

EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NSUKKA EDUCATION ZONE

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Abstract - The study examined the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching reading comprehension in English language to junior secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. Quasi-experimental research design was used for the study. The population of the study comprised four thousand two hundred and ninety-four (4, 294) junior secondary school two (JSS11) students made up of 2,191 males and 2,103 female students in Nsukka Education Zone. The sample used consisted of ninety-one (91) junior secondary school students (40 males and 51 females) in two intact classes from the two secondary schools sampled for the study from the fifty-eight (58) public secondary schools in Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State. Data were collected with English Language Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (ELRCAT). The instrument was face validated by experts in Department of Arts Education (Language Education Unit) and Department of Science Education (Measurement and Evaluation Unit), University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation, while the null hypotheses were tested using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 level of significance. Results showed that students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction achieved higher scores in reading comprehension. Also, the result showed that both male and female students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction performed well. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher recommended the need to expose teachers to the use of differentiated instruction in the teaching of reading comprehension in English language through workshops and seminars. Also, the federal government should make adequate provision of necessary technology that will enhance reading comprehension

Keywords: English language, reading comprehension, differentiated instruction, schools

Introduction

English is a global language that holds the prestigious status of being Nigeria's official language. English has become a worldwide language for communication among people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, often without relying on native-speaker standards (Jenkins, 2015). The Federal Republic of Nigeria: FRN (2013) in the National Policy on Education (NPE) and FRN (2022) in the National Language policy mandate English as the medium of instruction at the junior secondary education level, in addition to being a subject taught in schools. At this level, students learn various aspects of English, such as grammar, essay writing, letter writing, summary and reading comprehension.

Reading is the process of interpreting letters and words. However, the ultimate goal of reading is more than mere recognition of words, it is to comprehend the message from the text. Reading comprehension, therefore, is defined as the ability to construct a coherent mental representation of the text's content, integrating new information with existing knowledge (Kintsch, 2018). On the other hand, reading comprehension is described as a complex cognitive process that requires the reader to decode text, make

inference and integrate ideas across sentences and paragraphs (Cain & Oakhill, 2019). Perfetti and Stafura, (2014) emphasizes that reading comprehension is a multifaceted skill involving both lower-level decoding and high-level linguistic comprehension, including vocabulary and inferencing skills. In the opinion of Duke and Cartwright (2021), effectiveness in reading comprehension depends on the reader's ability to use various comprehension strategies, such as summarizing, predicting and clarifying, to construct meaning from the text. Reading comprehension is a critical skill that significantly impacts the overall academic success of junior secondary school students as it allows students to grasp the content across various subjects, such as science, social studies and mathematics. Without strong reading comprehension skills, students may struggle to understand textbooks, instructions and assignments. Again, reading comprehension builds the students' knowledge as comprehending what is read helps students acquire and retain knowledge, making it easier to connect new information with existing knowledge, leading to deeper learning. Reading comprehension fosters critical thinking by enabling students to evaluate the credibility and relevance of information, as well as improving the students' communication skills, as students with strong reading comprehension skills are better equipped to write clearly and coherently. Also, good reading comprehension enables students to engage in self-directed learning and also fosters a sense of autonomy in them.

Developing strong reading comprehension skills in junior secondary school students is a fundamental objective. However, it is common to see children of all ages struggling with reading fluently and understanding what they read, both in the classroom and at home. If a child does not learn to read early, he or she may face difficulties later in life. Research indicates that reading comprehension involves a complex process of constructing meaning from texts, which includes strategies like predicting, questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and making connections (Anderson & Pearson, 2019). Additionally, research highlights the importance of explicit instruction to enhance students' reading comprehension skills (Harvey & Goudvis, 2015). In junior secondary English classrooms, there are students with diverse reading abilities, and effective teaching must address these varying needs for successful learning outcomes. The diverse learning needs and reading abilities of junior secondary school students in English language classrooms often challenge achieving optimal reading comprehension outcomes. English language teachers frequently exacerbate these challenges by relying on traditional teaching methods for reading comprehension. This one-size-fits-all approach, such as the lecture-based method, is one of the oldest and most widely used in teaching. It involves a teacher presenting information to students in a structured format. The lecture method is defined as a teaching approach where the instructor delivers a continuous, verbal presentation of information to a group of students. The lecture method is described as a teacher-centered instructional method where the teacher talks and the students listen, often with little or no interaction, usually used in higher institutions due to its ability to cover large content within limited time, although it can be used in secondary schools (Okebukola, 2021)). In teaching reading comprehension using this teacher-centered method, students primarily listen and take notes, with the teacher reading the passages aloud, explaining main ideas, key vocabulary, and grammatical structures, and providing text analysis followed by comprehension questions. This approach might contribute to poor performance in reading comprehension, as some authors discovered in their studies. (Ayodele & Adegbile, 2011), discovered in their studies that reliance on the lecture method contributed to students' poor performance in reading comprehension. Also, (Chen, 2023) highlights that the traditional lecture method fails to meet diverse learning needs in the teaching and learning English

