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Influence of University Students' Reading Attitudes and Fields of Specialization on Their Comprehension Performance in English.

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Abstract

Reading is one important tool of learning at the tertiary level because it promotes interdisciplinary achievement. However, reading comprehension performance has not been encouraging among students of Nigerian tertiary institutions. The cause of this situation has not been completely identified and redressed by reading researchers. It is assumed that the attitude of the student is one factor influencing his or her performance in reading. The present study therefore sets out to explore the link between university students' attitude to reading and their fields of specialization on the one hand, and their comprehension performance in English language on the other hand. The sample for the study were 200 second-year students at the University of Ilorin, randomly drawn from the faculties of Agriculture, Business and Social Engineering, and Science. The instruments for the study were a five-item questionnaire and a thirty-two item test based on the University's "Use of English"; a compulsory course for all 200 - level students. While the questionnaire data were processed using the chi-square statistic, the test-based data were analyzed using ANOVA and the Duncan's Multiple Range Test. Results showed that students' attitude, as well as their fields of specialization, influenced their reading comprehension performance significantly. Based on this, appropriate suggestions are recommended.

Introduction

Reading has been viewed as the crux of intellectual development (Abe, 1991; Abe and Olajide, 1995; Olajide, 1995). At the tertiary level of learning, students confront varied printed materials in order to learn effectively. Abe (1991) opines, however, that 'there are a number of reading skills the lack of which may constitute problems for students and hinder their academic work' (p.94). As a result, he advocates that students at the tertiary level should possess basic reading skills, the skills of rapid reading, additional reading skills, and vocabulary skills using context and sentence structure. Lamenting the deplorable situation of reading at the tertiary level, Abe (1991) corroborates Zinga (1983): 'In all our universities and other tertiary institutions, there is a general awareness that many students have not learnt to listen well, to speak well, to read well, and to write well in English (p.93). Zinga (1983) has found that many university students could not perform in an ideal environment.

In the same vein, Lawal (1995) and Olajide (1991) found that majority of students could not read beyond the literal level of comprehension which both researchers

agree comprises the lower-order skills. Unoh (1983) has equally observed that students of Nigerian tertiary institutions manifest inefficient reading habits and behaviour that call for urgent attention.

Thus the attitude of learners toward reading at the tertiary level can be reasonably suggested to be one of the factors responsible for the poor situation. Massquid (1969) strongly believes that a learner attitude to the language he is learning can determine how he performs in the language. According to him, a learner needs a generally good linguistic background and favourable disposition, if he must perform creditably in a second language. Unless he is mentally, emotionally and physiologically ready, he may not learn the language successfully.

As a way of improving the attitude of the learner, Rivers (1972) recommends a careful monitoring of the learner's achievement in language use, and the steady provision of feedback to the learner in respect of his achievement. Rivers (1972) agrees with Tyler (1949) by maintaining that attitudes are important because they have strong influences on how a learner acquires satisfaction and taste. By this, it may be inferred that attitude to the learning of a language among tertiary students in Nigeria is most likely to have influence on their performance in the language, other things being equal.

That language learning has to be made interesting to the learners has been canvassed by Palmer (1964) who posits that not many people learn anything well unless they are interested in it. He suggests six steps that may make learning a second language a worthwhile undertaking: eliminating bewilderment in the learners, letting them know how much progress they have made, giving them game-like exercises, ensuring the right relation between the teacher and the student, and providing a variety of learning experiences. C. Onyewotu (1991) suggests that learners should be encouraged to read effectively by getting them to do higher order thinking in their subject area. This seems a recognition of the role subject specialization could play in functional reading. Adewumi (1988) also recommends the suiting of the "use of English" to students' disciplinary needs.

