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**ASSESSING READING-COMPREHENSION PROFICIENCY:**

**A CASE STUDY OF L2 IGBO LEARNERS IN NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY**

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**Abstract**

Second language acquisition investigates how people attain proficiency in a language that is not their mother tongue. Proficiency concerns an individual’s competence in using a specific language. This paper assesses the language ability of someL2 Igbolearners of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, to ascertain their level of proficiency with respect to reading-comprehension. Twenty (20) L2Igbo learners who had completed the Basic Igbo Studies I and II courses participated in the study. The means of assessing the reading-comprehension proficiency involved a method that requires that the participants read a summarized extract from the Igbo novel titled *AHA M BU̩ NỌNSO* and further expressed their comprehension of the main ideas from the text. The findings of the study show that greater percentage of the participants lack reading-comprehension ability while an insignificant number had the ability to read and comprehend the text. The study suggests that second language teachers should regularly involve L2 Igbo learners in read aloud sessions in order to reinforce pronunciation, increase reading speed and foster reading-comprehension.

**Keywords: Assessment, Reading-comprehension and Second Language Learning**

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**1.0 Introduction**

In language teaching, one of the main aims is that the language learners develop the ability to read and comprehend. Effective reading is fundamental for acquiring success in a second language. Reading is one of the four main skills in language learning. Reading comprehension is the process of making meaning from text in order to gain an understanding of what is described in the text rather than to obtain meaning from isolated words or sentences. (Woolley 2011:15)

For Grabe (2009) reading comprehension is an interaction between the reader and the text. The interaction involves the abilities to recognize words rapidly and efficiently, process sentences in order to build comprehension, engage underlying cognitive skills, interpret meaning in relation to background knowledge etc. According to Woolley (2011), difficulties in reading comprehension may be related to biological, cognitive or behavioral issues. On the other hand, factors such as lack of proficiency and problems within the text can affect the readers’ ability to comprehend the text.

Clarke (1979) argues that reading comprehension ability in a second language is largely a function of proficiency in the second language. In addition, it is believed that higher level strategies developed in a first language can be transferred to a second language to facilitate reading comprehension.

In second language acquisition, reading comprehension helps learners to achieve progress in the target language. Moreover, reading comprehension gives room to the interpretation of written text by student, an exercise which also contribute to their making sense of the world around them. Oral reading is also effective in second language acquisition because it improves reading and word recognition.

In view of the above, this paper attempts to investigate reading comprehension of someL2Igbo learners in Nnamdi Azikiwe University. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on the topic section 3 presents the methodology. In section 4 the data collected is analyzed while section 5 summarizes and concludes the study. The next section shall go into elucidating some terms associated with the present study beginning with the concept of assessment.

**2.0 Conceptual review**

The term language assessment is used in free variation with language testing although it is also used somewhat more widely to include for example classroom testing for learning and institutional examinations. According to Chapelle and Bridley (2002), assessment refers to the act of collecting information and making judgments about a language learner’s knowledge of a language and ability to use it.

Assessment plays an important role in the field of linguistics. It allows teachers make important decisions regarding the proficiency, placement, and achievement of second language learners. In addition, assessment assists in making diagnostic decisions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of particular students. For instance, Mewald and Wallner (2015) conducted an assessment of young learners of English as a foreign language in Australia which aimed at evaluating the current abilities of the learners to enable their teachers know how to plan and guide their teaching. In assessing the proficiency of second language learners, tests such as criterion and norm referenced tests are used depending on the objective of the evaluation.

Criterion-referenced tests compare all the testers to a predetermined criterion. In such tests everybody whose achievement comes up to the pre-set criterion will receive a pass mark, while those under it will fail. The criteria are often set in terms of tasks that students have to be able to perform (e.g. to interact with an interlocutor with ease; to ask for information and understand instructions). In norm-referenced tests, candidates’ performance is assessed in comparison with that of the other candidates. For these reasons the cut-off points (line between fail and pass) are determined after the test results are obtained from the group of students based on the distribution of the scores .Here a class of students with the same intelligence quotient is often tested using someone who is also a member of that class as the norm or reference.

