Effects of Self-Explanation Reading Training (SERT) on Second Language Learners' Comprehension of Expository and Narrative Text

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Abstract: *Reading research in Nigeria indicates that poor reading comprehension directly or indirectly affects students' performance in various school subjects. Thus, this research study investigated the effect of self-explanation reading training strategy on second language learners' comprehension of expository and narrative texts. The study adopted a pretest, posttest control group, quasi-experimental design. Random sampling procedure was adopted in selecting 3 intact classes each from 3 senior secondary schools in Abeokuta Metropolis, for the study. The studyalso determined the interaction effect of verbal ability on students' comprehension of texts. Descriptive and inferential statistics were adopted in analyzing the data collected. The result indicated that there was a significant difference in the pretest, posttest mean score of students exposed to treatment* $F_{(2,124)} = 51.348$ $p<0.05$. *Students in the 2 self-explanation groups1 (Science) and 1 (Art class) obtained the highest posttest mean achievement scores* ($\acute{X}=16.77$ *and* $\acute{X}=10.21$) *respectively compared to control* ($\acute{X}=7.23$). *Hence, SERT enhanced students' comprehension of text.*

Keywords Self-explanation Reading Training, Second language, Comprehension, Narrative and Expository texts.

Introduction

Reading comprehension is usually explained from different perspectives because it means different things to different people. It involves different cognitive, intellectual and social based skills and activities through which learners attempt to interact, interpret, construct, reconstruct and negotiate meaning from the text with a view to utilizing the information in solving human problems. Comprehension involves interweaving of information-new versus old- and the learner is expected to distinguish from this array of information and make meaning from the text. According to Kendeou, van den Broek, White and Lynch (2007), a common component of comprehension is interpretation of the information in the text, the use of prior knowledge to interpret this information and the ultimate construction of coherent representation or picture in the reader's mind of the text read. Luke, Woods and Dooley (2011) describe comprehension as a cognitive but social and intellectual phenomenon; hence narrow understanding of comprehension is insufficient for literacy education of diverse and marginalized learners. Certain individuals and groups' risk factors have been identified as influencing comprehension outcomes such as disrupted or abnormal development, home language other than English or non-standard dialect, low socio-economic status, poor school attendance, underprivileged literacy environment' (Luke, Woods & Dooley, 2011)

A greater percentage of students in Nigerian schools attend government public schools with diverse students' population. Greater percentage of these students fall within the category of students referred to as struggling readers characterized by poor school attendance, low socioeconomic background, poor linguistic background and poor learning environment at home and in school; most often they do not have access to robust and enriched reading materials. From among these students also, are the highest number of school dropouts and total lack of motivation for school related tasks. Thus, they are generally ill-disposed towards schooling and reading. Even when they read, they barely comprehend. This explains current emphasis in reading research on the comprehension of texts involving higher order cognitive processes. Singer (1991) cited in Lawal (1997) noted that teaching should go beyond 'no instruction in comprehension to multiple strategies for the development of comprehension and teaching students to be active in learning from print'. Comprehension involves the integration of knowledge of facts presented in the text and learners' rich repertoire of background experience to effectively extract, construct, reconstruct and negotiate meanings in the text read at both the literal, inferential and critical/evaluative levels. However, reading comprehension instruction as conceived and implemented by teachers in most Nigerian schools is worrisome because teachers focus is on testing rather than teaching comprehension skills (Onukaogu, 2002); the testing is even lopsided in favour of mere literal questions thrust upon students to test their oral reading and comprehension (Adegbite, 2005)

Effective instruction in reading comprehension involves the inculcation of strategic reading skills in learners so that as they read, they are able to 'integrate previous knowledge with current information, think about what is being read, monitor what is being read, utilize graphic information, apply what has been read to problem solving and connect their writing with their reading' (Caverly Mandeville & Nicholson, 1995 in Onukaogu, 2002).Research has shown that the use of strategy during reading is an important determinant of reading comprehension Dessus, Blanco, Nardy, Toffa, Dascalu, and Trausan-Matu (2012) and that students who are good comprehenders are strategic readers (Graesser, 2007). Teaching general learning strategies is very crucial because it helps learners to improve self-efficacy(McNamara, Levinstein, & Boonthum, 2004) and students who have a storehouse of strategies to draw from while reading consciously or unconsciously monitor their own learning and do better than students who do not have such strategies (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Therefore, the reading comprehension teacher is expected to provide learners with systematic organized activities (at the various stages of reading) to motivate and assist them to read and comprehends the text (Lawal, 1997).