reading comprehension. The continuous use of lecture method in teaching reading comprehension might have contributed to the poor achievement in English language generally and reading comprehension specifically, as highlighted in the 2022 WAEC Chief Examiner's report, which identified weaknesses in students' ability to handle inference-based questions and vocabulary deficiencies, leading to superficial text engagement and answers. The report emphasizes the necessity of enhancing teaching methods to develop critical thinking and comprehension skills using diverse and engaging reading materials (West African Examinations Council, 2022).

Similarly, the 2022 Chief Examiner's report for JSS3 English language reading comprehension identifies numerous issues and suggests improvements. It highlights that students often struggle with comprehension questions due to grammatical errors, insufficient vocabulary, and inadequate engagement with passages, sometimes resorting to verbatim copying. The report underscores that improving reading skills is crucial for better overall English performance, recommending enhanced grammar and vocabulary instruction, comprehension strategy practice, and thorough passage analysis before answering questions (National Examination Council, 2022). The persistent failure of students in English language, particularly in reading comprehension at the junior secondary level, which is foundational for secondary education, might be addressed by introducing differentiated instruction. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) view that instruction should be adapted to students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) for optimal learning outcomes.

In contemporary education, the recognition of diverse learning needs among students has prompted educators to adopt teaching methods that accommodate these differences. Differentiated instruction is a pedagogical approach that involves designing and delivering instruction to cater to the diverse learning preferences, interest and abilities of students. According to Tomlinson (2017), Differentiated instruction is a framework or philosophy for effective teaching that involves providing different students with avenues to learning, often in the same classroom. On the other hand, Couberge, Struyven, Vanthournout and Engels, (2017) define differentiated instruction as an educational practice that adjusts the content, process, products and learning environment to accommodate the needs of individual learners. This instructional method acknowledges the varying learning styles, interests and strengths of learner, offering personalized strategies and materials to support their individual growth. The teacher who applies differentiated instruction is not just serving students in the middle. Tomlinson (2023), is of the opinion that a truly responsive teacher makes room for every learner; those who need extra help, those who are right on track, and those ready for more challenge. By adjusting how lessons are taught, what students work on, and how they show their learning, teachers can ensure that every student feels seen, supported, and stretched in just the right way. There are diversities in every learning environment, some students want to learn, others do not even want to come to school; some students want to do extra work and others may want to do little or nothing at all; some students are actively engaged in the learning process while others are indifferent or bored. Connor and Morrison, (2016), highlight that effective English language teachers must recognize and address the full spectrum of reading abilities in their classroom, from struggling readers to proficient ones. This is to ensure that success in reading comprehension is achieved.

In a junior secondary school reading classroom, students display a wide range of reading abilities, preferences and behaviours. A good understanding of these different types of students with varying reading abilities will help teachers teach well so as to meet