Broadfoot (2007) identifies some reasons for educational assessment. These reasons include; assessment for curriculum (providing information and motivating learners), Assessment for communication (informing certification and selection) and assessment for accountability (publicly demonstrating achievement of outcomes). Brindley and Chapelle (2002) opine that the distinction that has been made is between ‘proficiency assessment and achievement assessment is that the former is concerned with measuring a person’s general ability for selection decisions while the later focuses on determining what has been learned as part of a specific programme of instruction.

Reading-comprehension which is another concept used in the present study is vital in second language acquisition as it contributes to academic achievement. For Iwai (2010) Reading-comprehension involves the passage, readers and the content. Iwai (2010) further notes that readers also construct meaning with such approaches as background knowledge, inferring the text, identifying key vocabulary or information and analyzing words. Besides, Thiele (2014) asserts that learners have difficulty achieving academically if they are unable to comprehend what they read. According to Carrel and Grabe (2013) comprehension ability of L2 readers can be affected by limited linguistic knowledge, lack of cultural and social knowledge pertaining to the language context, inability to retain prior knowledge and reasons behind studying the language such as pursuing a degree. Grabe (2009) suggests that strategies such as using background knowledge, making inferences, picking isolated meaning of words are usually employed by second language learners in their effort to comprehend what they read.

Stanovich (1980) asserts that readers make up for their insufficient understanding of messages by using either bottom-up or top-down approaches. The former approach involves processes whereby readers focus on letters, sound syllables, words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs while the latter approach involves readers focusing the whole text and looking for key information through prior knowledge activation and compensating for meanings of unknown vocabulary. Thiele (2014) opines that the use of Meta cognition influences reading comprehension. Meta cognition entails ability of the students to take control of their learning through defining their learning goals and monitoring progress in achieving the set goals.

Second language acquisition usually referred to as L2 acquisition covers the acquisition of languages which are not the learner’s first language. It generally refers to the process of learning any language other than the first language. Carrell and Grabe (2013) explain that because reading can be done for various purposes, there is a variance in the cognitive processes used in decoding what is read. They provide a number of purposes for reading such as scanning, skimming, reading for general understanding, reading to learn, reading to integrate information and reading to evaluate critically. With regard to reading for understanding among second language learners, Carrell and Grabe (2013) opine that the process requires visual and semantic processing and the construction of the summary version of what the text means.

**Empirical review**

Thiele (2014) examines the link between oral reading and comprehension for second language learners. The study which is based on general observation without reference to a particular group of learners submits that such factors as teacher’s and student’s reading aloud, parent involvement in reading, reading for pleasure among others are potential enhancers of comprehension of written texts. The study avers that comprehension is the aim of reading and advocates for the inculcation of these behaviors to enhance reading comprehension of SLL.

Pasquarella (2007) accounts for the relation between ready comprehension, decoding, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension strategies in adolescents either learning English as their L1 or L2. The study also compares models of English L2 reading comprehension to English L1 reading. The study involved 109 students, out of which 55 had English as their L1. The study affirms that the reading skills of English L2 students are significantly lower than their English L1 peers furthermore the study discovers that for both L1 and L2 groups, such variable as measures of decoding, vocabulary, working memory etc are related to reading comprehension.

Cromley (2005) conducts a study to measure the various components of academic reading comprehension for students with the aim of examining the reading processes of the students using standardized measures. The method used in caring out the study involved the student’s thinking aloud while reading. The author observes with respect to the think aloud, that participants who expressed difficulty with vocabulary also had difficulty with accurately summarizing what they have read. The study also avers that background knowledge were activated by participants in their bid to summarize what they have read and also notes that where the wrong background knowledge was activated, the participant encountered difficulty in accurately summarizing what have been read.

The present study departs from the previous ones by evaluating the reading-comprehension proficiency of undergraduate students from different linguistic backgrounds learning Igbo as a second language in a Nigerian university domiciled in the South-East.

**3.0 Methodology**

A summary of the novel *Aham bụ Nonso* formed the research material. Twenty (20) participants from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, comprising 8 male and 12 female students drawn from ethnic groups other than Igbo formed the study population. These participants were 100 level undergraduates who registered in the Basic Igbo Studies (GS 109) special class for non-Igbo speakers in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. The novel was used in the Basic Igbo studies II (GS 109 ) course which the participants studied in their first year. This study was conducted in the second semester of 2015/2016 academic session. The participants actual places of residence include Akwa Ibom, Benue, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun and Oyo states of Nigeria.

