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## Perspectives of Gender Differences, Students' Achievement and Attitude to Reading Comprehension

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### ABSTRACT

*Reading skills are specific abilities that enable a reader to read the written form as meaningful language and to mentally interact with the message. Reading is seen as an instrument that induces learning which involves a variety of interrelated activities. Comprehension in reading occurs when the reader takes hold of the writer's message. It is seen as the basic mechanical side of the reading process because the higher order cognitive processes are not called into play as they are with the more sophisticated side of reading that involves understanding and interpreting what is read. Research findings that have identified differences between gender groups in reading performance are not as clear cut. Various interpretations given by researchers often reported discrepancies between males and females in reading outcome. Not much work has been done on the investigation of gender differences, achievement in and attitude to reading, though there are general consensus that girls have been found in many Nigerian researches to have only a slight positive but statistically insignificant edge over boys in language performance. Also, it has been proven that a positive attitude often leads to successful learning and that students learn more effectively and achieve better when they are interested in what they learn. This study is interested in the provision of clear evidence that gender and attitude influence achievement in reading comprehension.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Reading is seen as an instrument that induces learning and literacy. This issue of literacy is at the very heart of reading education since one of the primary goals of a reading teacher is the fostering of lifelong readers. Reading is a component of primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions curricula. It is the ability of the

brain to perceive, recognise, and interpret printed symbols that involves a variety of interrelated activities. Reading is the act of decoding symbols of a language in order to ensure intelligibility and understanding (Jedege and Kolade, 2017). It is a complex, purposeful, interactive, comprehensible, and flexible activity that takes considerable



time and resources to develop (Bojovic, 2010).

Reading skills is a cognitive process that involves identifying word meaning, drawing inferences, identifying writer's technique, recognising mood of the passage and finding answers to questions. It is a meaningful interpretation of printed symbols, that is, a kind of interaction between the author and the reader. Reading is also described as the process of comprehending the meaning of a written text by depending on the ability to use phonic skills (that is, knowledge of letters and sounds) to decode printed words quickly and effortlessly both silently and aloud. It is a thinking process that deals with cognition that indicates that the focus of instruction should not be on the print, but rather on how readers connect with the print.

Many educators encourage their students to read outside of the classroom in order to increase reading comprehension, vocabulary, general knowledge, and cultural awareness; however, research indicates that pleasure reading may have a greater influence on a child's overall academic performance than their socio-economic background (Pearson, 2015). Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2014) in their study confirmed that reading habit has influence on academic performance and there is a relationship between reading habit and academic performance.

Reading and reading comprehension are interconnected and interrelated. For a successful reading activity, comprehension has to take place. Comprehension is seen as the basic cognitive side of the reading process. This implies that comprehension is a vital component of reading as a skill. Reading comprehension is the process of making meaning from text; it is overall understanding of the passage/text, it is a

decoding process. Comprehension in reading occurs when the reader takes hold of the writer's message. Reading comprehension is therefore getting meaning from what is being written; this implies that comprehension is a vital component of reading as a skill. It is clear that basic decoding processes are important for comprehension and are used by readers in interaction with the more complex processes of meaning generation (Bojovic, 2010).

### LEVELS OF COMPREHENSION

Students comprehend at various levels. The three levels of comprehension as identified by Osikomaiya, (2020); Osikomaiya, (2017); Mabekoje, (2012) and Adegbile, 1998) are: literal comprehension, interpretative/inference comprehension and critical/evaluative comprehension.

**Literal Comprehension:** demands understanding of ideas and information explicitly stated in the passage. The skills in literal comprehension include knowledge of word meaning; recall details directly stated or paraphrased in the writer's own words and understanding of grammatical cues. Comprehension at this level is a pre-requisite for comprehension of the other level and it is the most familiar and simplest form of comprehension.

**Interpretative / Inferential Comprehension:** is another level of comprehension. This level demands understanding of ideas or information not explicitly stated in the passage. The relevant skills here include reasoning with information presented to enable one understand the author's note, purpose and attitude, infer factual information, main ideas, comparison, cause and effect relationship not explicitly stated in the passage and summary of the story content.

**Critical Comprehension / Evaluative:** requires analysis, evaluating and personal



reaction to information presented in the passage. The skills involved are reader's ability to react personally to information in a passage, indicating its meaning to the reader. The critical role of reading widely at increasingly more challenging levels cannot be overemphasized.

Many parents, administrators and teachers still believe that literacy is primarily a matter of skill instruction. The importance of practising, using, and "living" literacy is often overlooked. Perhaps this is partly because we live in a society that does not always practise the literacy it preaches and supposedly values – libraries are underfunded, television is the predominant source of entertainment and information.

