the same time, they have formed a nexus among reading, literacy and academic performance. For the purpose of this paper, reference shall be made to the definitions offered by Okpala (2009) and Regis-Onuoha (2003) owing to the fact that these definitions capture the essence and significance of reading to learning and academic performance. Regis-Ohuoha (2003:24) sees reading as interactive and interactional. What is meant by this description of reading is that reading is a process of communication that involves the sender (the writer) and the recipient (the reader) of information sent through a specific medium. This communication process must observe the rules that guide human communication for the expected outcome. In her contribution to the description of reading, Okpala (2009:95) is of the view that:

In essence, reading involves the use of verbal symbols in the construction and reconstruction of messages, ideas and concepts for the purpose of negotiating meaning. Reading as interaction and transaction involves the text, the author who shares his experiences and the reader who draws from his schemata to abstract meaning from text, depending on the context.

The kernel of the arguments of Regis-Onuoha and Okpala is that the centrality of reading in human interaction and the academic performance of students cannot be ignored because it takes the largest percentage of attention in the teaching-learning process. This argument is given because students need to read textbooks, notes and even examination questions need to be properly read. In this regard, this paper corroborates the view of Madubuachi (2009: 35-6) that:

Reading is the hallmark of academic achievement, and functional literacy is fundamental to human development. This functionality is achieved when a person willingly engages effectively in those activities that require knowledge and skills in responding to his environment.

No academic achievement can be recorded without efficient and functional reading. Nigeria records poor academic performance because many students have formed lazy attitude towards reading. These students only read when they are conditioned by examination. A number of them have not formed that habit of voluntary reading and this situation has been affecting their performance in public examinations as conducted by WAEC and NECO.

Some reading experts have blame homes and school system, particularly the incompetence of teachers for the poor reading culture in the country. Among these reading experts is Olajide (2001: 179). This critic is of the opinion that:

Teachers across the rungs of the educational ladder are badly equipped, disorientated and dejected; research that would have rekindled literacy drives and ginger national development and integration seems abandoned or haphazardly carried out. Nobody appears to care about education being the capstone of self determination and good progress. Even when grants are given to institutions for research projects, the grants are either misallocated or diverted. Educational policy makers emphasized the sciences, engineering and medicine to the detriment of crucial disciplines like applied linguistics, reading, literacy and language education. If any nation thinks there can be scientific and technological breakthroughs without appropriate arts and humanities to back up, such a philosophy is as good as saying that there can be man without a brain.

The view of Olajide above also shows some connection between reading and literacy. There is a symbiotic relationship between reading and literacy. The connection between reading and literacy, thus, prompts this paper to examine and review various views on the nature and meaning of literacy.

The term literacy cannot be linked to a single definition. There are various views and perceptions of the term literacy and to this end, the view of Sesan (2014:2-3) is relevant here that:

Literacy is a relative term that is discipline-specific and context-specific. What constitutes literacy in one discipline does not imply literacy in another discipline. Thus, literacy is seen beyond the ability to read, write and compute with figures. As a relative term, literacy is the ability to make sound judgment with promptness, relevance and adequacy. The fact that Nigeria has considerable number of educated elites does not qualify the country as literate.

From the view of Sesan, it can be said that the meaning of literacy is subjective because the context influences the meaning given to the term literacy. While attempting the definition of literacy, Akinpelu (2008:317) sees literacy from the perspective of functionality. In his view, "literacy is perceived as lifelong learning, it is for the literacy skills to be acquired permanently, and functionally". A literate mind should have the ability to think proactively and at the same time, he/she should be able to act within the norms of the society.

In their own contribution on the definition of literacy, Arnove and Arboleda (1973-47) are of the view that:

Definitions of literacy range from a set of mechanical skills to the quality of an individual consciousness from skills of encoding, decoding and reproducing written symbols, to the reading and writing skills equivalent to so many years of primary schooling… to the competence and knowledge required to perform adequately in the adult roles in the society; to the critical consciousness and understanding of the fundamental issues which characterized a society.

From the above, it can be deduced that consciousness of self and the society is one of the important elements of literacy. A literate mind needs to know what is right from what is wrong.