This study is an attempt to help promote reading to learners in Nigerian tertiary institutions. It investigates the exact influence of students' attitudes to reading and their subject specialization on reading comprehension performance using the University's "Use of English" programme which is compulsory for all students at the 200 - level, and the equivalents of which are run in Nigerian Colleges of Education and Polytechnics. How much improvement these various courses have

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conferred on the students has not been fully ascertained. Yet, the tertiary institutions rely on the courses to give the learners the language skills they are expected to transfer to their various disciplines (Olajide, 1994).

Reading is one of the language skills imparted in the various Use of English programmes. And because it underlies performance in the other skills (writing, speaking, and listening), reading instruction should be pursued with corresponding determination and zeal..

The outcry by various reading researchers (Abe 1991; Lawal 1985; Olajide 1991; Unoh, 1983; Zinga, 1983) that Nigerian learners at the various levels do not seem to be proficient readers seem to point up the need for the present study. Such learners have attitudes towards the various reading remediation programmes that have been put up for them. Whereas scholars (Palmer, 1964; Rivers, 1972; Tyler, 1949) agree that students' attitudes can influence the performance in language, it is not yet absolutely certain the influence attitudes have on reading comprehension in English in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Findings from the present study should therefore be of interest to language teachers, curriculum experts, the government, and other relevant interest groups in the society. If the tertiary students who are expected to graduate to supply the middle level manpower that Nigeria badly needs are helped to become efficient readers, the future of the country might be better insured.

Procedure

The sample for the study is comprised of 200 students drawn at random from four faculties at the University of Ilorin. The faculties were Agriculture, Business and Social Sciences, Engineering and Sciences. These faculties were focused because their students had been reported (Adewumi, 1988) to be inefficient in and were objectionable to the University's Use of English programme.

The instruments for the study were a five-item questionnaire and a thirty-two question test based upon the reading comprehension component of the programme. The questionnaire has three parts, -part A sought demographic information about the subjects; B presented the test item while C sought general views about the use of English programme. Every question on the test has four options lettered A to D only one of which was correct; the questionnaire was a four point Likert's scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD).

The university's Use of English programme was selected for the study because it is compulsory for all 200 - level students, regardless of their disciplines. It was the only form that this researcher could use to assess the students' performances in Reading Comprehension. Also, The test was made up of four passages of about 600 words each, and reflecting the 4 focused faculties. The passages had been subjected to the Fry's readability test to ascertain their linguistic and cultural relevance.. The Questions set on each of the passages focused on the levels of Reading of Comprehension as follows:

Specification Of Questions Across Levels Of Reading Comprehension Of Each Passage

Table 1

Level	No of Questions
Creative	2
Critical	2
Inferential	2
Literal	2
Total	8

By so doing, the researcher was able to evaluate the performance of the students at each level of reading comprehension, and on the basis of subject specialization, equally. If a student or students of a given subject specialization scored below 40% within or outside the specialization, such a student or students were rated as being poor. The performance was to be related to the attitude of the students later in the study.

Data Analysis and Results

The data derived from the questionnaire were processed using the chi-square statistic. However, the test data were analyzed by subjecting them to the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the Duncan's: Multiple Range Test. Specifically, the only addressed two.

Hypothesis1: Students' attitude to reading comprehension does not significantly influence their comprehension performance in English

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Hypothesis 2: Students' performance in reading comprehension does not significantly differ on the basis of subject specialization.

Table 1 below represents the attitude of the students to reading comprehension in English after responses to the questionnaire had been subjected to the chi-square test. Also, tables 2 to 3 describe the performance of the students in reading comprehension when the test data had undergone ANOVA and Duncan's Multiple Range Test.

Table 2: Summary of Student's Response to the Attitude Questionnaire

Item No.	Paraphrases of item in questionnaire	Frequency	Percentage
1	Reading comprehension in Use as least relevant.	81	40.5
2	The Use Programmes as being irrelevant.	45	22.5
3	Reading comprehension as being useful.	162	81
4	Reading comprehension as being of no use outside the school.	43	21.5
5	The use Programmes as being very useful	167	83.5

Frequency = number of respondents who either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with item.

