

PDF - EFFECT OF EXPOSURE TO FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE ON SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION - researchcub.info **ABSTRACT**

This study focussed on the Effect of Exposure to Figurative Language on Senior Secondary School Students' Achievement in English Reading Comprehension in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State. Three research questions and six null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. The study engaged quasi-experimental research design, otherwise known as pretest-posttest non-equivalent control group design involving two intact classes from each of the randomly selected schools. Two hundred and ninety-nine (299) Senior Secondary Class Two Students, comprising males and females exclusively from four schools located in urban and rural areas of the Education Zone served as subjects in the study. The experimental group was made up of one hundred and fifty-two (152) students, comprising 43 males and 47 females from urban; 26 males and 36 females from rural schools. In the control group of (147) students, 47 males and 45 females were from urban, and 25 males and 30 females were from rural. Each of the intact classes in each of the schools selected for the study through simple random sampling was also randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The instrument for data collection was the English Language Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (ERCAT) based on two reading prose passages. Five different lesson plans for the two groups with the same instructional objectives and questions but different teaching strategies were developed. Two reading passages one for pretest and the other for posttest were used for the assessment. An internal consistency reliability estimate of each of the reading passages was calculated using Cronbach Alpha at .84 and .91 for the pretest and posttest respectively. Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (W) Test was used to determine inter-rater reliability which yielded .51. Data obtained were calculated using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The results of the study indicated that the strategy of exposure to figurative language significantly enhanced achievement in reading comprehension more than the conventional method. Gender had no significant influence on the students' achievement while location significantly did. The interaction effect of gender and instructional strategy was not significant but there was significant interaction effect of instructional strategy and location. Again, the interaction effect of gender, location and instructional strategy was not significant. Following discussion on findings, the educational implications of the study were posited and recommendations made. Among others, English Language teachers should adopt the exposure strategy to figurative expressions as added alternative to the conventional method of vocabulary learning in reading comprehension. A stronger reading foundation should be laid right from pre-nursery to junior secondary school during which learners engage in extensive reading for more exposure to figurative expressions embedded in texts. The limitations of the study and suggestions for further research were given.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

English Language has become an invaluable legacy of the British colonial masters to Nigeria. The language has provided Nigerians with another means of expressing their culture. Before the British came into Nigeria, the country already had its many indigenous languages. One would have expected that with the attainment of Nigeria independence in 1960, the language referred to as the language of conquest and oppression would have been abolished (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999). On the contrary, the English Language has come to stay as the country's official and national language. Globally, English is recognized as a world language.

Language is understood as the particular set of speech norms of a particular community (Alesandrowicz-Pedich and Lazar, 2002). It is expressed using a set of symbols in form of letters or pictures which represent its sound system. According to Offorma (2009) language expression can be verbal or non-verbal to convey thoughts, feelings, and information. The way the information is conveyed would reveal that language operates within a systematic arrangement. Again, there are some elements or characteristics of language which one cannot easily explain or find reasons for (Schmitt, 2000). For instance, in English, the object called "house" is so called not on the basis of any rational explanation but that the English people have conventionally agreed to call it so, otherwise different languages would have had the same name to designate the same object. Therefore, no two languages express the same idea exactly the same way. This suggests that language learning is by imitation and that to be clear and acceptable one must use words and patterns of expression which people of the group understand and accept and which have the same meaning for the hearer as for the speaker (Alesandrowicz-Pedich and Lazar, 2002).

Every language is made up of four skills in their hierarchical order of acquisitions as follows: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The listening skill as the first of the four major language skills is the key and the gateway to language learning and it is very vital and fundamental in the process of language acquisition. The three other skills, speaking, reading and writing build upon it and are more or less dependent on it (Mgbodile, 1999). As the child consolidates his listening skill he moves into the speaking stage that will enable him join his speech community. Listening and speaking stages are termed natural stages because they are acquired without any formal learning. Long before the child learns to read, he has started to communicate. Reading is the extension of communication and it naturally builds upon listening and speaking skills already acquired. With practice and further exposure to reading materials children gradually learn to read at primary school and perfect their reading as they move higher to secondary school and higher institutions. Skills for reading aloud, silent reading, intensive, extensive and fast reading are then acquired. According to Agwu

(2003) and Nduka (2003) reading is an indispensable tool of learning at the various levels of education.