Studies indicate that strategies directed at improving reading comprehension have been found to be effective (Rosenshine, Meister & Chapman, 1996; Afassi, 2004, Tracy & Morrow, 2006; Cromley & Azevedo, 2007) One of these strategies in current reading research is self-explanation, described as the process of explaining the meaning of text to one's self while reading (Chi, de Leeuw, Chiu & La Vancher, 1994).One of the benefits of self-explanation is that it encourages students to revise their current understanding of concepts by prompting them to compare their inaccurate and/or incomplete understandings with those presented in the text. Therefore, as they attempt to reduce inconsistencies between existing knowledge structure and new information, new leanings occur (Ainsworth & Burchan, 2007). It has also been described as a versatile strategy, which can be used individually or as group processing to enhance learning across a variety of instructional tasks. Hence Chin and Brown (2000) noted that self-explanation

can be used across levels, primary to post secondary. Thus, besides the teacher or expert tutor, peers can also encourage each other to generate self-explanation, especially in cooperative learning environments.

Self-explanation is a constructive activity. At the heart of constructive learning theory is the belief that learning occurs by connecting new knowledge to previously learned knowledge. Each learner individually and socially constructs meaning as she/he learns. Learners are not expected to regurgitate and recite what they have been told, heard or read about, they have to reflect and construct their own personal meanings and take control of their learning (Hein, 1991).

Understanding within the constructivist philosophy cannot be extracted from a text and put into a reader's head, nor can it be delivered to a learner, instead understanding involves being able to explain information being learnt, connect it to previous knowledge and use the information subsequently (Beck, MacKeown, Hammilton & Kukan, 1997).

Based on the concept of self-explanation, McNamara (2004) developed a reading comprehension strategy called self-explanation reading training (SERT), which integrates various reading comprehension techniques categorized as comprehension monitoring, paraphrasing, elaboration, prediction and bridging. Comprehension monitoring is being aware of how well one understands while reading. This skill helps learners to recognize when there is a failure in understanding. This awareness will trigger the use of other 'active reading strategies' beginning with paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is a sentence focused processing that involves restating the current sentence into the reader's own words to enable the readers to understand the grammar and vocabulary of the sentences. This is followed by bridging, a knowledge building skill that enables the readers to link the content of the sentence to the material previously read in the text. At this stage the reader makes inferences that would assist him/her to form global mental picture or representation of the content. This will then lead the reader to make prediction of what to expect next either by guessing or reminding oneself to be on the lookout for particular items that will aid comprehension. The reader goes beyond making inferences to elaborate by associating current reading with prior knowledge gained from sources other than the current text. In elaboration, the reader attempts to link current information from the text to other information the reader already knows. The reader does this using content domain general knowledge, logic or where the reader lacks sufficient background knowledge of the text, the reader can apply common sense.

SERT has been implemented with different levels of students within laboratory and formal classroom context with promising results. For instance, SERT is found to be more effective in improving college students' comprehension than conventional teaching method (McNamara 2004; Magliano, 2005). It has also been found to be more effective when compared with two other strategies in improving comprehension of high school students (O'Reily, Best and McNamara, 2004); It is also known to have had positive effects on students with low comprehension or low reading skill (O'Reilly, Best & McNamara, 2004). On the other hand McNamara, O'Reilly, Rowe, Boonthum and Levinstein (2007); and McNamara, Levinstein and Boonthum (2004) experimented with iSTART (Web-based version of SERT) and found that iSTART was beneficial in enhancing the comprehension of both college and high school students. Thus, McNamara et al. (2007) concluded that SERT has been successful in improving

students' text comprehension, and the effect of the training seems to be more evident for those who need it most.

