

Impact of Topic of Interest on Secondary School Students' Performance in Reading Comprehension in Taraba State Nigeria

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Abstract: This research examines the impact; topic of interest has on students' performance in reading comprehension among SS II students in Jalingo Education Zone of Taraba State, Nigeria. Two research objectives were formulated which led to the answering and testing of two research questions and hypotheses at .05 level of significance. The design for the study is descriptive research design. The population of the study is 2,847 Senior Secondary School Two from 19 public secondary schools. Multistage sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 240 SS II students. Two instruments were adapted for data collection; Topic Interest Inventory (TII) and Reading Comprehension Performance Test (RECP). Findings of the study revealed that there is significant difference in the mean difference scores of students who read topic of high interest ($F(2,231) = 119.43, P = 0.000$) and also there is significant difference in the mean performance scores in reading comprehension of high and low ability students who read topics of high interest ($t.cal = 9.91 > t.cri. 1.91$ at $P > 0.05$). It is concluded that; topic of interest should be used by the reading teacher to enhance students' reading comprehension performance. Seminars, symposiums, workshops and conferences be organized to equip English language teachers with the strategy and approach of topic of high interest in reading comprehension.

Keywords: Interest, Topic of Interest, Reading Comprehension, Academic Performance, ability.

Introduction

In a classroom, students come from various backgrounds with differing abilities. Some students are of high ability while some are of low ability. For learning to be meaningful, texts should cover a wide range of reading interests for all reading levels. Harackiewicz (2016) stated that interest is a powerful motivational process that energizes learning and guides academic and career trajectories and is essential to academic success. Interest is the degree of likeness an individual has for something such as activity, person or situation (Giggin 2013). It concerns the individual's preference for a particular type of ability. In other words, the more a person is interested in a subject, the more effort he will put into it. He further described an interested person as being engaged, engrossed or entirely taken up by an activity because of its recognized worth. If a child has interest in watching a particular programme on the television, he/she watches it whether the stomach is empty or not. This is to say that interest facilitates learning, improves understanding and stimulates effort and personal involvement. Interest is a strong

factor in the teaching and learning of English Language (Chi and Hao 2013). This calls for teachers to provide interesting texts to encourage students to love reading thereby developing a reading culture.

Romina et.al (2024) posit that the ability to read is essential for everyday life and academic success. The most essential skill in English Language is reading ability, which every learner must master, as it serves as the gateway to knowledge and information. All other subjects learned in school require reading as a prerequisite, making it an indispensable skill for any student. A strong foundation in reading is very important. It will lead to better understanding of academic materials, improved critical thinking skills, and higher academic performance. However, many students struggle with reading comprehension, and this affect their academic progress negatively. It is therefore, the duty of the reading teacher to provide materials in form of texts that contain interesting topics for students in a reading class.

Topic of interest is a feeling that accompanies or arouses special attention to a particular topic or subject matter. There are several attributes of interesting topics. Jude and Ajayi (2012) observe that topics that deal with personally relevant issues are more likely to be deemed interesting. Books that meet the interests of students include those that will delight them or those that will not destroy pleasure, predictable books, they are easy to read and include repetitions. According to Erik and Jackson (2013), an interesting topic is characterized by novelty and surprise. High interest topics have more action-oriented verbs, unfamiliar characters and surprise endings, while low interest texts have fewer active verbs, more characters that are familiar and more common endings. Topic of interest and performance in reading are inextricably linked (Owolabi, 2012). A text that is within a reader's interest and experience will, therefore, be easily comprehensible than one which he/she has low interest in. Babikkoi, Abdul-Razak and Sulaiman (2012 p. 222) maintain that "it is easier for the learner to retrieve from a text whose contents are of interest to him/her compared to the ones he/she has less interest." This implies that teachers should use topic of high interest to motivate students to read during reading comprehension lessons. On the other hand, low interest in a text will almost lead to a total lack of comprehension no matter the simplicity of the language of a text (Owolabi 2012). This is an indication that a learner is excited about reading and attempts to contribute if the reading text is in his/her area of interest.

