

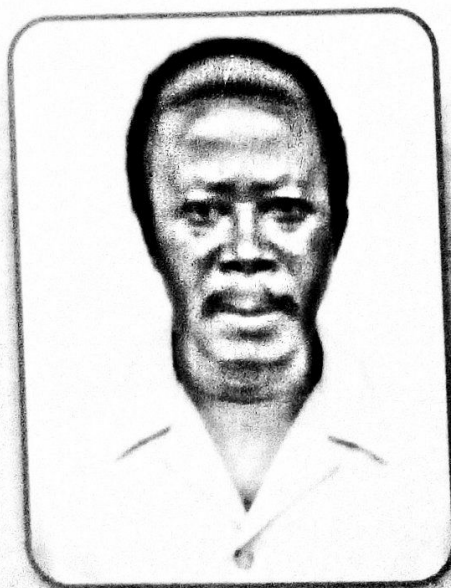
CROSS CURRENTS

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ENSURING ADEQUATE REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION RESEARCH: THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR Stephen Billy Olajide	page 270 - 278
LITERATURE	
VILLANELLE POETICS AND THE EXAMPLES OF WILLIAM EMPSON, DYLAN THOMAS AND JOHN UPDIKE Femi Dunmade	page 279
"LE VOILE EST-IL UN INSTRUMENT DE VIOLENCE? LE SYMBOLISME DU VOILE ET LA THANATO-LIBIDO DE LA VOILÉE DANS LE ROMAN D'ASSIA DJEBAR" Y. O. Aremu	page 280 - 291
DE LA FICTION A LA REALITE : LES RECLUSES DE KOFFI KWAHULE COMME APPEL AU COMBAT CONTRE LA VIOLENCE SEXUELLE Austin S. Moye	page 292 - 310
CODIFIED FORMS OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH IN NIGRIAN DRAMA OF ENGLISH EXPRESSION O.K. Owoeye	page 311 - 320
LES MISÉRABLES DE VICTOR HUGO OU LA PEINTURE DU NIGERIA ACTUEL Simeon Idowu Olayiwola	page 321 - 330
MARITAL ILLUSIONS AND REALITIES: CHANGES AS VIRTUE IN AIDOO'S CHANGES Victor O. Ogbeide	page 331 - 342
BATAILLE DU DÉVELOPPEMENT RURAL DANS LA FICTION AFRO-ANTILLAISE: ÉTUDE COMPARÉE DE GOUVERNEURS DE LA ROSÉE DE JACQUES ROUMAIN ET DE LES TRESSEURS DE CORDE DE JEAN PLIYA Francis Unimna Angrey	page 343 - 357
	page 358 - 371

**ENSURING ADEQUATE REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION RESEARCH:
THE ROLE OF SUPERVISOR**

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Introduction

Research is central to advanced learning, and is the basis of truth regarding what progress mankind has made across the millennia. The demands that research makes on the undertakers are varied, although it generally involves establishing and solving a given problem through objective analysis of carefully gathered data. In this connection, the supervisor is expected to draw the attention of the student-researcher to the importance of related literature to the successful investigation of any chosen topic of language education. Indeed, the student researcher should be made to show evidence of good reading of the relevant literature before setting out to write the study. The student-researcher can be assisted to select and acquire the relevant literature which is usually textual, although there are non-textual sources that the supervisee may benefit from. The supervisor must encourage the supervisee to organize and sequence materials in a manner that the ideas derived from them could be synthesized into appropriate subtitles.

Research requires its undertakers to contribute to knowledge, no matter how little. Nwana (1981), Ali (2006) Lategan (2008), and Amanda (2007) are agreed that research is an undertaking to solve a special human problem. For this to happen, the student-researcher needs be helped by the supervisor to develop a questioning attitude to the ideas expressed in the pieces of literature. The researcher should carefully select and relate relevant literature to the topic on hand. He would need to convince the supervisor about the relationship between the selected literature and the problem under investigation.

