

PDF - ASSESSING THE READABILITY OF ON Y VA! FOR JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL (JSS) IN NSUKKA EDUCATION ZONE OF ENUGU STATE - researchcub.info

ABSTRACT
This study was undertaken to assess the readability of On y va! (French textbook) for Junior Secondary School (JSS) in Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State. It also sought to determine the readability of the text by male and female students as well as by urban and rural students. The determination of the interaction effect of gender and location on students' readability of the text was equally aimed at. Five research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. An evaluative survey design was used. The sample for the study consisted of 272 SS I students (because they have covered the content of the book) from three public schools in Nsukka Education Zone. A multi-stage random sampling technique was used due to the variables of gender and location. The instrument used for data collection was a 45 – item French Textbook Readability Questionnaire (FTRQ), validated by five experts in language Education and Measurement and Evaluation from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The instrument yielded an average reliability coefficient of 0.97 using Cronbach's Alpha method. It was administered to the students by the researcher and collected on the spot. The data was analyzed using mean scores and standard deviations for the research questions and t-test and univariate analysis of variance for the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The major findings of the study were that all the sections of On y va! were not easy to understand, but they were interesting and had legible prints. Also, gender and location had significant difference on the readability of the text, but there was no interaction effect of gender and location. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that the authors of the On y va! series should carry out a more detailed analysis of the students' past experiences and background knowledge in French and incorporate them in their subsequent editions of the text. Limitations of the study were outlined, and suggestions for further study given.

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Nigeria is an English-speaking country surrounded by French-speaking nations such as Benin Republic, Cameroun, Niger and Chad. Given this geographical location, there is a great need for Nigerians to be knowledgeable in French language for better co-operation and understanding with these nations. Besides, French is a major international language of science, commerce, industry, diplomacy and technology, as well as a prerequisite for employment in international organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the International Police Commission (INTERPOL), the United Nations Organization (UNO), the African Union (AU), etc. It is against this background that the Federal Government of Nigeria, in 1998 adopted the new French/English bilingual policy of French as a second official language in Nigeria (FRN, 2001).

In pursuance of the above policy, the current National Policy on Education made French "compulsory in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools but non-vocational elective at the Senior Secondary School" (FRN, 2004:10). The Federal Government adopted a three-phase implementation schedule recommended by the Ministerial Task Force for the implementation of the policy (Opara, 2005). The first phase of the schedule which was supposed to last from September 1998 to October 2000 was aimed at making French compulsory from primary 4 to 6 and making a pass in French a criterion for acquiring Junior Secondary School (JSS) certificate. The second phase (September, 2000 to October 2004) was aimed at making French a compulsory subject from JSS I to SS I and making a credit in French a criterion for recruitment/admission in the University. The third and the final phase (September 2004 to October 2008) was aimed at making the basic knowledge of French a requirement for recruitment into jobs and promotion of civil servants.

However, the actual implementation of the policy has been bedeviled by a lot of constraints such as lack of teachers, textual resources, awareness, poor attitude of the students, etc. For instance, Opara (2004) reports that most of the teachers who are to

implement the policy have neither heard about it nor the proposed phases of the implementation schedule. These prevailing situations do not show that the fortune of French teaching and learning has really broken loose from its past, characterized by uncertainty and hesitation. It was introduced in the secondary school curriculum in Nigeria at the wake of independence in 1960 (Offorma, 2002). Since then, it has been one of the two major foreign languages taught in the schools. However, the majority of the students do not see its usefulness since it is spoken only in the classroom. They do not show reasonable interest in it, and the teachers have to work very hard to motivate them. In spite of the teachers' serious efforts, only very few students opt for French in the senior secondary school certificate (Offorma, 2002).