The summary of the novel which was about 80 words long begins by stating the identity of the protagonist Nonso, the qualities of Nonso and further illustrates the author’s perception concerning the attributes of Nonso. Ten main ideas were expressed in the summarized text. The researchers administered the summarized extract to the participants in three different contacts. Each participant was asked to read silently and then report what s/he made out of the Igbo text in writing using the English language. This method of rewriting was used to measure the comprehension of the participants. The participants’ written works were scored on the basis of one point for each correct idea expressed. The checklist developed by the researchers guided the scoring.

The language background of the twenty (20) learners of Igbo as a second language which formed the research population are summarized below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Language group** | **Number of participants** |
| Yoruboid | 4 |
| Edoid | 4 |
| Lower/Upper Cross River | 7 |
| Idomoid/Tivoid | 3 |
| Igboid | 1 |
| Central Plateau | 1 |
| **TOTAL** **6** | **20** |

The language background of the respondents shows that they came from six different language areas in Nigeria other than Igbo. The Yoruboid and Edoid groups had 4 participants each; while the Yoruboid group had only speakers of the main language in the group (*Yoruba*), the Edoid group had one *Edo* and three *Urhobo* speakers. The Cross River group had 7 participants which is the majority in the sample, and this group consists of four languages as follows: *Efik* (2 participants), *Ibibio* (2 participants), *Annang* (1 participant) and *Ejegam* (2 participants). The other groups are Idomoid/Tivoid with participants from three linguistic groups consisting of Etulo (3 participants). Igede (2 participants), and *Tiv* (3 participants), Igboid group with a sole participant from *Ukwuani*, and Central Plateau with a sole participant from *Ikulu*. Obviously, there is a discrepancy in the number of participants from the different linguistic groups; this is accounted for by the availability of participants. In keeping with ethics, the participants agreed with the researchers to use only their first names in the data to ensure anonymity.

**4.0 Data Analysis and Discussion**

As earlier indicated in the methodology, ten main ideas were expressed in the summarized extract of the Igbo novel *Aham bu Nọnso*. The notions expressed include the identity of Nọnso, his age, his character, teachers and pupils’ perceptions of Nọnso’s qualities which include neatness, civility, fun-loving, passion for reading, dutiful, show of respect and joviality. Below is presented, the participants, their first language and the number of ideas registered for each.

**Yoruboid Language Participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants** | **First language** | **Number of Main ideas expressed** | **%** |
| Ajayi | Yoruba | 2 | 20.0% |
| Abiodun | Yoruba | 6 | 60.0% |
| Daniella | Yoruba | 3 | 30.0% |
| Tijani | Yoruba | 2 | 20.0% |

The data reveals a discrepancy in the comprehension proficiency of the participants. Out of the ten ideas, only one participant (Abiodun) recorded a good score 60.0% which is an indication of a fair understanding of the reading text.. The majority of participants scored less than the average which is a suggestion of low understanding of the reading text. In sum, the result shows a low score among the Yoruboid group of participants.

**Edoid Language Participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants** | **First language** | **Number of Main ideas expressed** | **%** |
| Akpomuode | Urhobo | 5 | 50.0% |
| David | Urhobo | 1 | 10.0% |
| Ojemro | Urhobo | 4 | 40.0% |
| Arhebamnem | Edo | 3 | 30.0% |

The data reveals a discrepancy in the comprehension proficiency of the participants. Out of the ten ideas, only one participant (Akpomuode) recorded an average score 50.0% indicating a fair understanding of the reading text. The majority scored less than the average which is a suggestion of low understanding of the reading text. In sum, the result indicates a low score among the Edoid group of participants.