With the understanding of the meanings of reading and literacy, there is a need to explain the concept ,literacy competence. The term, literacy competence connotes the ability of individuals to assess information that is available for proactive actions. The literary competence of individuals can be measured through performance. In the instance of this paper, literary competence of the students can be measured through their performance in the public examinations as evident in their final grades.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is behaviourist model that sees learning and some other academic activities as imitational. This theory is a product of series of research activities by B. F. Skinner, Ivan Pavlov and Jean Piaget on stimulus-response continuum in human behaviour. These behaviourist psychologists postulate that the behavioural pattern of a child is imitational (Akinyosoye, 2004:3). In this regard, the child responds to the stimulus that can trigger reading and other academic activities offered by the immediate environment. The action and the inaction of a child's environment influences attitude to a particular phenomenon. In this direction of argument, this paper corroborates the view of Ibitoye (2004:244) that:

The extreme behaviourist or empiricist position was represented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who said that the mind of the child is like a tabula rasa, a perfect blank, at birth into which society writes all its impressions; the dos and don'ts.

The above position establishes the fact that society influences the attitude and behaviour of individuals.

Relating reading and behaviourist theory together, Ajala and Ojebode (2006:17) are of the view that:

Reading, to the behaviourist, is an action that needs to be positively reinforced, especially at the learning-to-read stage. A person will become an avid reader if every reading activity is given a reward. The reward does not have to be monetary or material. It could be verbal praises, marks, etc.

The deduction from the above position by Ajala and Ojebode is that reading needs to be motivated for it to be effective and result-oriented. With this model, it can be argued that reading will be seen as voluntary.

3.1. Instrumentation

A researcher-designed questionnaire was used as an instrument to elicit information from the respondents. It was structured to have two sections. Section "A" elicited information about respondents' bio-data and section "B" was devoted to relevant questions on the variables that caused poor performance of students in the SSCE English language. The questionnaire contained fifteen items.

The expected responses would also be structured along a modified Likert Scale as thus:

Strongly Agree (SA)   4marks
Agree (A)   3marks
Strongly Disagree (SD)   2marks
Disagree (D)   1mark

To validate the instrument, content validity approach was employed. A draft copy of the instrument was presented to experts in Test and Measurement in the Department of Guidance and Counseling, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The corrections made were effected before the final draft was made. The researcher ascertained the reliability (r) of the instrument using the Pearson Product moment Correlation Co-efficient method.

3.2. Procedure for Data Collection

 The researcher personally met with the principals, the vice-principals and English language teachers of the selected schools to seek their permission and cooperation on the study. Finally, the questionnaires were distributed to the respondents to respond to them. These questionnaires were later collected immediately to avoid any loss or distortion of their observations.

3.3. Data Analysis Techniques

Frequency count and percentage distribution were used to answer all the research questions. Also, t-test was used to test null hypotheses 1 and 2 while hypothesis 3 was tested using one way ANOVA.

3.4. Data Analysis and Results

This data analysis has two main parts: the analysis of the demographic information and the analysis of the content of the questionnaires. This analysis is given below:

3.5. Demographic Information of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	128	64.0
Female	72	36.0
Total	**200**	**100.0**

Table 1: Gender Distribution

The table shows that out of 200 students sampled, 128 (64%) were males while 72 (36%) were females. The implication of the above data is that the society still favours education of male children more than the education of female children.

School Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Public	08	40.0
Private	12	60.0
Total	**20**	**100.0**

Table 2: School Type Distribution

The table reveals that the200 students that were sampled for this study came from public and private schools. With the frequency and percentage of the public schools 08(40.0%) and the private schools 12(60.0%), it can be said that the number of private schools in Abeokuta South Local Government of Ogun State is more than the public schools. These private schools, however, are of different standards.

3.6. Answering of Research Questions

Four research questions were raised in the course of this study. Research question one was answered using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) while other research questions 2–4 that have corresponding hypotheses were tested using inferential statistics, at the alpha 0.05 level of significant.

- Research Question 1: Is there personal attitudinal factor of students that contribute to poor performance in the SSCE English Language?

	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation
Attitudinal factor of students that contribute to poor performance in the SSCE English Language	200	22.5694	4.45375

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Students' attitudinal factors that
contribute to poor performance in the SSCE English Language

The table shows that the respondents' mean score of 22.5694 with standard deviation of 4.45375 which implies that they have negative attitude towards reading and literacy competence. This phenomenon, thus, significantly contributes to poor performance in the SSCE English language. The students read only when examination is fast approaching and they do not make efforts to understand what is read. Rather, they memorise the subject matter of their reading for the immediate use in the examination context.