The above scenario has been the lot of the French language in Nigerian secondary schools since its introduction in the school curriculum, and efforts have always been made to address the problem and popularize French teaching and learning. One of such efforts has been in the area of production of textbooks by seasoned French teachers and researchers. Hence, at different places and time in Nigeria, such French textbooks as *France Afrique*, *TransAfrique*, *Practical French*, *Contacts* and *Bonjour l'Afrique* had been in use. All these are becoming more and more unpopular due to the fact that the teaching and learning of French is shifting from the existing methods such as the grammar-translation method, the direct method, the audio-lingual method and audio-visual method to communicative method, a method that is widely accepted as the most efficient and effective in the teaching and learning of French language (Kim, Eke, Obobairibbojie, Nwodo, Marcellin and Ayinde, 2007). The shift became necessary because of the obvious shortcomings of the preceding methods. The grammar-translation method, for instance, makes no distinction between formality and informality in language use (Anasiudu, 2002). The direct method has its own major flaw in its overreliance on the mechanical repetitive drills which could be engaged in without thought on the part of the learners. Similarly, the audio-lingual method has intensive pattern practice as its major technique. This technique serves the need of beginners, but is definitely not suitable for all second language learners. The audio-visual method has equally been criticized for being teacher-centred and for having problems with the validity of the visual elements. The communicative method takes care of all these shortfalls by emphasizing the linguistic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing as well as the practical use of the language in real-life situations.

The shift spurred a group of seasoned French teachers and reputable trainers of trainers to write a series of French textbooks that are in consonance with the new methodology. These books: *On y va!* for JSS I, *On y va!* for JSS II, *On y va!* for JSS III and *On y va!* for Senior Secondary Schools (SSS) written by Catherine Mazauric and Evelyne Siréjols with the collaboration of John Ilya Kim, Jummai Makpu and Mohamed Tijani were published by Spectrum Books limited Ibadan and CLE International Paris between 2002 and 2005. Earlier on, a new curriculum for teaching French in Nigeria had been developed in 2001 (Kim et al, 2007). So, the *On y va!* series were designed and a series of workshops organized by the Centres for French Teaching and Documentation (CFTDs) throughout the country to create awareness about them.

The books are the recommended textbooks for the teaching and learning of French in Enugu State. French teachers in Nsukka Education Zone, including the present researcher, participated in the series of seminars and workshops aimed at popularizing the books at Enugu and Jos in 2007. However, the area is witnessing increasing apathy towards the language among the students (Ngene and Njoku, 2007). The students perform poorly even in very simple French exercises (Eze and Meniru, 2006). The above scenario raises doubt about how readable they find the book.

The term readability refers to all the factors that affect success in reading and understanding a text. These factors, according to *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1977), include the average number of words in sentences, the number of commonly understood words, the average number of syllables in the words, the number of long complex

sentences, the number of abstract ideas and the use of personal pronouns. In using these to estimate the readability of a given write-up, a number of formulas have been developed. Such formulas include Gunning "FOG" readability Test, Fry Readability Graph, Flesh-Kincaid formula, Power-Sumner-Keerl Formula, McLaughlin "SMOG" Formula, FORCAST Formula, etc. These measures guide the construction of textbook to conform to the intended grade level.

However, readability experts such as McNamara, Louwse and Graesser (2005) argue that scores from such formulas are based on surface characteristics of the text, and as such, prevent valid predictions of text comprehension. According to them, measuring elements of a textbook that are primarily needed for surface processing does not adequately capture comprehension and learning, which are the major concern of educators. Hence, the present researcher is in agreement with Johnson and Johnson (1987) who see readability as a concept which has as its major components the notions of ease of understanding, legibility and interest/motivation.

The present study therefore aims at investigating the readability of *On y va!* in the light of all these factors by examining its ease of understanding, legibility and interest/motivation in relation to the reading ability of the students in the public schools in Nsukka Education Zone. The aspect of ease of understanding has to do, among other things, with whether the assumptions about students' prior knowledge are appropriate and whether the content information from the text can be supported by being directed to the examples in the text. Interest/motivation, on the other, deals with how pleasant and attractive the students find the book while legibility of print deals with the type such as the use of lower case and capital letters, the bold type, italics, the size of the type, the length of the line, the spacing between the lines, curvature of the page, the type of paper and the colour of paper.