### **Styles and Types of Reading**

It has been established that a relatively simple intervention-reading can have a powerful effect on students' comprehension, thinking, knowledge of the world, and choices in higher education and life careers. There are styles and types of reading which can assist students in carrying out reading tasks (Alegbeleye, 2017; Osikomaiya, 2007&2013; Mabekoje, 2012). Adequate exposures of students to these styles help in accomplishing reading task. These include:

1. Skimming: is a quick impression of what the passage is all about. It entails quickly running of the eye over a text to get the gist. Skimming is a rapid reading which is used to get the main idea(s) from a passage. It involves finding out what a reading materials is all about. To skim in reading means to look at briefly. Skimming involves the act of the book or page quickly in order to have a general idea of the content.
1. Scanning: is closely associated with skimming but it is not actual reading. Scanning is the rapid and efficient location of specific words, information,

facts or details which one knows or is expected to be somewhere in a text. It is a narrowing down process that involves running the eyes rapidly over the text or material. Scanning is used to find a specific word, phrase or fact e.g. to check scanning of word in a dictionary.

2. Recreational Reading is reading for enjoyment. It involves reading of novels, magazines, etc. It is a relaxed reading and is also referred to as reading for pleasure.
3. Academic Reading/ Analytical reading: occurs when the reader needs full understanding/ comprehension of the text. Reading is done repeatedly in other to grasp and appreciate the text. The reader might stop while reading, to think, assess or jot down some points. Study reading slows down reading rate because it requires display of seriousness. This type of reading is concerned with academic activities e.g. reading for examination.
4. Proof Reading is carefully focusing on spelling, punctuation and sentence structure in order to check accuracy. It is usually used when editing a write-up.
5. Revision Reading is skimming through a book which one is familiar with so as confirm some information one is sure is within the materials.
6. Critical Reading is reading for stimulus, for challenge, to assess value and ideas as in reading a book for review or critically analyzing a novel. It involves evaluating what you have read.
7. Reading for mastery has to do with getting detailed information or understanding of a topic. It involves reading carefully, slowly and repeatedly.
8. Extensive Reading: Extensive reading is nothing but reading longer text usually for one's own pleasure. Extensive



- reading means reading in quantity in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading. This is the method used in the training for fast reading. The purpose may be to enhance fluency, faster reading or for pleasure.
9. Intensive Reading: This is a deep reading of the text, requiring that you get as much information from the text as possible. Intensive reading involves reading shorter texts to extract specific information. This kind of reading is otherwise known as reading for details. Intensive reading is generally at a slower speed, and requires a higher degree of understanding than extensive reading.

#### **Approaches to Reading Comprehension**

Much as there is the need to improve students' comprehension ability, the following steps would provide a more innovative approach to the teaching of reading comprehension. These steps include: pre-reading stage, reading the passage, guided reading, procedures for questioning and supplementary activities.

The first approach to reading comprehension is **pre-reading stage**. Pre-reading assistance provided by the teacher can be verbal; the teacher gives background information as a basis for a brief discussion before reading the passage. Pre-reading activities are meant to introduce and raise interest on the topic, to motivate the students by giving them a reason for reading and to provide language preparation for the text. Pre-reading activities can include brainstorming, games, puzzle, pre-teaching, pre questioning, conceptual related readings, KWL strategy, and

graphic organisers of students' background knowledge (Aboagye, Qing, Ilnatushchenko, and Mensah2016; Ekaniungum and Prabandari 2015; Adegbile 1998). These various activities allow students to replace important vocabulary or concepts with those the teacher has detected from the text in order to draw attention to the desired points. In addition, the teacher may develop questions through directed writing or interactive discussions such as

*'What do the students be acquainted/familiar with? What do I (as a teacher) need to know about the students (background/previous knowledge), about the text before engaging in reading activities with the students? What is passage about showing from the headings, pictures, graphics etc?'*

These pre-reading activities do not only prepare students to understand a text but also help to build their vocabulary levels and study skills. Apart from the above, the next stage is **passage reading**: At this stage, reading usually starts from a general understanding of the entire text to understanding smaller units. The initial reading can be aloud or silently. To assist students in effective comprehension of a given text, the teacher should do an oral reading of the passage. This forms a model reading for the learners. In the secondary school, emphasis should be on silent reading of the passage. Silent reading helps to train students for what they will do when they leave school. The model reading provided by the teacher at this stage using all necessary accompanying para-linguistic strategies such as gestures and facial expressions can provide in-roads to comprehension especially through the



rhythm of reading and the particular emphatic way in which ideo-phonetic words are pronounced (Tunde-Awe, 2001 & Osikomaiya, 2010). Therefore, teacher's model reading would serve to provide appropriate content for the treatment of vocabulary items that may be new or still prove difficult.