3.7. Hypotheses Testing

Three null hypotheses were formulated. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using independent t-test while hypothesis 3 was tested using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) both at the alpha level of 0.05 significant.

- Ho_1: There is no significant difference in the attitude of male and female students towards reading and literacy competence in English language.

Variables	No	Mean	SD	Df	Cal t-value	Sign (2-tailed)	Remarks
Male	128	24.4618	10.24807	328	18.109	0.000	S
Female	72	16.0000	2.28898				

Table 4: The t-test Analysis showing Difference of the Attitude of Male and
Female students towards reading and literacy competence in the English language
P < 0.05

The table reveals that the calculated t-value is (18.109) with the p-value of (0.000) computed with the degree of freedom 328 and at alpha level of 0.05 significant. Since the calculated t-value of (18.109) is greater than the p-value otherwise known as the critical t-value, the Hypothesis 1 is rejected and the alternative hypothesis upheld that: there is a significant difference in the attitude of male and female students towards reading and literary literacy in the SSCE English language.
 Obviously, male students recorded mean score of (24.4618), standard deviation of (10.24807), while the female students recorded the mean score of (16.000) with standard deviation of (2.28898) indicating that the male students displayed positive attitude towards the reading and literacy competence in the SSCE English language.

- Ho_2: There is no significant difference in the attitude of students in private and public secondary schools towards reading and literacy competence in the SSCE English language.

Variable	No	Mean	SD	Df	Cal t-value	Sign (2-tailed)	Remarks
Public	08	12.8474	10.48850	258	0.414	0.679	NS
Private	12	48.2588	18.44782				

Table 5: The t-test Analysis Showing Difference in the Attitude of Students Public and
Private Secondary Schools towards Reading and Literacy Competence in the SSCE English Language
P < 0.05

The table indicates that the calculated t-value is (0.414) with p-value of (0.679) computed with the degree of freedom 258 and at alpha level of 0.05 significant. Since the calculated p-value is greater than the level of significance hypothesis 2 is hereby not rejected. This implies that there is no significant difference in the attitude of public and private secondary school students towards reading and literacy competence in the SSCE English language.

- Ho_3:There is no significant difference in the attitude of students towards reading and literacy competence in the SSCE English language based on Home and School factors.

Variables	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Remark
Between Groups	228.640	2	179.320	10.940	.000	
Within Groups	2114.941	257	15.532			
Total	**2343.581**	**259**				

Table 6: ANOVA Analysis showing difference in the Attitude of Male and Female Students towards
Reading and Literacy Competence in the SSCE English Language
P < 0.05

The table shows that the calculated F-value is 10.940)with p-value of 0.000 computed at alpha level of 0.05 significant. Since the calculated p-value is less than the level of significance, it means that there is a significant difference in the attitude of male and female students towards reading and literary competence in the SSCE English language.

3.8. Findings and Inferences
Some of the findings and inferences from the data analysis and discussion are given below:
   i.   The school type (private or public) does not really determine students attitude towards reading and literacy competence.
   ii. Related to the above, it is inferred that most private schools device other means to ensure   that their students perform better than their counterparts in public schools.
   iii. Home and school factors militate against effective and efficient reading culture and literacy competence of students.
   iv. Related to the above, students have formed lazy attitude to reading and literacy   competence.
   v.   Male students perform relatively better in reading than female students owing to the ambition that most male students do have to go into lucrative professions.

3.9. Recommendations
Based on the findings and inferences from the study, it is in the view of this paper that government should embark on rigorous media advocacy on efficient and effective reading. This media advocacy will re-orientate individuals on the need for voluntary reading. Schools should put in place a good library and at the same time should encourage and motivate students to engage in independent and voluntary reading. Besides, schools should partner with some professional associations such as Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) to motivate the interest of students in voluntary and goal-achieving reading.

3.10. Conclusion
This paper has examined the reading and literacy competence of students in the SSCE English language in Abeokuta South Local Government of Ogun State, Nigeria. The concepts of reading and literacy competence are examined and discussed. A set of questionnaires are administered on 200 respondents that are selected from private and public schools in Abeokuta South Local Government of Ogun State. The gathered data are analysed with statistical tools such as frequency counts, percentages and ANOVA. The findings of this paper reveal that there is no significant difference in the attitude towards reading and literacy competence of students in private and public schools. The paper recommends that the government and other stakeholders of education should be determined to address the problem of poor attitude to reading and literacy competence among students in Nigerian schools.

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