Therefore, bearing in mind the prevailing condition of the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria generally and in Nsukka Zone in particular, especially as it appertains to the dismal performance of secondary school students in reading, determining the readability of the recommended textbook, *On y va!* in line with the above readability indices may be a plausible remedy. For instance, ease of understanding is a major determining factor in whether a student is going to benefit from a given text or not. Assessing the ease of understanding of *On y va!* would address any readability problem associated with faulty assumptions about students' vocabulary knowledge, prior knowledge and experiential background. On the other hand, assessing how the books interest the learners would help in motivating them and sustaining their interest in the books. Also, determining the legibility of print of the texts would help to address the readability problems associated with type faces, size of type, the length of lines, the space between the lines, weight of print, quality of paper the texts are made of as well as the relationship between the colour of the paper and the colour of the type. If all these readability related difficulties are taken care of, the students would definitely enjoy the reading of *On y va!*, and benefit from its rich communicative and linguistic content. This would invariably enhance the students' performance in external examinations.

Besides, as the question of gender and school location has remained an unresolved issue in students reading competence, this study intends to include them as its variables. Gender is seen by Offorma (2004) as a learned, socially constructed conditions ascribed to individuals on the basis of being born either male or female. It is enforced through cultural practices. Hence, the type of training and exposures given to male and female children in a given society depend on the people's understanding and belief. Gender, therefore, is a very important variable because a person's personal orientation and outlook play a crucial role in performance. However, there are conflicting reports on whether gender has a significant influence in language performance (Offorma, 2004). Similarly, there has been a raging controversy on whether the school location has an impact on students' achievement. As schools play an important role in the intellectual development of children, adequate provision of learning facilities or lack of them may facilitate or hinder learning. The location of

schools comes into play here because it may determine some vital learning ingredients such as learning facilities, infrastructure, number of teachers and the class size. The present researcher intends to assess how readable male and female students as well as urban and rural students find the different components of the language such as speech, reading comprehension, grammar and writing as they are contained in On y va! This is aimed at contributing to research in the direction of whether gender and location are related to competence in the named components.

Since the Junior Secondary School (JSS) III marks the end of the first half of the secondary school system, and is also the level when students have been exposed to the On y va! so much that they can give a reasonable assessment of how readable they find it, this exercise will focus on On y va! for JSS 3. With the reading age of eleven (11) using the Gunning "FOG" Readability Test (See Appendix F), and most of the students of JSS 3 in Nsukka Zone being above that age, it is supposed that the students will be able to read and comprehend it with ease. With its rich content as a whole, students at this level are expected to understand, speak, read and even write fairly good French. Unfortunately, most of the students of JSS 3 in Nsukka Zone are completely incapable of identifying or recognizing the simplest French words and expressions (Eze and Meniru, 2006). It is against this background that the researcher embarks on this study to examine the readability of the text in use in the Education Zone, the On y va!, with a view to contributing to the improvement of teaching and learning of French in the area.

Statement of the Problem

It is presumed that after being exposed to the teaching and learning of a language for two years one would be able to make oneself intelligible in the language, both in speech and in writing. Hence, it is disheartening to observe that the majority of the students in Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) 3 in Nsukka Education Zone cannot read or understand some of the commonest French words and expressions. This is more worrisome in the light of the fact that some of these students come from the former French language pilot schools in the area. These are schools that are reasonably equipped for French teaching and learning, where it is presumed that all the students have the recommended textbook, the On y va! and its workbook.

Besides, French teachers in the area are constantly complaining that their students find it very difficult to read the relevant textbooks and materials, and as a result are not learning. In fact, inability to read efficiently has always been an endemic educational problem. The problem needs solution, but it cannot be solved until one finds out why students perform poorly in reading even their textbooks. Given that there are teachers to guide the students, it is disheartening to observe that only 6 out of 53 public secondary schools in Nsukka Education Zone registered students for French language for the 2009/2010 Junior School Certificate Examination (JSCE). It can be assumed that the students' poor performance in reading may not be primarily because they lack interest and capability. The problem may, therefore, lie in the readability of the recommended French textbooks themselves. Therefore, the problem of the study, posed as a question, is: to what extent do the students of Junior Secondary School (JSS) in Nsukka Education Zone find the different sections of (On y va!) readable?