Reading is an active mental process through which the reader gets into the author's mind and comprehends his view –expressed and unexpressed – on a subject which is presented before him in the form of printed language. In other words, the reader is involved in both mental and emotional interaction with the author's ideas, processes these ideas in the light of his total experience past and present. In order to do this, the reader has to make speculations, think over, interpret, judge and evaluate all that the author has said. In comprehending what is read, mere understanding of sentences and language are not enough but the semantic (underlying meaning) and not the syntactic (sentence arrangement) content which is retained after reading. In other words, comprehension is an act or process of understanding the nature or meaning of something, the act or process of grasping with the mind (Alberto and Troutman, 2003). In the same vein, Nduka (2003) could be said to have lent support to the above view when he observed that comprehension, as it refers to reading, means getting meaning from what is perceived in writing. Perception here implies forming mental images and concepts generated by the written symbols (words). These images and concepts are not restricted to only the visible language symbols but extend far beyond to include ideas not directly represented by the symbols of the language. Basically, authors often use words perceptively to achieve special effects. Using language figuratively is one such use.

Figurative expressions are the expressive, non-literal use of language for special effects usually through images. Figurative language is one of the richest means of emotional communication and it is an indispensable tool for arousing the feelings of hearers or readers. It enriches literary writing as images and evocative expressions. According to Nwachukwu-Agbada (2001) the use of figurative language makes for conciseness in speech and writing. In other words, its use gives rise to economy of words, enhances clarification of meaning, provides vivid examples, stimulates associations and emotions and gives life to inanimate objects and ornaments. The kinds of figurative language people use stem from the underlying values and assumptions of their culture or society. A well understood metaphor in one culture may have an entirely different meaning in another culture. For example, the figurative meaning of different colours varies from one language group to another. According to Palmer and Brooks (2004) the conventional association in British English between the colour "green" to mean nature and innocence might not be the same for students in other cultures. Students ought to be aware of these associations in order to make sense of idiomatic usages like "to be green" (referring to the colour of a thing and "to have green fingers" which means "one good at making plants grow", as well as more literary uses of the colour green. The teacher's task is to sensitize students to the cultural significance obtainable to particular examples of figurative language in English, while encouraging them to compare the association with those

in their own language.

Figurative language is found both in literary and study-type reading materials. It is used in conversations too. Hence, it is part of every individual's cultural background. The embedded figurative language in a reading passage carries the culture of that language and the reading process involves recognition and handling of such cultural meanings (Dellicarpini, 2007). On the problem of recognizing and handling cultural meanings, Dellicarpini (2007) stated that because figurative expressions have become conventional components of everyday language, listeners and readers are unaware of the extent of the metaphorical nature of language. Some popular idioms, proverbs and metaphoric expressions are so deeply embedded into language that they are comprehended immediately when used in oral conversations without the individual knowing the initial, historical context of the word or phrase. But Batolva (2006) observed that despite the copious usage of figurative language in conversations, many readers struggle to interpret the language when it is encountered in a text. This inability to interpret the language leads to a breakdown in text comprehension which in turn can frustrate readers and discourage them from continuing the reading task.

Figures of speech are numerous but the most commonly used are metaphors, synecdoche, metonymy, personifications, idioms, proverbs and allusions (Palmer and Brooks, 2006). Other commonly known forms are hyperbole (overstatement), litotes (understatement), simile, which is a formal comparison of two things usually introduced by the words "like" or "as", and, irony. Metaphors on the other hand, provide direct comparisons between two things that are usually considered not similar. An important characteristic of one thing is used to describe another in a metaphor. For example, in the statement, "The child was a bolt of lightning," characteristics of lightning are associated with the child's quick movements.

Another important figure of speech in English Language is idiom. Idioms are defined as fixed phrases or sentences whose meanings are different from the meanings of the individual words (Baldeh, 2001). They form integral part of everyday colloquial speech of native speakers. For instance, idioms such as "making a mountain out of a molehill or burning the midnight oil" are expressions that do not mean what they literally say (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, and Hornish, 2004).

One may ask what implications these examples have for the teaching of figurative language. First, understanding figurative language involves a process of inference whereby the learner is able to comprehend that two things which do not normally collocate are being brought together. Understanding figurative language requires a deeper level of text comprehension, an understanding beyond the literal level using analytical and inferential skills. According to Fredricks (2006), analyzing figurative language for meaning is found to be complex and challenging for both native and nonnative English speakers. As a result, students' inability to grasp figurative language can lead to a breakdown in understanding key

points or even comprehending the passage as a whole. In the same vein, its being complex to understand can also cause difficulty in teaching particularly if students' prior exposure occurred in a dry, dull format with material that they could not relate to, thereby decreasing their incentives to learn. Therefore, two major tasks are needed to interpret figurative language. These are the ability to recognize figurative language and the ability to understand it. According to Batolva (2006), to recognize figurative language the reader should see if the writer used language that would not make good sense if taken literally; if he made a direct comparison; if the writer said that one thing is something else; if the writer exaggerated the comparison. To understand figurative language, students are expected to do the following: decide what things are being compared; think of the qualities that are characteristic of the figurative language; and, decide which of these qualities is appropriate to the context in which the figurative language is used. In reading for comprehension then, word recognition is not enough. Vocabulary knowledge is needed (Scarborough, 2001).