Due to the huge success of SERT in enhancing students' reading comprehension skills as indicated in literature, it is believed that exposing second language learners' in Nigeria to strategic reading instruction such as SERT is necessary due to the nature of most Nigerian classrooms characterized by large classes and diverse students' backgrounds (linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, ability levels and poor learning environment). This situation poses great challenges to the teacher in terms of giving individualized instruction and promoting active student engagement in reading. Thus, this study examines the effects of self-explanation reading training (SERT) on second language learners' comprehension of Narrative and expository texts. It also determines the moderating effect of verbal ability on students' achievement.

Statement of Problem

Reading comprehension in Nigeria has been highly misconstrued both in terms of conception and practice. Students are not taught to acquire effective comprehension skills or trained in strategies that will assist them to read and comprehend text. Instead emphasis is on testing comprehension because it is believed students can learn reading skills by mere exposure to the text. Hence students turn out to be poor comprehenders without knowledge of strategic reading skills to use while reading various types of texts. This study examined the effects of self-explanation reading training (SERT) on second language learners; comprehension of Narrative and expository texts. It also determined the moderating effect of verbal ability on students' achievement.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for this study:

HO_1: There is no significant difference in the mean posttest achievement scores of students according to treatment and control.

HO_2: There is no significant difference in the mean posttest achievement scores of students according to treatment and verbal ability

HO_3: There is no significant difference in the mean posttest achievement scores of students according to text type.

HO_4 There is no significant difference in the mean posttest achievement scores of students according to treatment, verbal ability and text type.

Methodology

This study employed a pretest, posttest non randomized control group quasi experimental research design using intact classes. The population of the study comprised all the senior secondary schools in Abeokuta Metropolis. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted in the study. First, three senior secondary schools were purposively selected from all the schools within the metropolis. Purposive sampling was adopted to ensure that students in both the high performing and the low performing schools were given equal opportunity of being selected. Secondly, a random sampling technique by balloting was used to select an intact class from each of the three schools as well as in assigning treatment to the intact classes selected.

The instruments for the study were:

(i) Achievement test on Reading Comprehension (ATRC)
(ii) Verbal Ability Test (VAT)

The ATRC comprises two expository and two narrative passages selected from the past reading comprehension passages used for the West African Examination Council. Twelve short essay type questions were drawn from each of the passages. The questions were both text-based and inference-based requiring that students employ their skills of elaboration to apply their prior knowledge to providing answers to the questions. For the purpose of validation, the achievement test was prior tested on a set of forty (40) senior secondary II students in a different school using test-retest procedure within two weeks interval to ascertain the reliability of the instrument. The scores of the two different tests were correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. A reliability index of 0.76 was obtained. Secondly, VAT which comprises 36 item test adapted from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) test had earlier been validated. However, the version used for the present study was revalidated by Ezenandu (2012) using Kuder Richardson (K21) formula and 0.82 was obtained. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed using pretest scores as covariates while the Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) was used to find out the magnitude and direction of differences among the groups. The hypotheses were tested at $p<0.05$ level of significance.

Treatment Procedure

The study lasted for a period of six weeks and was conducted during regular classroom time. In the first week of the study, students were administered pretests on the ATRC and VAT. Students in the two experimental groups were trained to self-explain the text they were exposed to read while students in the control were not given the same training. They were merely asked to study the same reading passages. The study adopted McNamara (2004) training formula involving three stages: Introduction, Demonstration and Practice.

Stage 1: This is the introduction stage; here the teacher explained the meaning of SERT to students with relevant examples. Then the teacher introduced and explained the strategies students were expected to apply as they self-explain what they read. The strategies include: comprehension monitoring, paraphrase, bridging inferences, logic, common sense and elaboration.