Purpose of the study

The general purpose of the study was to determine the readability of the prescribed French textbook, the On y va! for JSS 3, in Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State. Specifically, the study attempted to find out the;

Extent of ease of understanding of different sections of the text by the students of JSS 3 in Nsukka Zone.

Degree to which different sections of the text interest the students.

Legibility of the print of different sections of the book to the students.

Readability of different sections of the book by male and female students.

Readability of different sections of the text by urban and rural students.

Significance of the Study

The study promises some remarkable contributions to the teaching and learning of French in our secondary schools. It is the researcher's hope that the finding of this study will help the French language students, teachers, textbook writers, curriculum designers, examiners, researcher and readability specialists.

Theoretically, the study will be beneficial to researchers and readability scholars by throwing some light in the current controversy on whether the schema theory or the text-centred is the main determinant of a text's readability. As the study will adopt an eclectic approach to readability which comprises some elements of the two theories, it will demonstrate whether the text-centred theorists' insistence on coherence as the major readability indicator actually translates to comprehension or not, as well as whether the schema theorists' emphasis on the relationship between background knowledge and text readability is indeed indispensable.

Also, the study will expose the learners to the aspects of their text that are contributing to their apparent reading problem. This will help them to design their own strategies to make the best use of the text and improve their reading effectiveness. This approach will help the students in simplifying *On y va!* and in making it possible for them to enjoy more meaningfully the rich communicative exercises there-in, and in so doing, build up their own confidence in the study and mastery of the French language.

Besides, the study will equip the French teachers with the knowledge of how their students actually feel about the textbook they are using, the *On y va!* With this knowledge, the teachers will be on a proper pedestal to tackle the reading difficulties their students are facing with the book. The study will equally help to direct their attention to the aspects and sections of the book that the students are least comfortable with, and as a result, provide them with some helpful clues on how best to go about their lessons for maximum impact.

In addition, the study will inspire the authors of *On y va!* and other French textbook writers to review their books in a way that will make them more reader friendly. It will help them to address the readability of their books more objectively. They will also be equipped with some information that can form the basis for making decisions about grouping and sequencing of items and the kind of drills and exercises which the students would be presented to practice.

Moreover, the study will provide information on reading difficulties and readability problem of the recommended textbooks to curriculum designers. Such information can be built into the French language materials and syllabuses. With this, the job of the curriculum experts will be more comprehensive, objective and meaningful.

Furthermore, the study will be of immense benefit to French language examiners by making their work easier. For instance, if the students through the findings of this work get to read their text better and with ease, they are most likely going to listen and speak better, and read and write more effectively. With this improvement, the examiners will be saved the embarrassment, disappointment and frustration they normally face when students speak or read very poorly or even refuse to make any attempt during oral examination. Similarly, examiners will have their work made easier when the severity of the atrocious French that the students normally write is reduced.

Scope of the Study

This study was restricted to Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State. The zone has both urban and rural settings and houses two of the schools that were recently used for the Enugu State French Language Pilot School Scheme.

The study examined the extent of ease of understanding of different sections of *On y va!* by JSS III students. These sections are as follows: dialogues (on the first page of every unit), speech acts (on the second page of every unit), comprehension exercises (on the third and the seventh pages of every unit), grammatical structures (on the fourth and the fifth pages of every unit) and written exercises (on the last page of every unit). The study also found out the degree to which the different sections of the text interest the students. Besides,

it found out the extent of legibility of print of different sections of the textbook. It equally examined the readability of different sections of the text by male and female students, as well as by urban and rural students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

To what extent are different sections of On y va! easy to understand by JSS 3 students in Nsukka Education Zone?

To what degree do different sections of On y va! interest JSS 3 students?

How legible are the prints of different sections of On y va! to JSS 3 students?

To what extent are the different sections of On y va! readable by male and female students?

How readable are the different sections of On y va! by urban and rural JSS 3 students?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide this study. Each was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

HO1: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female JSS3 students on the readability of On y va!

HO2: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of urban and rural JSS3 students on the readability of On y va!

HO3: There is no significant interaction effect of gender and location on the mean scores of JSS3 students on the readability of On y va!

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