the diverse needs of the students. Several types of readers that can be found in a junior secondary school include; the fluent readers, the struggling readers, the reluctant readers, critical readers, visual readers and auditory readers. Teaching reading comprehension using differentiated instruction involves tailoring teaching methods to meet varied needs of the students, thus enhancing their understanding and retention of texts. One effective strategy is to provide texts at varying levels of difficulty. This allows students to engage with material, which is challenging yet accessible, facilitating better comprehension. By offering multiple texts on the same topic, teachers can ensure that all students, irrespective of their reading levels, can participate in the same lesson. Also, Coubergs, Struyven, Vanthournout and Engels (2017) highlighted the need to apply various methods during teaching. Teachers can employ a range of activities to help students understand and analyse texts. For example, some students might benefit from visual aids, others might benefit from discussions or dramatization. In addition to that, ongoing assessment plays important role in differentiated instruction for reading comprehension. Teachers continuously monitor students' progress and adjust their strategies based on individual needs. Additionally, fostering a supportive classroom environment is essential. Encouraging collaboration among students can enhance their comprehension skills. Incorporating technology such as reading apps and online platforms can provide personalized reading experiences. Heacox (2018) notes that tools offering differentiated reading materials and activities can support students at various levels of proficiency, thereby making reading more accessible and engaging. Lastly, teachers can apply Scaffolding Instruction which has to do with providing support structures to help students grasp complex reading comprehension skills. According to (Fisher & Frey, 2018), Scaffolded support can be gradually reduced as students gain confidence and independent. Some researchers have conducted works to prove the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching reading comprehension to junior secondary school students. Joseph, Thomas, Simonnette and Ramsook, (2013), did a work which provided evidence on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in improving student achievement. Another study by (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2019) explore the application of differentiated instruction in higher education and its effects on student achievement. The study of Heacox (2018) provides practical strategies for making differentiated instruction a routine practice in classrooms and discussed its positive impact on student achievement. Employing differentiated instruction in teaching reading comprehension will be beneficiary to all students irrespective of their gender, as it is all encompassing.

Gender according to (Adigun, Irunokhai, Sada, & Adesina, 2015) has been explained as a wide range of biological, behavioural, physical and mental characteristics regarding to and differentiating the female and male population. Some researchers are of the opinion that the use of differentiated instruction has more effect on female students than male students, while some are of the opinion that the effect is more on male students than on female students, still other are of the opinion that differentiated instruction is effective on both male and female students. Gender has been defined as a critical factor that interacts with learners' identities and affects their investment in language teaching and learning (Norton, 2021). The studies carried out by Aliakbari and Haghighi (2014), focused on Iranian high school students and found that differentiated instruction positively affected both male and female students' achievement in English language learning. Another study conducted by Rock, Gregg, Ellis, and Gable, (2008) examined the use of differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms and found that it could effectively address the learning needs of both male and female students. The study of Chien, (2012)

focused on Taiwanese elementary school students and found that differentiated instruction significantly improved reading comprehension skills of male and female students. The study noted that while both genders benefitted, girls showed slightly higher gains, indicating a potential gender difference in response to certain differentiated instruction strategies. Aliakbari and Haghighi (2014) observed that when differentiated instruction was used in the classroom, female students tended to respond with greater enthusiasm and focus. They not only showed more interest in the learning activities but also performed better academically, signifying that differentiated strategies may be particularly effective in engaging girls and supporting their reading development. In addition to that, the study of Moreover, the study of Magableh, (2022) showed that differentiated instruction proved effective in narrowing the achievement gap among learners, transforming mixed-ability classrooms into more cohesive learning environments. However, factors such as large class size, classroom management challenges, and noise were identified as major obstacles to its successful implementation. Overall, while statistically significant differences were found between the experimental groups, there was no significant interaction effect among group and gender, level and gender, or the combination of group, level, and gender, strongly indicating that differentiated instruction works on both males and females. However, it is not known whether gender is an issue in teaching reading comprehension using differentiated instruction to junior secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the traditional lecture method used in teaching reading comprehension has been increasingly criticized for its ineffectiveness in addressing the diverse learning needs of junior secondary school students. This challenge could be as a result of methods used in teaching reading comprehension, which fails to accommodate varying levels of students' ability and learning preferences. As a result, students' reading comprehension skills remain underdeveloped, impacting their overall academic achievement. Differentiated instruction has emerged as a promising alternative; designed to tailor teaching strategies to meet individual students' needs, learning styles and interests. However, despite its potential benefits, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in improving reading comprehension among junior secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone. Existing studies have predominantly focused on the general impacts of differentiated instruction, with insufficient attention given to its specific application in the context of reading comprehension within Nsukka Education Zone. This research seeks to fill this gap by analysing the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching reading comprehension to junior secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone.