Stage 2: The teacher demonstrated how self-explanation could be applied. During the demonstration, the teacher exposed students to sample expository and narrative comprehension passages selected from the Senior Secondary School ***Intensive English*** Course Book II. The demonstration activities that the teacher launched the students into include:

(i) The teacher models self-explanation to students
(ii) The teacher and the students brainstormed in whole class setting.
(iii) Expert student modeling. The teacher invited students who have mastered the concept to model it to the entire class.
(iv) Teacher and students brainstormed in whole class setting for the second time. This is to prompt discussion on issues raised that students were not quite cleared about.
(v) Then five students were grouped around one expert student, who models the skill to other group members.
(vi) The students come back together in a whole class discussion of the concept and its application.

Stage 3: Finally, students were paired to read a given passage. In pairs, they took turns to read, self-explain and summarize the text. At the end of the training, students were once again administered the posttest in ATRC and VAT.

Results of Findings

The results are presented in order of the hypotheses formulated.

HO_1: There is no significant difference in the posttest mean achievement scores of students according to treatment.

Table 1: Summary of ANCOVA Posttest Achievement Scores of Students by Treatment, Verbal Ability and Text type

Source of Variance	Sum of Square	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Covariates PREACH	13400.741	1	13400.741	817.489	.000
Main effects (Combined)	5059.580	49	103.257	6.299	.000
Treatment	1683.453	2	841.726	51.348	000*
Verbal Ability	206.191	2	103.095	6.289	.003
Text type	1173.109	10	117.311	7.156	.000*
2. way interaction					
Treatment*Verbal Ab.	95.805	4	23.951	1.461	.218
Treatment* Text type	601.234	10	60.123	3.668	.000*
Verbal Ability *Text type	173.728	10	17.373	1.060	.398
3Way interactionTreatment* Verbal Ability*Text type	677.540	10	67.754	4.133	.000*
Model	7092.259	173			
Residual	2032.678	124	16.393		
TOTAL	20493.000	174			

*Significant at $p<0.05$

Table 1 indicates that there is a significant difference in the posttest mean achievement scores of students who were exposed to treatment $F_{(2,124)} = 51.348$ $p<0.05$. Hence hypothesis 1 is

rejected. Table 1 also indicates that there was a significant difference in the mean posttest achievement scores of the students with regards to text type (narrative and expository). This means that there is a significant difference in the scores of students based on the type of text. To ascertain the magnitude of difference, students obtained the highest mean score ($\bar{x}$=5.68) in expository text compared with the narrative text ($\bar{x}$=2.13), implying that self-explanation reading training was more effective in reading expository texts than narrative.

Table 2: Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) of Posttest Achievement Scores of Students by Treatment, Verbal Ability and Text type

		Predicted Mean		**Deviation**			
Treatment category	N	Unadjusted	Adjusted for Factors & Covariates	Unadjusted	Eta	Adjusted for Beta factors and Covariates	
Treatment							
Trt Grp. 1:	56	13.475	16.77	1.18		.78	
Trt Grp 2:	52	9.647	10.21	1.41	.545	.69	.743
Control	66	5.202	7.231	-3.22		.95	
V. Ability							
Low	114	9.554	10.22	-3.21	.222	.66	
Med	42	8.881	9.49	-3.42		.31	
High	18	6.556	8.88	-2.57		.09	
Text type							.021
Narrative	174	66	2.13	-.50	.047	1.75	
Expository	174	66	5.68	.50		1.37	
R = .316							
R^2 = .347							

Table 2 shows that students exposed to both treatment group 1(Science class) and group 2 (Art class) obtained the highest posttest mean achievement scores ($\bar{x}$=16.77 and $\bar{x}$=10.21) respectively compared to students in the control with a mean posttest scores of ($\bar{x}$=7.23). Therefore, the treatment was more effective with students in the Science class than those in the Arts class.

HO_2: There is no significant difference in the mean posttest achievement scores of students according to treatment and verbal ability

Table 1 reveals that the two way interaction of treatment and verbal ability on students' achievement in reading comprehension was not significant. Therefore hypothesis 2 is not rejected.

HO_3 There is no significant difference in the mean posttest achievement scores of students according to text type.

HO_4 There is no significant difference in the mean post test achievement scores of students according to treatment, verbal ability and text type

Table 1 shows that the difference in the mean posttest achievement score of students based on the 3 way interaction of treatment, verbal ability and text type is significant ($F_{(10, 124)} = 4.133$; $p<0.05$) hence, hypothesis 4 is not rejected .