The relationship is actually the gap (now problem) to be addressed meaningfully in

the study. The latter should give focus to the problem by addressing appropriate research questions and hypotheses generated from the literature. When the supervisor leads the supervisee to answer the research questions suitably, test the set hypotheses correctly and discuss the findings incisively, the duo would have contributed to knowledge in a way.

Although there is no single definition of research, all scholars are agreed that it requires painstaking consistency, objectivity and good counseling. For example, Babie (1986), Jimoh (1995) and Hay (2008) viewed research as a way of examining human social affairs in order to understand them, while Hatch and Farhardy (1982) Osuala (1982) and Lategan (2008) are agreed that it is the systematic way of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data in order to solve a given problem. To Akuezulo (1993), Denscombe (2001) and Lourens (2007), research is not only systematic and coordinated, but a dispassionate search for knowledge of the subject of study which can be utilized in solving a novel problem. That research is an investigation aimed at knowing what has not been known before has also been canvassed by Abimbola (1995). Above all, Lawal (1995), stressing the centrality of related literature to effective research, advanced that research is a systematic activity which must be 'literature derived, literature implied, and literature-bound' (p.24).

Locating Related Literature

A strong student researcher should be able to identify, locate, synthesize, store, retrieve, and correctly apply the information related to her topic. Olajide (1999) described the library as the richest single source of printed materials for the reader-writer (or the researcher, in the present case). As such, the supervisor should encourage the language education supervisee to utilize the library adequately. Every library maintains staff that have been trained to assist the student-researcher (like other users) to access the desired information. The student-researcher may also have residual knowledge of how the library works, which he may have acquired at the College of Education, Polytechnic and/or University through the General English Studies or such other English for Academic Purpose (EAP) programmes. Besides public libraries, there are usually subject-specific personal libraries owned by specialists which the researcher can consult. He requires the supervisor's guidance on how to obtain the permissions of such subject specialists to use their libraries. Relevant pieces of information may also be obtained from newspapers, magazines, calendars

The Internet is probably the juiciest source of relevant literature to the researcher.

Thus, he should be encouraged to learn to use the Internet well, especially because the facility is the fastest and surest way of accessing latest world information about any subject of study. Any world class higher institution provides Internet facilities for its staff and students.

Before the supervisee locates the needed literature, the supervisor could get him to break the target topic into appropriate sub-topics that would bring the envisaged investigation under sharper focus. The sub-topics would strengthen the student-researcher's insight into the problem at issue and harmonize his thoughts. According to Ijaya (1997), relevant literature "...points out research strategies, specific procedures, and instruments that have been found to be productive in investigating research problems"(p.18). Lourens (2007:9) suggested that the final research topic should meet three criteria: meet the researcher's interest, be relevant to the theory and practice within the discipline and be fairly innovative. These criteria can be met in Language education research if only available literature is handled dispassionately and insightfully.

The supervisor can himself be a source of related literature for the supervisee. Personal materials and past projects supervised by the supervisor can be made available to guide the researcher. Giving that kind of support would rekindle the student-researcher's interest in the research work, give him greater sense of security and make him resolve to work for success. Facilitating the supervisee's access to relevant literature does not amount to a supervisor giving undue advantage to the supervisee, after all, the expected research report would project the supervisor as well. A badly written research report is a poorly (if ever) supervised work, which should blame on the student-research and the supervisor.

Although the supervisor could assist the student-researcher to obtain the needed pieces of related literature, the latter should be left to synthesize and adequately apply the facts obtained from the literature in confirming or refuting the existing ideas gleaned from the literature. Identifying, defining, delimiting and assessing other writers' and researchers' ideas as expressed in the available related literature can be ensured only by instinctive student-researcher. The supervisor can be involved in the process but only as a guide, preventing the student-researcher from name-dropping and outright dubbing from the available pieces which are expected to be approached with critical disposition.