Purpose of the Study

The general objective of this study was to find out the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in teaching reading comprehension to junior secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone. Specifically, the study aims to ascertain;

1. The mean achievement scores of students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction and lecture method to junior secondary school students.

2. The study aims to ascertain the mean achievement scores of male and female students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction to junior secondary school students.

Research Questions

Based on the objective of the study of the study, two research questions were raised for this study:

1. What are the mean achievement scores of students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction and lecture method to junior secondary school students?
2. What are the mean achievement scores of male and female students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction to junior secondary school students? ‘

Hypotheses

Based on these research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

- Ho₁:** There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught reading comprehension in English language differentiated instruction and lecture method to junior secondary school students.
- Ho₂:** There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of male and female students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction.

Methodology

Quasi-experimental research design was used for the study. Quasi-experiment is an experiment where random assignment of subjects to experimental and control groups is not possible, therefore, intact groups are used (Nworgu, 2015). The population of the study comprised four thousand, two hundred and ninety-four (4,294) junior secondary school two (JSSS2) students, made up of 2,191 males and 2, 103 female students in Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State. The sample consists of 91 junior secondary school students (40 boys and 51 girls) in two intact classes from two junior secondary schools sampled for the study from fifty-eight (58) public secondary schools in Nsukka Education Zone of Enugu State. Data were collected with English Language Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (ELRCAT). The instrument was face validated by two experts in Language Education Unit, Department of Arts Education and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation Unit, Department of Science Education, all from University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The instrument was trial tested with twenty (20) students from Obollo-Afor, Education Zone. The Kuder-Richardson's formula (K-R 21) was used to determine the consistency of the items within the instrument. The ELRCAT instrument yielded a reliability index of 0.82, which is high enough and considered usable. The researchers with permission of the school authority trained research assistants, who are the English Language teachers in the selected schools. They were first of all trained on how to administer the pre-test, after which they received training on how to perform the experiment. They were guided by the lesson plans developed by the researcher that lasted for a period of 4 weeks. The research assistants administered the post-tests after the 4 weeks of teaching with the lesson plans. The essence of using the English language teachers in the various selected schools was to avoid experimental bias, and they were

trained In order to avoid selection bias, the researcher made use of the intact classes in the selected sample schools. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation, while the null hypothesis was tested using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of achievement of students taught reading comprehension in English language in an inclusive English classroom using differentiated instruction and lecture method in an inclusive English classroom.

Treatment	N	Pre-test		Post- test		Gain Score
		\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	
Differentiated	45	9.00	3.05	17.5	1.25	8.53
Conventional	46	6.73	1.70	8.26	1.35	1.53

The result in Table 1 above indicates that the students taught reading comprehension in English language had a pre-test mean achievement score of 9.00 with the standard deviation of 3.05, and a post-test mean achievement scores of 17.5 with a standard deviation of 1.25 The difference between the pre-test mean achievement score and the post-test mean achievement score (gain score) for differentiated instruction is 8.53. On the other hand, those taught reading comprehension using lecture method had a pre-test achievement score of 6.73 with a standard deviation of 1.70, and a post-test mean achievement score of 8.26 with the standard deviation of 1.35. The difference between the pre-test mean achievement score and the post-test mean achievement score (gain score) for lecture method is 1.53. For both treatments, the post-test mean achievement score was greater than the pre-test mean achievement score with the students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction having the highest mean gain score.

Table 2: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of students' achievement by method

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1964.737 ^a	2	982.368	646.147	.000	.936
Intercept	1047.468	1	1047.468	688.965	.000	.887
Pretest Treatment	18.323	1	18.323	12.052	.001	.120
	1468.142	1	1468.142	965.661	.000	.916
Error	133.791	88	1.520			
Total	17090.000	91				
Corrected Total	2098.527	90				

a. R Squared = .936 (Adjusted R Squared = .935)

The result in Table 2 shows that the F-value is 97.6, with the P-value of .000. Since the P-value of .000 is less than 0.05 level of significance set for the study, it means that the F-value is significant at 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H^1) which states that there is no significant difference between the mean achievement score of students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction and those taught using lecture method is rejected. In other words, there is significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction and those taught using lecture method.