**Guided reading:** is another approach to reading. During guided reading, teachers provide students with the structured means to integrate the background knowledge that they bring to the text with the new knowledge provided by the text. Students probe the text beyond its literal meaning for deeper understanding. They revise their preliminary questions or predictions, search for tentative answers, gather, organise, analyse and synthesize evidence to have overview about their new understanding which propelled them for further reading.

**Procedure for questioning:** is also an approach to reading comprehension. At this stage, various forms of questions that can facilitate effective comprehension can be asked. For instance, general opening question that hinges on the subject matter of any passage should be avoided e.g. "what is the passage all about?" In other words, such question could relate to any passage. The type of questions to be asked should have a focal point, and should be dependent and centered on the passage. Apart from this, emphasis should be on direct reference questions that could elicit direct and appropriate response relating to the passage from the passage.

**Supplementary Activities:** is another approach to reading comprehension. These activities are of paramount importance in a reading comprehension class. They take a variety of forms different from the straight question and answer routine of the conventional

comprehension class. Supplementary activities include summary writing, writing alternatives to certain parts or the whole passage, drawing graphs, diagrams, charts relating to the content of the passage. In this case, a small discussion group can be organised, also projects relating to the passage can be assigned to groups; to be done out of class. Other aspects of supplementary activities include the use of dictionary as a skill in the direct teaching of vocabulary. However, the teacher should caution on the dictionary meaning of words which may not be necessarily based on contextual meaning. The teacher has to emphasize the fact that words and phrases are best explained in the context in which they are used in the passage (contextual meaning).

In reading, the reader previews the text by activating background knowledge, making predictions about content, making connections and setting a purpose for reading. During reading, the student self-questions, visualizes, monitors, thinks about words and makes connections to self, text and word. After reading, the learner summarizes, evaluates and makes connections to self, text and the word again engaging in cognitive processes. To do this, there is need for students to use comprehension strategies such as previewing, self-questioning, making connections, visualizing, knowing how words work, monitoring, summarizing and evaluating. Students have shown that multiple factors affect successful reading comprehension.

Essentially, the only objective in reading is comprehension, but this depends on the successful processing of three kinds of information: grapho-phonetic, syntactic and semantic. These three make up the reading process:



1. The **Grapho-phonetic Information** is the first kind of information. Goodman (1972) divided this aspect of information into three segments:

- a. **Graphic Information:** this includes the letters, spelling patterns and pattern of patterns created through space and punctuation. In other words, a word or suffix represents a graphic pattern while a phrase or sentence is a pattern of patterns.
- b. **Phonological Information:** this includes the sounds, sound patterns and pattern of patterns created through intonation (pitch, stress, rhythm, etc.).
- c. **Phonic Information:** this includes the complex set of relationships between the graphic and phonological representations of the language.

2. In addition, there is **Syntactic Information**. Syntactic information is a kind of information that is made up of:

- a. **Sentence Patterns:** this includes the grammatical sequences and interrelationship of language.
- b. **Pattern Maker:** the markers that outline patterns are words, inflections and punctuations
- c. **Transformational Rules:** these are the elements that help the reader to understand the deep structure of some phrases or sentences.

3. The last kind of information is the **Semantic Information**. This level of information includes:

- a. **Experience:** here, the reader brings his or her prior experience into play in response to the graphic input.
- b. **Concepts:** in this case, the reader organizes the meaning they are

reconstructing according to their existing concepts and re-organises experience into concept as they reads.

- c. **Vocabulary:** this is largely a term for the ability of the reader to sort out his or her experiences and concepts in relation to words and phrases in the context of what he or she is reading.

### **GENDER DIFFERENCES AND STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN READING COMPREHENSION**

Gender differences provide content for discussion in a variety of human activities. Research findings that have identified differences between gender groups in reading performance are not as clear cut. Various interpretations given by researchers often reported discrepancies between males and females in reading outcome. These reports vary considerably and are indicative of an on-going debate. Gender has been found to play an important role in influencing students' academic performance and activities along with different factors such as intelligence, study habit, self-concept, creativity, aptitude, interests, reading culture and socio-economic status of the parent (Olanipekun and Zaku, 2013). The Gender and Education Association (GEA) (2012) observed that certain subjects are gender stereotyped, for example, males are believed to be better in Mathematics, Sciences and Engineering and are therefore, masculine subjects and females are believed to be better than males in Language Arts etc. and are therefore feminine subject. Houtte (2004) examined 3,760 pupils in the third and the fourth year of secondary education in a sample of 34 schools in Flanders, Belgium... the study demonstrated that boys' culture is less study oriented than girls' culture and that





this difference can be held responsible for the gender differences in achievement, at least in general schools. In technical/vocational schools, boys also seem to oppose the study culture.