In the secondary schools, reading comprehension is taught as an aspect of English Language where students are expected to read passages and answer comprehension questions on the various components of English Language such as grammatical names and function, synonyms (replacing of words in sentences), interpreting figurative and idiomatic expressions. A student that cannot read independently will find it difficult to answer such questions. Reading is one of the greatest essential skills for learning and for professional success. Students need this all-important skill for their personal development and academic breakthrough (Odusina and Oloniruha 2020). Proficiency in reading will enable learners perform better in their various school subjects because they will need to read their various courses in order to make progress academically. Reading comprehension is the construction of meaning by a student who is the interpreter of the text (McLaughlin 2012). The content of that meaning is influenced by the student's prior knowledge and experience and consists of the student's thinking processes and intentional problem solving process. Enyi and Ereke (2011) support this claim by defining comprehension as relating new experience to the already known. This also includes the understanding of language as used in the text, reading skills and the reader's familiarity with concepts presented in the text. Reading with comprehension remains one of the most important ways to connect with people and to make sense of the world and attain a better academic performance.

Osemwinyen (2009) posits that academic performance is the gain in knowledge of students as a result of participating in a learning programme. Saka and Ibrahim (2022) describe academic performance as the level of actual accomplishment or proficiency one has achieved in an academic area as opposed to one's potential in the educational goals measured by examination.

In the words of Spinath and Birgit (2012) performance refers to the student's present academic skills, while Onah (2015) sees performance as a thing that somebody has done successfully especially using effort and skill. Thus, performance can be considered as one reaching a height he/she has never attained before. By implication, when texts are interesting to students, there can be high academic performance for both low and high ability students.

There is evidence that the influence of topic of interest on performance in reading comprehension is determined largely by students' ability levels (Lahuerta, 2012). He further posits that the effect is more on low ability readers than their counterparts with high reading ability. Thus, low ability readers become more frustrated when the topic does not interest them. This could be responsible for students' perpetual poor performance in reading comprehension of the private candidates who wrote the 2017 Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) with credits in English, representing a sharp drop in the results recorded in 2016 (Adedigba 2017). Poor academic performance of students may be linked to many factors, of which lack of reading text according to topic of interest may be one (Ay and Barten 2012). The trend is not different in Taraba State as experiences with secondary school students over the years show that majority of them perform less than average in their performance test, class examinations and even in their Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations, especially in English Language. This study therefore aims at finding out if reading texts based on topics of interest in reading comprehension could be used to enhance students' performance in English Language.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of the fact that reading is critical for development of individuals, communities and nations, it is disheartening to note that some students do not possess the interest to read independently. This consequently affects their performance in reading proficiency. In the past, many scholars and researchers advanced various remedies to students' poor performance in reading. However, such remedies have yielded little results as students' performance in reading comprehension and other subjects have continued to decline. It becomes imperative therefore, to find alternative ways of helping the students become proficient readers who also love to read. This study seeks to find out if topics of interest can impact students' performances in reading comprehension in Taraba State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to give direction to this study:

1. What is the impact of topics of interest on students' performance in reading comprehension?
2. What is the difference in the mean performance scores in reading comprehension of high and low ability students who read topics of high interest?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study and were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

HO₁ There is no significant impact of topics of interest on students' performance in reading comprehension.