Table3: Mean and Standard Deviation of achievement scores of male and female students reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction and lecture method.

Gender	N	Pre-test		Post- test		Gain Score
		\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	
male	41	8.17	2.82	13.3	4.80	5.13
Female	50	7.58	2.60	12.3	4.90	4.72

The result in Table 3 shows that the pre-test mean achievement score of male students taught reading comprehension in English language in an inclusive English classroom using differentiated instruction is 8.17 with the standard deviation of 2.82, while the post-test mean achievement score of male students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction is 13.3 with the standard deviation of 4.80. On the other hand, the pre-test mean achievement score of female students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction is 7.58 with the standard deviation of 2.60, while the post-test mean achievement score of female students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction is 12.3 with the standard deviation of 4.90. The gain score of the male students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction is 5.13, while that of the female students is 4.72. This shows that the gain scores of both male and female students are high and as such gender is not a significant issue in using differentiated instruction.

Table 4: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on the difference in the mean achievement scores of male and female students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction and those taught using lecture method.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	502.209 ^a	2	251.104	13.843	.000	.239
Intercept	349.803	1	349.803	19.284	.000	.180
Pretest	479.217	1	479.217	26.418	.000	.231
Gender	5.614	1	5.614	.309	.579	.004
Error	1596.319	88	18.140			
Total	17090.000	91				
Corrected Total	2098.527	90				

a. R Squared = .239 (Adjusted R Squared = .222)

The result in Table 4 shows that the F-value for male greater than and female students taught reading comprehension with differentiated instruction is .309, with P-value of .579. Since the P-value of .579 is greater than .05 probability level set for the study, it means that the F-value is not significant at 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference between the mean achievement score of male and female students taught reading comprehension in English language is not rejected. In other words, there is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of male and female students taught reading comprehension in English language. Therefore, gender has no significant effect on the achievement of students.

Discussion

Research question one identified the mean achievement scores of students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction and lecture method to junior secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone. The study revealed that for both treatments, the post-test mean achievement score was greater than the pre-test mean achievement score with the students taught reading comprehension using differentiated instruction having the highest mean gain score. The study is in line with the study of Ayodele & Adegbile, (2011), who discovered in their studies that reliance on the lecture method contributed to students' poor performance in reading comprehension. Again, the findings of their study align with the work of Joseph, Thomas, Simonnette, & Ramsook, (2013), which provided evidence on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in improving student achievement. Another study by Santangelo & Tomlinson, (2019) agree with the findings of this study as it explores the application of differentiated instruction in higher education and its effects on student achievement.

In addition to that, research question two discovered the mean achievement scores of male and female students taught reading comprehension in English language using differentiated instruction to junior secondary school students. The findings of this study show that, the result of the achievement of male and female students taught reading comprehension in English using differentiated instruction is high. Therefore, gender has no significant effect on the achievement of students. This might be due to the fact that, when the individual needs of the students are met, irrespective of being male or female, the student is bound to achieve high academically. The findings of this study agreed with the studies conducted by Rock, Gregg, Ellis and Gable, (2008) and Chien, (2012) examined the use of differentiated instruction and found that differentiated instruction significantly improved reading comprehension skills of both male and female students. The study has provided empirical evidence in the area of teaching reading comprehension in English language so as to create an inclusive English classroom using differentiated instruction. The implication here is that if English language teachers utilize differentiated instruction in the teaching and learning of reading in English language, the achievement of the learners will be enhanced, especially in an inclusive classroom.

Conclusion

From the findings and discussion of the study, it has been disclosed that using differentiated instruction by English language teachers in teaching reading comprehension classes in an inclusive classroom will boost the achievement of the students in reading comprehension. Again, the study reveals that gender is not an issue in using differentiated instruction in teaching reading comprehension in English language in an inclusive classroom.

Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that:

1. English language teachers should incorporate differentiated instruction in the teaching and learning of reading comprehension, as this will facilitate learning in other aspects of the language and beyond.
2. The Federal Government should make adequate provision for appropriate assistive learning technologies in junior secondary schools in Nsukka Education Zone.
3. Educational authorities should organize seminars and workshops for English language teachers on how to effectively use differentiated instruction in teaching reading comprehension.

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