However, Fischer, Schult and Hell (2012) in their study using sample of 554 German freshman students provided measures of general intelligence, achievement motivation, science course choice, self-efficacy, self-perceived academic achievement, and test anxiety. The study discovered that achievement motivation, self-perceived academic achievement and sex significantly contribute to the final secondary school success far above student's intelligence. Females' advantage in final secondary school grades becomes even larger after controlling for general intelligence. This advantage can be explained by females' higher achievement motivation. Showing more compensatory effort as well as self-control and taking more pride in their own productivity helps females to outperform their male counterparts at secondary school.

The boys out-performed the girls on the cued recall task, whereas the girls were more proficient on the unstructured recall tasks (IEA, 1996). NAEP report of 1982 (in the USA) reported that "although females performed better than the males at each stage on the reading comprehension exercises . . . (it would appear) that some of the differences in performance may be attributed to the amount of time boys and girls spend reading in their spare time. At all ages, females tend to read more than males in their spare time, this is buttressed by the results of the research which showed that there are differences between boys and girls in many aspects of reading habits and preferences.

Osikomaiya (2013) established a correlation between academic performance

and gender of a learner in reading comprehension. Boltz (2007) discovered that gender differences and interests have also been observed in several studies: boys tend to engage in reading through different types of literature than girls and that boys tend to read brief informative and entertainment texts and not for story or literary quality. Boys named themselves mostly as average or poor readers, they read less classical literature voluntarily, they spend less time with reading, they don't like to read long books and books with small letters etc. Jawad (2015) narrated the findings of Gambrell and Marinak which shows that females are doing better in reading assessments. They found that school-based practices either facilitate or inhibit a male student's reading engagement and motivation.

Research had found that girls enjoy reading more than boys and the types of books they read provide them with the academic language that helps them improve their reading and writing skills. Olanipekun and Zaku (2013) in their study found that male students performed better than their female counterparts, they concluded that findings on gender are inconclusive since different researchers have different opinions based on their findings as regards gender effect on students' academic performance. In disagreement, Bećirović (2017) discovered that female students are more successful at learning English as a foreign language than male students at aged ten (fifth grade), fourteen (ninth grade) and eighteen (twelfth grade) group/grade levels. Also, the findings revealed statistically significant results in measuring the correlation between achievement and motivation which can be highly beneficial for teachers, parents and students in adopting the most effective approach to learning and teaching English as a foreign language.



Olagunju (1998) had a different view about gender relationship in learning. According to her, both boys and girls can perform excellently well if they are exposed to the same learning opportunities. Confirming this, Oyinloye (2007), noted that there is no significant relationship between gender and achievement of students in English. Reilly, Neumann & Andrew (2019), Osikomaiya (2013) and Agboola (2004) agreed to the general consensus that girls have been found in many researches to have only a slight positive but statistically insignificant edge over boys in language performance. Osikomaiya, (2013); Osikomaiya, (2006); Jibowo, (1997) established a correlation between academic performance and gender of a learner but that gender has no significant effect on performance of students in English.

#### **GENDER DIFFERENCES AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TO READING COMPREHENSION**

Differences in attitudes towards reading have been observed in several studies. An attitude is a product of socialization that is formed in the relevant environment through direct or indirect learning, and it helps to determine how people react to various people and objects. Attitudes are regarded as active or passive, good or bad, correct or biased, while aspects of attitudes help people to generate positive or negative views or opinions and may lead to specific behaviours. Attitudes are things that cannot be observed in a specific sense; specific attitude refers to mental processes going on inside a person whilst general attitude refers in addition to these mental processes, to explicit behaviour. Learning attitude may refer to positive and negative evaluation or feeling of an individual towards learning activities and the learning environment and to his or her readiness to "translate" this attitude into appropriate behaviour.