Summary of Findings

The results of the study are summarized as follows:

1. There was a significant difference in the posttest mean achievement score of students who were exposed to self-explanation reading training (SERT) and conventional teaching method. Students who were trained to self-explain what they read had higher mean achievement scores more than those in the control group who were subjected to the conventional method. The results also revealed that students in the science class had the highest mean achievement scores, followed by those in the arts class.
2. There was a significant difference in the posttest mean achievement scores of students based on the type of text read. The result revealed that students exposed to the training had higher scores in the expository texts compared to the narrative texts.
3. The result also revealed that students exposed to the training were not significantly different in their mean posttest achievement scores on the basis of treatment and verbal ability.
4. However, when compared on the basis of treatment, verbal ability and text type, the difference in the mean posttest achievement scores of students was conspicuously significant.

Discussion

The major objective of the study was to investigate whether SERT would have any influence on students' comprehension of expository and narrative texts as well as to ascertain the influence of verbal ability on students' comprehension of text. The study was implemented with students in government owned public schools using intact classes within normal school time.

As indicated in the result of the study, students subjected to the training programme scored higher than their counterparts in the control class. The two treatment groups seem to have differed in terms of their mean posttest achievement scores based on school type and category of class. Students in the science class performed better than their counterparts in the arts class. This aligns with previous studies in SERT which have consistently investigated the influence of SERT on students' comprehension of science text with appreciable and promising results (McNamara, 2004; McNamara, O'Reilley, Rowe, Boonthum & Levinstein 2007). There is not much available information on the implementation of SERT in the comprehension of narrative

text. However, Dessus, Blanco, Nardy, Toffa, Dascalu and Trausan-Matu made an automated analysis of 3rd and 5th graders verbalization of what they understood when exposed to self-explanation during the reading of narrative text and they found that ability to recall recent sentences read was not uniform, there was a grade effect on pupils' recall of distal causal sentences.. Another possibility of the differences in the achievement scores of science and arts students may be attributed to the text structure which science students may have already been familiar with and the fact that the strategies integrated within SERT are more suited to the study of expository text than narrative.

The result may also be a function of school. Students in treatment group 1 are selected from schools labelled high performance school in terms of ability level and socio-economic background contrary to students in treatment group 2. Thus, they were likely to have mastered the strategy more than students in the lower performing school. However, the result, in treatment group 2 is a good indication of the efficacy of the training especially in enhancing the achievement of low performing students. This is in line with previous research findings that the effects of SERT are most evident for the students, who show the lowest comprehension, those with either low domain knowledge or low reading skills (McNamara 2004; 2007)

Some of the observed challenges that may have serious implication for future implementation of SERT in the ESL classroom were identified such as overcrowded classrooms which made it impossible for an effective one-to-one or individualized training, frequent disruption in the smooth training of students due to constant intrusion of unplanned school activities; low linguistic proficiency of students especially among the low performing schools, lack of textual materials, poor school attendance, uncooperative teacher attitude towards the programme. These extraneous factors may combine to influence the predicted result of the training programme.

Conclusion

Self-explanation reading training (SERT) has great potentials to repair and enhance second language learners' comprehension skill required to master learning tasks involving higher order thinking processes such as that required to read and achieve a deeper understanding of expository and difficult texts. Therefore training students to monitor their understanding as they read, inculcate, internalize and utilize strategic reading skills will help them not only to be focused and engaged readers but also help them take charge of their learning

Due to the observed problems that may hamper the smooth implementation of the programme in Nigerian classrooms, the government, curriculum planners and school administrators should focus more attention on the professional training and retraining of reading teachers to become acquainted with contemporary student-centred instructional practices that would make learning to read more productive. This is because the teaching of reading in Nigeria is still 'an all comers affair, implying that most of the teachers of reading are hardly trained to teach reading. It is a general belief among school administrators that anybody who holds a certificate in language related course can teach reading. Meanwhile classroom and home environments are not made conducive for a good foundation and subsequent development in reading skill.

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