For English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, many factors have been known to influence reading negatively. These factors have been categorized into psychological, physical, environmental, pedagogical and linguistic. Generally, reading achievement can be hampered by psychological problems and physical defects ranging from general low intelligence leading to poor mental and perceptual ability; auditory defects which lead to poor auditory perception; eye defects, defects of the speech organs and emotional instability (Mgbodile, 1999). Also, studies have shown that Nigerian learners of English have poor reading habits which influence comprehension. These habits include pointing at words thereby delaying the fast movement of the eyes for fast reading; moving the head sideways along the line of print, thereby making reading tiring and boring; vocalization in which the reader pronounces words to oneself equating the speed of talking with the speed of reading; sub vocalization, in this case, the lips are not moved, the tongue and vocal cords are intact but a sort of inner speech is made to oneself; and, word by word reading which results in excessive word analysis (Nduka, 2003; Ikonta, 2005; and Offorma, 2009).

A variable considered important in reading skill is gender. Gender in this study is regarded as a cultural constraint which distinguishes the roles, behaviour, mental and emotional characteristics between males and females developed by a society (Azikiwe, 2005). A society in this regard is a group of individuals who share common interest and norms, living together in a particular geographic location (Nwafor, 2002). In language learning, especially reading, there have been controversial reports on gender performance. For instance, Akabogu (2002) and Marja (2008) recorded no gender difference in performance of male and female students in reading comprehension. Offorma (2001, 2009) reported that girls achieve more than boys in foreign language acquisition. On the other hand, Anizoba (2004) and Oluikpe (2004) also reported no significant influence of gender on the students' achievement in essay writing.

Closely related to the influence of gender on students' performance in reading

comprehension is location of the school. Differences in location imply the existence of differences in demographic and socio-economic parameters of the school. (Anizoba, 2004), Uwa (2005) and Adepoju (2008) observed that students in schools located in the urban area perform better in second language learning than those in schools located in the rural area. The observation was that schools in the urban centres had access to electricity which in turn attracted infrastructures like language laboratory, computers for computer based learning, well equipped school libraries, conducive classrooms and enough qualified English language teachers. On the contrary, schools located in the rural areas lack most of these amenities. So far studies carried out on the influence of location on reading comprehension have shown controversial results. For example, Ene (2002) and Akabogu (2002) reported that students in the urban area scored higher marks in reading comprehension than the students in the rural area. Okeke (2000) and Anizoba (2004) reported a no significant difference in achievement in reading comprehension of students from the urban and rural areas.

Closely related to location variable is a linguistic factor which influences reading comprehension among Nigerian students. This problem arises as a result of interference of the learners' mother tongue (MT) on the target language (TL). According to Uwa (2005), students who are used to the pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation patterns of their mother tongue before learning to read and write in a language which has different phonological, lexical and syntactical arrangements with their (MT), get in the printed material distorted thereby influencing the students' rate of comprehension (International Reading Association, 2001).

Unfortunately, students' performances in examinations conducted by examination bodies like West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) have been very poor in English language. Reading skill is at the centre of all the subjects offered in the school (Nduka, 2003). Therefore, failure in reading is failure in all the other subjects including the English language. For instance, WAEC'S statistical report on candidates' performance in English Language, May/June (2006-2008) showed very poor achievement. In May/June (2006), 32.48% obtained credit and above; in May/June (2007), 30.32% scored credit and above; in May/June (2008), 35.02% scored credit.

In the same examination, NECO's statistical presentation on candidates' performance in the same subject has not showed any improvement as one would expect with all that the computer age has to offer. In NECO June/July (2009), 25.99% candidates scored credit and above. In June/July (2010), 21.00% candidates scored credit and above; and in June/July (2011), 20.16% obtained credit and above (<http://www.neco.com>). The results so far presented call for urgent need to explore ways of making reading lessons effective in order to enhance students' achievement.

WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports on English Language Paper 1 sections B and C which

comprises Comprehension and Summary of passages have never attracted favourable commentary on students' performance for some years now. For instance, they expressed sadness that after six years in the secondary school and given a paper that conformed to standards, most candidates still performed very poorly (WAEC, 2008). According to the report, the candidates' expression was generally poor and the range of vocabulary knowledge so limited. In the reading comprehension and summary sections, candidates lost a lot of marks as a result of lifting seeming answers. The report indicated that many candidates were yet to understand the skills of reading comprehension one of which hinges on vocabulary recognition and vocabulary knowledge.

The Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) English Language Syllabus has revealed the WAEC and NECO objectives for setting comprehension questions. According to the objectives, it is expected that after six years in the secondary school, candidates should be able to do the following:

- Find appropriate equivalents for selected words and phrases;
 - Understand the factual content of a passage;
 - Make inferences from the content of the passages;
 - Respond to uses of English expressions to reveal, reflect sentiments, emotions and attitudes;
 - Identify and label basic grammatical structures, words, phrases or clauses, and explain their functions as they appear in the context;
 - Identify and explain basic literary terms and expressions;
 - Recast phrases or sentences into grammatical alternatives.

(WAEC 2004-2008:192-193)

Method of teaching the subject has been under severe criticism in recent time. In most Nigerian secondary schools the conventional method of teaching reading comprehension is teacher-oriented and not student-centred. It is patterned after the Audio-Lingual Method which often ends in habit formation. The learning theory underlying the (ALM) is the behavioural theory of stimulus-response which upholds that language, like much of human behaviour, takes the form of repeated responses to similar stimuli. In the adaptation of (ALM) to teaching reading comprehension in the classroom, the English teacher has often done the following: (i) sets out purposes for reading; (ii) builds background experience of the reading passage; and, (iii) teaches unfamiliar vocabulary through the use of the dictionary. The audio-lingual method of language teaching has been criticized for a number of reasons. For example, the method is seen as an all-teacher affair. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), learners are viewed as organisms that can be directed by skill training to produce correct responses such that teaching focusses on the external manifestations of learning rather than on the internal processes of learning. Learners play a reactive role by responding to stimuli.

On the contrary, a humanistic approach which centres on the schemata and meta-cognitivism have gained increasing prominence in English Language teaching and it has recognized the learner as a whole person who has analytic ability (Fredricks, 2006). The theory of constructivism on which this teaching strategy is based, states the nature of interaction between the cognitive processes resulting from the influence of prior experience, both social and cultural, on the reading passage as aids to comprehension if properly harnessed. This includes all the variables which may influence the meaning any reader can give to a text. Exposure to figurative language is discussion oriented. Recourse is made to first language association (Peregoy and Boyle, 2000; Fredricks, 2006). The use of the dictionary is encouraged so that learners can generate more metaphorical extensions of the target words. Exposure takes the form of teaching vocabularies in their context. The teacher adopts the following steps in exposing figurative language in a passage: (i) Categorizing language according to metaphorical propositions which may require act of "completion" from the readers whereby a "linkage" is established between the two elements being compared and linguistic inferences made (Lazar, 1996:47). For example, to what is "Love" compared to in the two verses below:

(a). Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs:

Being purg'd, a fire sparking in lover's tears:

A madness most discreet. (from Romeo and Juliet I.i.)

(b). Love is feeling cold in the back of vans.

Love is a fan club with only two fans.

Love is walking holding painstained hands. (from "Love is" by Adrian Henri in Mc Gough 1981:108)

The question can be "Which comparison in the verses above about "love" do you think is the most effective? and why?"

Figurative language can be taught by asking the students to list the literal qualities in a group of words in order to decode their figurative meanings in a text. The aim of the activities which follow is to help the learners grapple with the more sustained metaphors often found in certain texts such as humorous journalism, advertisements, poetry and other literary texts. For instance in the following words "peak", "mountain", "torrent", can you match each word with the definition that best explains its meaning?

1. a large amount of water that flows or falls very quickly
2. an extremely high hill that usually has steep sides
3. the pointed part of a mountain

The words defined have at least one other meaning which the students can find out.

According to Fredricks (2006) idioms and collocations with deeply entrenched metaphors create the most difficult problems for ESL readers as the embedded metaphors carry the culture of the second language. Unfortunately, many studies have not been carried out on the

extent to which figurative language can expand students' vocabulary for enhanced reading comprehension. Few works available have given credit to its usefulness to ESL learners. For instance, Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, and Leclere, (2006) observed that providing ESL students with explicit instruction in interpreting figurative language- a bridge to reading comprehension- is a significant goal for teachers who design instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse population. Lazar (1996) suggested using figurative language to expand students' vocabulary. Fredricks (2006) identified it as an aspect of vocabulary difficult to teach. In the present study, the researcher has attempted to investigate whether exposure to figurative language will have any effect on the achievement of senior secondary school students in English reading comprehension.