Use = " Use of English .

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Table 3: Chi-Square Comparison of Student's Reaction to the Proposition that the Reading Comprehension

Component of the " Use of English" Is relevant to their need

Response	Agriculture			Bus & Soc.St			Engineering			Sciences			crit	decision
	Obs	cal	Val	Obs	cal	Val	Obs	cal	Val	Obs	cal	Val		
Positive	208	192.5	1.25	163	192.5	-4.25	206	192.5	0.95	193	192.5	.0013		
Negative	42	57.5	0.54	87	57.5	15.3	44	57.5	-3.17	57	57.5	12.45	7.81	null
Total		250			250			250			250			

* Significant at 0.05, 3df

Table 4 Duncan's Multiple Range Test of Students' Performance On Science Text

Treatment	Mean	Interpairing	Calculated Range	Result
Bss	3.02	Sc vs Bss	3.26	A
AG	1.98	Sc vs AG	2.22	B
ENG	4.24	Sc vs Eng	1.04	C
SC	5.24	Eng vs Bss	2.26	D
		Eng vs AG	1.22	C
		AG vs Bss	1.04	C

* Significant Difference did not exist between faculties whose result gave the same letters.

Table 5: Duncan's Multiple Range Test of Students' Performance On Engineering Text

Treatment	Mean	Interpairing	Calculated Range	Result
AG	2.34	ENG vs BSS	3.46	A
BSS	3.26	ENG vs AG	2.24	B
ENG	4.56	ENG vs Sc	0.94	C
SC	5.55	SC vs Bss	2.22	D
		SC vs AG	1.3	E
		AG vs BSS	0.92	C

* Significant Difference did not exist between faculties whose result gave the same letters.

Table 6: Duncan's Multiple Range Test of Students' Performance On Agriculture Text

Treatment	Mean	Interpairing	Calculated Range	Result
ENG	2.78	AG vs ENG	2.42	A
SC	3.14	AG vs SC	2.06	B
BS	3.8	AG vs BSS	1.4	C
SC	5.2	BSS vs ENG	1.02	D
		BSS vs SC	0.66	D
		BSS Vs ENG	0.36	D

* Significant Difference did not exist between faculties whose result gave the same letters.

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Table 7: Duncan's Multiple Range Test of Students' Performance On Soc.Sc. Text

Treatment	Mean	Interpairing	Calculated Range	Result
AG	4.06	BSS vs ENG	3.3	A
BSS	5.42	BSS vs SC	2.84	B
ENG	2.12	BSS vs AG	1.36	C
SC	2.55	AG vs ENG	1.94	D
		AG vs SC	1.48	E
		SC vs ENG	0.46	C

* Significant Difference did not exist between faculties whose result gave the same letters.

The result of the chi-square test (Table 3) indicated a significant difference in students' responses across the four faculties. The calculated value was 12.45 while the table value was 7.81. This led to the rejection of the null hypothesis H_0 . In other words this study confirmed that students had differing attitudes to the "Use of English" programme, particularly its reading comprehension component.

Also, the inter-pairings done in tables 4 to 7 showed that students' performance in reading comprehension in English differed along subject specialization. In the performances of students on the science-based text, significant differences were found between the Faculties of Sciences and Business and Social Sciences; Sciences and Agriculture; Engineering and Business and Social Sciences. The students of Agriculture performed best on the science-based text, having recorded more than 40% in five of the eight items set on that text. Although the students of Engineering never had the lowest percentage of correct responses to any item on the text, they recorded the next poorest performance. Business and Social Science students performed poorest.

However, the students of Business and Social Sciences performed best on the test related to their discipline, recording the highest percentage of correct responses in each of four items. They were followed by Agriculture students on the same text, the latter group having recorded more than 40% in three items. Next to the poorest performance on the text were science students who maintained the highest percentage of correct responses to only one item. Engineering students performed poorest on the text, having scored less than 40% on the text. Significant difference was observed in the performances of faculties except between sciences and Engineering on the text.