As observed by Lawal (1995), research is not.... "a blind and anything-goes research" (p.25). The model below may help to further explain the kind of interaction that should

exist among the supervisor, supervisee and the research work language education.

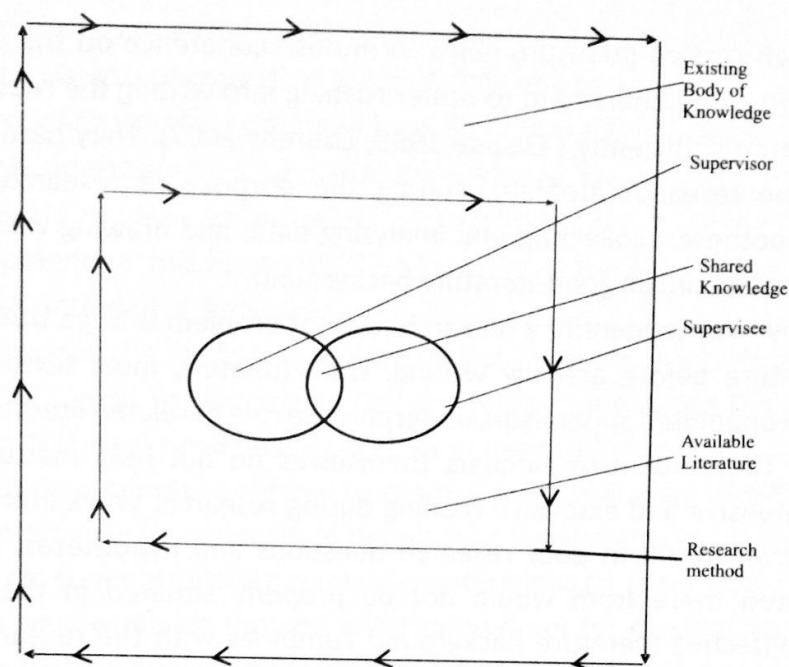


Figure 1: A model for ensuring effective review of related literature in Language Education Research

From the foregoing model, it may be seen that the boundary of knowledge is porous and elastic, allowing further knowledge. Available literature reviewed suggested that all research efforts, theoretical preoccupations, and academic commentaries are intended towards one direction - attempting to solve human problems. Also, the arrows move clockwise, without a beginning and an end, to indicate that knowledge has neither a beginning nor an end. The model is intended to demonstrate the stage-by-stage preparation of a good research report with the supervisor and supervisee occupying a central position where they share knowledge and encourage each other. It may be noted that the "flow path for knowledge" is a two-way position from where other older knowledge (presented as the "existing body of knowledge") and the new knowledge (given as the "available related literature reviewed") flow into each other to produce the final report.

Problem and Prospect of Adequately Reviewed Literature in Language Education

Although related literature helps to impose coherence on the part of a research report, student-researchers tend to prefer rushing into writing the report to first reading related literature sufficiently (Olajide 1999; Lourens 2007). They hardly appreciate that identifying the research problem, stating the purpose of research, raising relevant questions/hypotheses, collecting and analyzing data, and drawing valid inferences from findings must be based on good literature background.

The best way to identify a research topic or problem is to go through the available related literature before actually writing. Unfortunately, most textbooks on research methods and appointed supervisors underplay the role of related literature in the conduct of research. The student-researchers themselves do not help matter as they cannot undertake intensive and extensive reading during research. Weak literature background would, however, result in poor research questions and hypotheses; and any research problem stated there from would not be properly situated in the existing pool of knowledge. Effective literature background combines with the research hypotheses to invalidate and interpret the data gathered by the student-research; and it helps to supply focus to the research because it enables the student-researcher to confirm or refute either theories or assumptions by making cross-references to the work earlier done on the research topic involved.