Statement of the Problem

There have been consistent reports of poor achievement in English Language among Nigerian students over the years. Also, results on students' performance in Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) in English Language over the years have not been commendable. Failure in this subject area has often been attributed to the methods and strategies of teaching the reading skill which is the core of the school curriculum. Another observation made is the limited vocabulary which ESL students have. Previous reports from WAEC Chief Examiners noted that in reading comprehension section, most candidates usually exhibited poor understanding by giving the surface meaning of the passage, lacking the ability to read between the lines or draw inferences. The reports also added that most candidates performed poorly in questions testing figures of speech and concluded that all these pitfalls pointed to the fact that the candidates were not adequately prepared for the examination by the schools. The conventional method of teaching reading comprehension has been found to have some limitations, one of which is that it is teacher-centred instead of learner-centred.

Therefore, considering the need to improve students' performance in reading comprehension, the present study attempted to investigate the effect which exposure to figurative language would have on senior secondary school students' achievement in reading comprehension. Put in question form, the problem of the study was: What will be the effect of exposure to figurative language on senior secondary school students' attitude and achievement in English reading comprehension?

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to determine the effect of exposure to figurative language on senior secondary school students' achievement in English reading comprehension. Specifically, the study set out to determine:

1. the achievement of senior secondary school students exposed to figurative language in English reading comprehension and those taught using the conventional method.
2. the influence of gender on the achievement of senior secondary school students exposed

to figurative language in English reading comprehension.

3. the influence of school location on the achievement of senior secondary school students exposed to figurative language in English reading comprehension.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to be beneficial to English Language teachers, students, curriculum planners, course book writers, the Government and stakeholders in education. Teachers of English will see the need to teach figurative language as a special aspect of vocabulary in English reading passages for enhanced comprehension. Basically, English writers often use words figuratively to achieve special effects. The strategy is expected to encourage students to make use of standard dictionaries to generate more figurative extensions of words for increased vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary use. Recourse made to the students' schema through association with their first language provides a stress-free and friendly classroom that promotes learning.

Theoretically, this study recognized that reading comprehension has moved from a mere behavioural perspective to a cognitive developmental and socially constructed task that goes beyond understanding the words in a page. The teaching strategy is found to encourage successful discussion among groups in the class. The teacher is the facilitator and the learning situation is students' – centred for impactful output. The discussion during reading is expected to promote higher level thinking opportunities which aids the students to make critical and aesthetic contributions on the text. Students are able to also generate new ideas and questions. Empirically, the study has provided evidence that exposure to figurative language increases vocabulary knowledge which goes beyond the literal knowledge of words to inferential and analytic levels that promote reading comprehension. Students' mental capacity is sharpened which leads to creativity transferred to novel situations during extensive reading.

In the same vein, textbook writers will be able to carry out a thorough review of the existing reading section in English textbooks in order to incorporate and organize linguistic activities which can give the learner more opportunities to process language at a deeper level. There will be the need to integrate culturally based linguistic differences that can promote understanding among students.

The result of this study is expected to sensitize the Government and Stakeholders in education on the need to organize seminars and workshops for English teachers who are already in the field about the new strategy. Finally, educational researches bring innovations to teaching and learning. Hence, the present study is an added resource material for educational purposes as well as reference material for further research.

Scope of the Study

The present study is delimited to the effect of exposure to figurative language on senior secondary students' achievement in English reading comprehension in Anambra State. For

content coverage, two reading prose passages of WAEC equivalent were selected from Senior Secondary School Students' English Project written by Grant, N., Nnamonu, S., and Jowitt, D. (2002).

The questions from the reading passages elicited students' knowledge in the six process objectives on knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Wheeler, 1979). The variables of gender and location on the teaching strategy were considered too.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the difference in the mean achievement in English reading comprehension of senior secondary school students exposed to figurative language and those taught using the conventional method?
2. What is the difference in the mean achievement between male and female students exposed to figurative language in English reading comprehension?
3. What is the difference in the mean achievement in English reading comprehension of senior secondary school students from urban and rural location exposed to figurative language?

EFFECT OF EXPOSURE TO FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE ON SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION

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