The best performance on engineering-related text came from the students of sciences. They recorded the highest percentages of correct responses to three items on the text and had no least in any of the remaining items. Students of Agriculture and Engineering followed, respectively. For the second time, the poorest performance was by those from Business and Social Sciences. On the text, significant differences were found in the performances of students of Engineering and Business and Social Sciences; Engineering and Agriculture; Sciences and Business and Social Sciences; Sciences and Agriculture.

In the text related to Agriculture, the students of Agriculture performed best. They were followed by the students of Sciences; Engineering students took the third place. For the last time, the students of Business and Social Sciences performed poorest. When all performances on the text were subject to the test of significance, significant differences manifested only between the faculties of Agriculture and Engineering; Agriculture and Sciences; and Agriculture and Business and Sciences.

It was observed that although students' comprehension of the various texts differed in patterns and at levels faculty to faculty, not all the differences were significant when subjected to statistical test. Subject specialization was found to have exerted influence on students' reading comprehension performance, hence the acceptance of the second null hypotheses, HO₂, of this study; Most of the students performed well on the texts that were related to their subject specialization. The students of Agriculture (*208 out of 250; see Table 3), more than students of any other specialisation, attached importance to the reading comprehension component of the University's "Use of English"; they later performed best not only in their discipline, but also on the science-related text.

Discussion

Because certain students felt that their disciplines were not directly related to English, they felt they needed not be compelled to offer the use of English course. However, there were others who felt that although their disciplines were not directly related to English, they needed reading skills to do well in these disciplines. The latter group were found in the present study to have performed well in reading comprehension not only in their discipline, but also in other disciplines. In the group were students of Agriculture who showed appreciable mastery of the various reading skills. This tends to confirm the view of, Rivers (1972), that the attitude of learners towards a subject influences their performance in such a subject.

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Most of the students, especially of Agriculture, involved in the study agreed that reading comprehension skills helped learning. This seems to justify the call by Abe (1991), Zinga (1983), and Unoh (1983) for rigorous pursuit of reading comprehension in English at the tertiary level of education in Nigeria. Students at that level cannot learn well if they cannot read fast to tackle academic tasks with appreciable proficiency. Tertiary education requires higher cognitive functioning which the students mainly read to attain (Onyewotu, 1991).

Students find it easier to read and comprehend texts that are related to their disciplines, as explained elsewhere (Abe and Olajide, 1995), although they can also read efficiently in other disciplines. This may be so because the jargons of the disciplines and certain other aspects of such texts are familiar to the students. The implication of this is that students can increase their reading comprehension performance not only by cultivating positive attitude to reading, but also by reading extensively and intensively across disciplines. Text writers on various disciplines should strive to attract readers of whatever disciplinary persuasions by carefully selecting and organizing the contents of the textbooks produced.

Concluding Remarks

Although this exploratory study could not be regarded as conclusive, it points out two things about reading comprehension in English at the tertiary level. First, there appears no need for a programme of reading comprehension without taking into cognizance the attitude and preference of those for whom the programme is designed. This is because the learners may attach little or no importance to the programme, no matter the loftiness of it. Consequently, such learners may not perform well in the programme. Thus the learners' fields of study in the tertiary institutions may interact with the learners' attitudes to influence their reading comprehension performance. Therefore, efficient teaching strategies that can sensitize the learners to read reflectively and flexibly should be adopted in Nigerian Colleges of Education, polytechnics and the Universities. From time to time, students of the institutions should be given opportunities to assess programmes of reading in English in terms of relevance and instructional qualities. Their views might gear up instructional and curricular innovations as suggested by Palmer (1964).

Several studies are required to follow up this exploratory study. For example students' attitude to the General Studies Education (GSE) English offered in the first two Years in Nigerian Colleges of Education might be investigated. It may be