The value of any research work rests in its propensity to cohere with the available related literature reviewed, and extend the frontiers of knowledge, thereby causing, according to Lawal (1995:34) "ripple in the pool of knowledge". Unless a proper literature background is ensured by the student-researcher through the aid of the supervisor, the envisaged research would be out of focus, gravely detached from useful previous studies that would have strengthened the target work. Related literature provides the theoretical and practical ramifications of the stated problem since it reflects the informed thoughts on the subject. Familiarity with the work already done on the subject of the research not only gives focus to the research work, but also helps the student-researcher to determine the implications of his findings (Leedy 1974). The status of research in terms of who, what, where, when, how, and why can best be established by obtaining the right literature. Research efforts would not be duplicated, and the most rewarding investigation procedures can be selected only by reading related literature.

Strategies for Adequately Reviewing and Appraising the Literature

All the benefits derivable from related literature already discussed may elude the student-researcher in language education that is not focused enough. He must be logical and sequential in handling the ideas obtained from the literature. The distinction between research-based and non-research-based literature should be carefully drawn by the student-researcher. He requires an introductory paragraph where he would show the pattern of development of the literature. The body of the review should be logical, sequential, synthetic, integrative, and compelling.

During the review, the student-researcher must keep his research goal in mind, always relating writers' ideas to his goals, so that the supervisor may see the link between the goals and ideas. The ideas need be put together under sub-topics that must have been hinged on the theoretical trends suggested by them. If many literature materials focus on an area, a few of them may be reviewed in details. The supervisor should encourage the student-researcher to summarize and paraphrase materials as far as possible. A writer may be quoted directly only when his thought is considered apt for elucidating the point at issue, and the source of the quotation should be in line with the reporting format imposed by the institution harvesting the research report later. Materials based on research may be grouped together as empirical studies (or integrated with theoretical view) with the details of authors, years of studies, samples involved, instrument and statistics employed, and the ultimate findings clearly expressed.

The review may be concluded with an effort by the student-researcher to summarize how the state-of-the-art as reflected in the related literature has influenced (but is different from) his intended research-work. His general impression on the quality of the research already carried out and theory so far formulated by earlier researchers, and writers/commentators should be given. Although supervisors seem not agreed on where research questions and/or hypotheses should be presented in a research report, it is only after an adequate review of the related literature that they can be relevantly formulated.

The supervisor should remind the student-researcher of the need to place all authors cited in the review chapter and elsewhere in the research report in the reference list or bibliography. A way of not dropping any item from the list is that the student-researcher should write out on neat, separate sheets all the publication details of every material before consulting it. Even if such material is not available when it is time to prepare

the list, the researcher's draft(s) would come handy. The supervisor should note that plagiarism is the charge for any research-work in which the authors of reviewed ideas are not properly acknowledged. As such, there must not be any mismatch between the reference list or bibliography and the citations made in the body of the research-work. (The preparation of reference list is outside the scope of this paper, incidentally.)

Concluding Remarks

Supervising student's research project in language education is demanding but can be exciting and rewarding if properly handled. The population of supervisees, if large, could reduce effectiveness. And once the supervisees notice any laxity on the part of the supervisor, they may do things unethical, including plagiarizing. Student-researchers tend to look for short-cuts to research-reporting. Most of them would not want to go through the rigor of contacting available related literature to give them the full grasp of the situation scholarship has reached on their subjects of research before rushing to write. Hence their Background to the Problem is usually as empty as their Review of Related Literature and Discussion.

The efficient supervisor motivates the supervisee, and gets him started on an adequate literature background. He also leads him into identifying, processing, interpreting, and relating the thoughts of older researchers and writers as expected in the available literature. The focus, relevance, and fire that the intended research requires in order to qualify as a genuine contribution to knowledge can only be derived from an efficient review of available related literature. The appropriate background, problem, purpose of study, hunches, discussions and implications of findings cannot be efficiently handled by a student-researcher in Language Education that lacks the ability to garner ideas from the relevant literature. And any supervisor that signs a shoddy student's research report is a mockery of scholarship.

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