**Lower/Upper Cross River Language Participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants** | **First language** | **Number of Main ideas expressed** | **%** |
| Idiongesit | Efik | 4 | 40.0% |
| Umoh | Efik | 2 | 20.0% |
| Ndarake | Ibibio | 4 | 40.0% |
| Henshaw | Ibibio | 4 | 40.0% |
| Nsikak-Abasi | Annang | 4 | 40.0% |
| Godseal | Ejegam | 4 | 40.0% |
| Bennedict | Ejegam | 9 | 90.0% |

The data reveals a slight discrepancy in the comprehension proficiency of the participants. Out of the ten ideas, only one participant (Bennedict) recorded a high proficiency score 90.0% which is an indication of very high understanding of the text.. The majority scored less than the average which is a suggestion of low understanding of the reading text. In sum, this result is an index of low score among the lower/upper cross river language participants. This result is marked because it is expected that, being geographically close to Igbo land and people, this linguistic group ought to register a higher understanding of the text.

**Idomoid/Tivoid language Participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants** | **First language** | **Number of Main ideas expressed** | **%** |
| Audu | Etulo | 3 | 30.0% |
| Okache | Igede | 2 | 20.0% |
| Ukahah | Tiv | 3 | 30.0% |

The data reveals symmetry in the comprehension proficiency of the participants. Out of the ten ideas, none of the participants recorded average score of 50.0% indicating a very low comprehension proficiency. All the participants scored less than the average which is a suggestion of low understanding of the reading text. In sum, the result apparently shows a low score among the Idomoid/Tivoid language participants.

**Igboid Language Participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants** | **First language** | **Number of Main ideas expressed** | **%** |
| Ugbome | Ukwuani | 8 | 80.0% |

The data reveals a high result in the comprehension proficiency of the sole participant. Out of the ten ideas, the sole participant (Ugbome) recorded a high score 80.0% indicating high proficiency which is an indication of high understanding of the text. In sum, the result shows a high score among the Igboid group of participants. This is an unmarked result because the sole participant is Igboid, although not Igbo. It is expected that this participant should have a better understanding of the Igbo text than other language groups.

**Central Plateau language Participants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants** | **First language** | **Number of Main ideas expressed** | **%** |
| Peace | Ikulu | 8 | 80.0% |

The data reveals a high result in the comprehension proficiency of the sole participant. Out of the ten ideas, the sole participant (Peace) recorded a high score 80.0% indicating high proficiency which is an indication of high understanding of the text. In sum, the result shows a high score among the central plateau language participant. This is a marked result given that the sole participant is from a remote language group that shares n similarity with Igbo, and geographically beyond the frontiers of Igbo land.

The summary of points with respect to the expression of main ideas reveal that 75% of the participants expressed less than five main ideas contained in the text while 25% expressed from five to ten main ideas comprehended from the text they read. An observation from the written report of the participant showed that they made use of the knowledge of the main text without resorting to the summarized version. Others made sense of the text by picking the meaning of individual words contained in the text. For instance, the word *Bekee* ‘English’ which appeared in the sentence *Ọ maara eme bekee, was* consistently reported by the participants as *he speaks English.*

However, it could be observed that greater percentage of the participants lack reading- comprehension ability while an insignificant number had the ability to read and comprehend the text. Although there were marked and unmarked results in the study, it is acknowledged that factors such as place of birth, years of residence in a locale, endogamous or exogamous marriage, frequency of contact with the target language speakers and others, are factors that impinge on language acquisition which affects comprehension of reading material among second language learners. This factor may explain the fact that a participant from *Ikulu,* that is central plateau, recorded a better understanding of the text than many participants from Lower/Upper cross river languages, which is geographically contiguous with Igbo, and even as high as the Igboid participant.

**5.0 Conclusion**

It is interesting that among Nigerian language speakers, there are quite a good number studying Igbo as a second language in Universities including Nnamdi Azikiwe University. The present study has shown that, although the L2 Igbo learners recorded a poor understanding of the text used to gauge their proficiency, they were making progress. It was found that none of the participants registered a zero score in the proficiency text. This is essentially on account of the fact that, second language learners are mainly interested in acquiring sufficient knowledge of the language for the sake of interaction with native speakers than other purposes. The study suggests that second language teachers should regularly involve L2 Igbo learners in read-aloud sessions in order to reinforce pronunciation, increase reading speed and foster reading-comprehension.

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