HO₂ There is no significant difference in the mean performance scores of high and low ability students who read topics of high interest.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design for this study is descriptive survey research design. The reason for using descriptive design is that variables in the study are merely described at a particular time (Dokumbo & Dokumbo, 2016). The population for this study is 2,847 Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students from the 19 Public Secondary Schools in Jalingo Education Zone with 2,078 male and 769 female students as at the time of this research. The sample size of this study is 240 SSII students made up of one hundred and twenty (120) male and one hundred and twenty

female students (120) drawn from four public secondary schools in Jalingo and Ardkola Local Government Areas in Taraba State. The sampling technique adopted was Multistage sampling technique and as such the sample for the study was selected at different stages. The students were randomly selected from the four classes that were used for the study. There were two instruments adapted from previous researches by the researchers for data collection for the study namely: Topic Interest Inventory (TII) and Reading Comprehension Performance Test (RECPT).

Data Analysis

The data collected for this study was subjected to analysis at two different levels; descriptive and inferential statistical levels. At the descriptive level, the descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used in order to respond to the research questions. Descriptive statistics present quantitative description of large amount of data into a simple and sensible way, to arrive at a meaningful summary that may enable comparison across people (Kaur and Yellapu, 2018). Hence, the descriptive statistics are considered appropriate to answer the research questions in this study. At the inferential level, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test hypothesis one while t-test was used to test hypotheses two at 0.05 level of significance. Descriptive statistical techniques of Mean and Standard Deviation were presented using tables as follows.

Research question one

What is the impact of topics of interest on students' performance in reading comprehension?

Table 1. Mean achievement scores and standard deviations of influence of topics of interest on students' performance in reading comprehension

Group	N	Mean	std. dev	difference
high interest	80	59.05	11.91	
low interest	80	33.06	11.23	25.99
neutral	80	31.40	14.49	1.66

Source: Field survey 2021

The result shows that students with high interest on topics have mean scores of 59.05 with standard deviation of 11.91, while those with low interest on topics have mean score of 33.06 with standard deviation of 11.23 (Table 1). Students that are neutral have mean score 31.40 and standard deviation of 14.49. The mean scores indicate that students that have high interest in topics have the higher mean score than those with low interest. The standard deviation scores indicate that the scores of students with high and low interest are more closely related than their counterparts who are neutral. The difference in mean scores between students with the high interest and low interest is 25.99, while the difference between low interest and neutral is 1.66. This means that topic of high interest has impact on Secondary School Students' performance in reading comprehension.

Research Questions two

What is the difference in the mean performance scores in reading comprehension of high and low ability students who read topics of high interest?

Table 2. Mean performance scores of high and low ability students who read topics of high

Ability level	N	Mean	Std. Dev
high ability	64	63.47	8.29
low ability	16	41.38	6.48
Mean diff		22.09	

Field survey 2021

Results show that students in the high ability level who read topics of high interest had achievement mean score of 63.47 with standard deviation of 8.29, as against their low ability counterparts who had achievement mean score of 41.38 with standard deviation of 6.48 (Table 2 above). The standard deviation scores show that the scores of students in the low ability level are more homogeneous than those in the high ability level. There is a difference of 22.09 between the achievement mean scores of the high and low ability students who read topics in which they have high interest, and this interest is in favour of the high ability students.

Hypothesis one

Reading topics of interest has no significant impact on students' performance in reading comprehension?

Table 3. One-way ANOVA of the impact of reading topics of interest on students' performance

Sources of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Between groups	37714.04	2	18857.02	119.43	0.00
Within groups	36157.96	229	157.89	73.49	
Total	73872.00	231			

Hypothesis two

There is no significant difference in the mean performance scores in reading comprehension of high and low ability students who read topics of high interest

Table 4. t-test analysis of mean performance scores in reading comprehension of high and low ability students who read topics of high interest.

ability level	N	Mean	SD	df	t _{cal}	t _{crit}	Decision
high	64	63.47	8.29				
				78	9.91	1.96	S
low	16	41.38	6.48	D			

Results from Table 5 revealed that difference in the mean performance score of high and low ability students who read topic of high interest is significant in favour of the high ability students. This is shown by the calculated t-value of 9.91 which is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96 at $P < .05$. Thus, the hypothesis of no significant difference in the high and low ability students' mean performance score is therefore rejected. That is, the mean difference in the mean scores of high and low ability students is significant to have any appreciable impact on their performance level. From Table 6, the mean performance score is in favour of High ability students.