Attitude is a way someone thinks, behaves or reacts to a given condition, idea or event before making a decision whether to acknowledge or decline it. Attitude is a mental view, posture or disposition about something. It is a predisposition of perceiving feeling and behaviour towards specific objects or people in a particular manner. Attitude could only be seen through behaviour. Attitudes affect a child's ability to succeed in reading, examining students' attitudes toward reading is an important and essential part of assessing their reading progress this is because literacy development determines children's future success both in and outside of school. He observed further that children who develop positive attitudes toward reading are more likely to enjoy reading, be willing to read and be life-long successful readers (Avallone, 2005). Researchers have shown that learners who have favourable attitude towards a language, its speakers and culture tend to be more successful in their learning than those without it. It has been proven that a positive attitude, more often than not, leads to successful learning. Learners' attitude to language plays an important role in learning a language. Research had found that girls had more favorable attitudes toward reading than boys at all grade levels in both recreational and academic reading. Positive attitudes toward reading for male students started to decline in the fourth grade.

Studies have identified variables such as age, status, gender, level of educational attainment, socio-economic status and experience, psychological, cultural and religious factors as some of the factors that can affect or influence the development of attitude towards a goal or an object. Osikomaiya (2019) in a study investigated Junior Secondary School students' attitudinal disposition towards reading comprehension, three hundred and





eighty seven participants (387) were drawn from fourteen Junior Secondary Schools in Ijebu East Local Government Area of Ogun State. The result of the study showed that there was no significant gender difference in the attitude of male and female students towards reading comprehension and also there was no significant difference between the attitudes of students from private secondary school and public secondary school. Also, Osikomaiya (2020) in her study on the effect of scaffolding instructional strategy and gender on students' attitude to reading comprehension revealed that there was no significant gender effect on students' attitude towards reading comprehension. Besides, Osikomaiya, Osijo, Okueso and Omotayo (2018) discovered that both male and female showed positive attitude towards language learning and that attitude and gender are highly important in language learning

Oyinloye (2010) said in a study of 160 Nigerian secondary school students to determine the influence of achievement, motivation and gender on performance in English Language learning, the study found that if adequately motivated, the students are capable of mastering English Language. Agboola (2008) opined that positive attitude to school work relates directly to higher academic achievement among school children. Osikomaiya (2009) opined that negative attitude to school work produces unfavourable achievement among students.

Teachers and other educators generally believe that students learn more effectively and achieve better when they are interested in what they learn. Therefore, continuous attention should be directed towards creating, developing, maintaining and reinforcing positive attitude in the students. Also, the attitude of teachers towards comprehension lessons determines the way it is taught and learnt.

Hence, the study of attitude is an essential part of any academic improvement. Though, researches still hold that there is a meaningfully strong relationship between attitude and achievement. Since attitude is very important in whatever one does in life, its importance cannot be over-ruled in teaching-learning situations. Attitude can be learned or acquired, shaped or re-shaped and can as well motivate individuals toward achievement. Students need to develop and sustain positive attitudes towards the teaching and learning of English reading comprehension.

## CONCLUSION

Research findings on gender, attitude and achievement are inconclusive. Researches that have identified differences between gender groups in reading performance are many and they are not precise. Various interpretations given by researchers often reported discrepancies between males and females in reading outcome. Though there are agreed general consensus that girls have been found in many Nigerian researches to have only a slight positive but statistically insignificant edge over boys in language performance. Also, attitudes are generally regarded as ending though modifiable by experience and or persuasion and as learnt, rather than innate. It has been proven that a positive attitude, more often than not, leads to successful learning. Students learn more effectively and achieve better when they are interested in what they learn, under a friendly and very conducive environment. Students who develop positive attitude towards reading tend to have favourable interest in reading. Positive attitude and great level of motivation are well established factors for successful reading activities. Students that develop positive attitudes to reading are more likely to be good and willing readers, take pleasure and



have interest in reading; they also become proficient readers and enjoy reading through their life time. Student's attitude and interest are very important factors in formation of a good reading habit that promotes academic excellence. Students are much more likely to engage in activities that are pleasing to them, activities that add value to their life and well-being. Therefore, students that see reading as a lifelong practice/exercise will develop positive attitude and interest towards reading.

Moreover, excellent reading teachers influence students' reading and learning, consequently, good readers (teachers) are strategic and they take active roles in the reading process. Reading should occur in meaningful contexts, students benefit from transacting with a variety of texts at multiple levels because vocabulary development and instruction affect reading comprehension. Engagement is a key factor in the comprehension process, comprehension strategies and skills should be taught and dynamic assessment informs comprehension instruction. Alegbeleye (2017) asserted that reading can be positive and or negative depending on an individual's disposition or personality or purpose for which the reading is embarked on. There is clear evidence that gender and attitude influence achievement in reading but gender does not influence achievement, that is, both male and female can attain good academic achievement when they are taught using students' centered methods with good teaching practise. Teachers in general and English language teachers in particular should endeavour to assist both male and female students to develop positive attitude towards reading because positive attitude will help students to develop reading culture which will enhance effective reading and academic excellence.

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