Discussion of Findings

Discussion of findings is based on the variables of the study as guided by the findings of the hypotheses.

Impact of Topic of Interest on students' Performance in Reading Comprehension

The findings revealed that there is significant impact of topic of interest on students' performance in reading comprehension as evident in the mean performance scores of the students. Students who are neutral scored 31.40 and students with low interest in topics they read

had scored (33.06) compared to the score of those who had high interest in the topics (59.05). The results lend credence to Ay and Bartan (2012), Moudumogu and Terwase (2016), who investigated topic interest on students' achievement in reading comprehension. The result of their studies showed that topic of interest significantly impacts students' performance in reading comprehension. Guthrie and Klauda (2014), observed that when students have high interest in what they read, they process the materials more deeply, gain richer conceptual understanding and engage more fully in the text.

Similarly, this finding confirms Dewey's (1913) interest in learning theory that when a learner is genuinely interested in something, he or she will automatically be motivated to engage in activities that allow him or her to learn more about it. This implies that learners will not pay attention to any learning experience that does not take their interest into consideration. The result however, contrast with Brantmeier (2004). In examining topic familiarity levels and comprehension of University male and female second language readers using two different violence-oriented texts, Brantmeier reported that male and female readers indicated being equally familiar with violence-oriented content of the target culture. The analysis pointed to the fact that students with high interest in topics had the highest mean score than those with low interest. This is pointing to the fact that teachers need to motivate learners to develop interest in reading by giving opportunity to students to read topics of their high interest rather than topics in which they have low interest in or neutral topics given by the English Language Teacher. This will enhance reading comprehension performance greatly.

Reading Comprehension of High and low Ability Students in Topic of High Interest

The findings revealed that there is significant difference in the mean performance scores in reading comprehension of high and low ability students who read topic of high interest. Based on the scores of the students who read topic of high interest and scored 50% and above with students who read topic of high interest yet scored 49-1%, the result of this study indicates that students in the high ability level who read topics of high interest had higher performance scores than their counterparts with low ability level. The difference in the performance scores of high and low ability students was statistically significant. This finding agrees with Warapon (2008), Muodumogu and Unwaha (2013), who found that effect of topic interest was more on high ability readers than low ability readers. This is probably because high ability readers are more able to apply reading comprehension strategies than their counterparts who do not. The finding of this study is appropriate because the high interest of low ability students' in topics cannot automatically result in high performance since they have reading difficulties and cannot easily comprehend the written or printed words. Teachers therefore should consider low ability students, to select materials that match their levels and interest so as to bridge the gap between high and low ability students.

Conclusion

It is evident from the findings of this study that the use of topic of high interest during reading comprehension lessons can impact students' performance in reading comprehension positively. Since students' performance is the main aim of teaching English (Reading comprehension), greater consideration needs to be given to strategies that will enhance the effective teaching and learning of the subject such as the use of Topic of High Interest as a teaching strategy in Reading comprehension. This will make students to develop the passion to read and subsequently will comprehend what they read and as such, improve their performance in Reading comprehension.

Recommendations

The implication of the results of this study and the associated recommendations as it borders on performance in Reading comprehension are as follows:

1. School Administrators should organize seminars and workshops for English Language teachers in Secondary Schools so they could be equipped with the strategy or approach of using Topics of High Interest during Reading comprehension.
2. English language teachers should use Topic of high interest strategy to improve the academic performance of students in Reading Comprehension. This can start by the use of Topic Interest Inventory to each student in the class, group them based on their topic of high interest and during reading comprehension lesson, provide them with materials or passages of their interesting topics to read. This will further arouse their interest in reading which may sustain a reading culture and will aid their performance in reading comprehension.

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