



The Language of Selected Prose Texts: A Readability Study



By

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Outline

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Motivation

- Discovery that second year law students were walking out of quizzes because they had not read the novel on which test was based. Scores from quiz made up 30% of overall assessment. Why were students not read the prose texts ?
- Set us thinking. Perhaps readability of texts responsible for reading inertia among youths.

Introduction 1

- Language of literature, especially prose, is often characterized by intricacies & complexities as a result of writers' fluidity and elasticity in use of language.
- Intricacies and complexities can pose a challenge to reluctant readers such as most Nigerian students (Ekpunobi,1993:486 & Osakwe,1999:47).
- Reading literature reveals that competence in L1 reading positively influences L2 reading (Cummins,1979:222)

Introduction 2

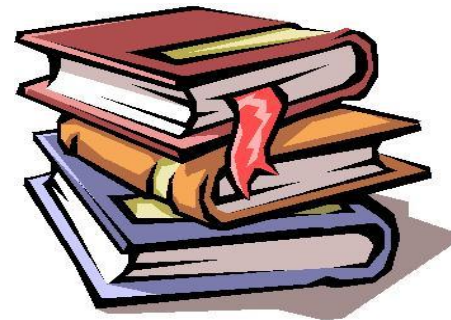
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Introduction 3

- Literature reveals that secondary school students prefer reading notes based on recommended texts to reading primary texts.
- (NECO Chief Examiners' Report, 2007:59; Widdowson, 1985).
- West African Examinations Council's Results from
- 2007- 2012 show that only 41% of students who registered for the examination scored from A1- C6. (WAEC, Yaba, Nigeria Statistics of Entries & Results)

Objective

- To determine how readable the recommended prose texts are.
- To determine which lexical ,grammatical & syntactic features are likely to pose readability challenges to students .



Defining key words

- Reading: interaction between reader and text (Nuttal,2007:11).
- Readability: The level of ease or difficulty with which text material can be understood by a particular reader who is reading that text for a specific purpose (Pikulski,2002:1)
- Prose texts: narratives written in a straightforward manner.

Prose texts & Authors

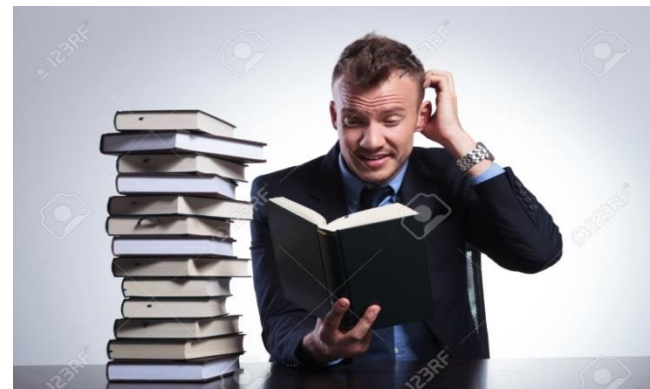
- Prose texts under examination: Recommended texts for 2013 literature in -English National Examination Council (NECO) examination:
- i. Lord of the Flies –written by a male, British, William Golding.
- ii. Purple Hibiscus- written by a female Nigerian from south-eastern Nigeria, same location as the study population, Chimamanda Adichie.
- iii. A Woman in her Prime- written by a male, Ghanian, Asare Konadu

Study Population

- 150 senior secondary male & female students aged between 16 & 22 from five states in south eastern Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo and Ebonyi States.
- 10 students each randomly selected from 3 categories of schools in each state.
- Category A: Government –owned schools located in state capitals /Cities.
- Category B: Private schools located in state capitals/cities - established and run by private individuals.
- Category C: Government –owned schools located in rural areas.

Research Questions

- To what extent are the lexical, grammatical and syntactical structures of the recommended prose texts within the readability levels of the study population?
- Which lexical, grammatical and syntactical features are likely to pose readability challenges to readers?



Theoretical Framework

- Drew inspiration from Schema theory credited to (Barlett, 1932). Stresses the active construction of knowledge by individuals as they read or experience situations.
- Implication: Wide reading equates expanded schema. Extended schemata leads to reading fluency & comprehension.
- Conversely limited reading causes small schema, strained reading & slow comprehension.
- Reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) Since individuals have an individual schema, he contends that a literary piece does not exist until it is read and experienced by the reader.
- Implication: Readers cannot experience unreadable texts.

Literature Review

- Okoye (1996:56) discovered that complex noun compounds, unfamiliar words ,frequent use of passives and presenting new information without any given led to text difficulty of government-sponsored Social Sciences research reports .
- Umole & Oyetunde (1991 :234-55) used cloze test to discover text difficulty of a narrative passage in an English language textbook with a readability profile supposedly two levels below a class.
- Osborne & Hocchauser (1999:4-6) discovered that patients were unable to read advanced directives because of legal terms and long sentences.
- Odejide & Sanni cited in Adesonye (2000:85) discovered that editorials of The Guardian & Daily Times newspapers were written at a level that would be frustrating to the masses in Nigeria.

Methodology 1: Flesch Readability Formula

- Flesch Readability formula –Most publicized Readability test Formula; Easy and Cheap; Math Behind Microsoft Office (Dubay,2007:56)
- Position on a scale of 0 (difficult) to 100 (easy),with 30=very difficult & 70 easy.
- ASL=Average length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences)
- ASW=average number of syllables per word
- A.Count 100 words on a text.
- B.Count number of syllables in 100 words
- C.Count number of sentences within 100 words
- B divides A=X84.6=.....
- A divides C=X 1.015=...
- Readability Score = $206.835 - (1.015 \times ASL) - (84.6 \times ASW)$ = Readability score

Method 2: Cloze test

- Cloze test (Taylor,1953)- Comprehensibility test .Best measure of word difficulty is not words but how words relate to each other.Those who understand passage will be able to fill gaps.
- 3 passages from each prose text .Each passage selected from beginning, middle and end of each prose text. Each passage made up of 100 words,
- First and last sentences in each passage left intact to provide background for readers.
- Every 5th word deleted in passage. Total of 50 deleted spaces created in each passage.

Method 3,4 & 5

- **Method 3-Descriptive statistics:** Results of cloze test subjected to descriptive statistics:
 - Mean
 - Frequency
 - Percentages
- **Method 4-Corpus Analysis:**
 - Number of Simple sentences, number of compound sentences, number of compound complex sentences; number of asyndetic sentences, number of code mixing, number of parallelism, colloquial , number of logopeia, number of unfamiliar words, number of Double negative constructions
 - sentence count & linguistic analysis of prose texts using checklist
- **Method 5: Teachers' Questionnaire & Interview**

Validation of Research Instruments

- .Instruments validated by a Professor of English and an Associate Professor in Linguistics.

Data Analysis of Texts using Flesch Readability Formula

Lord of the Flies

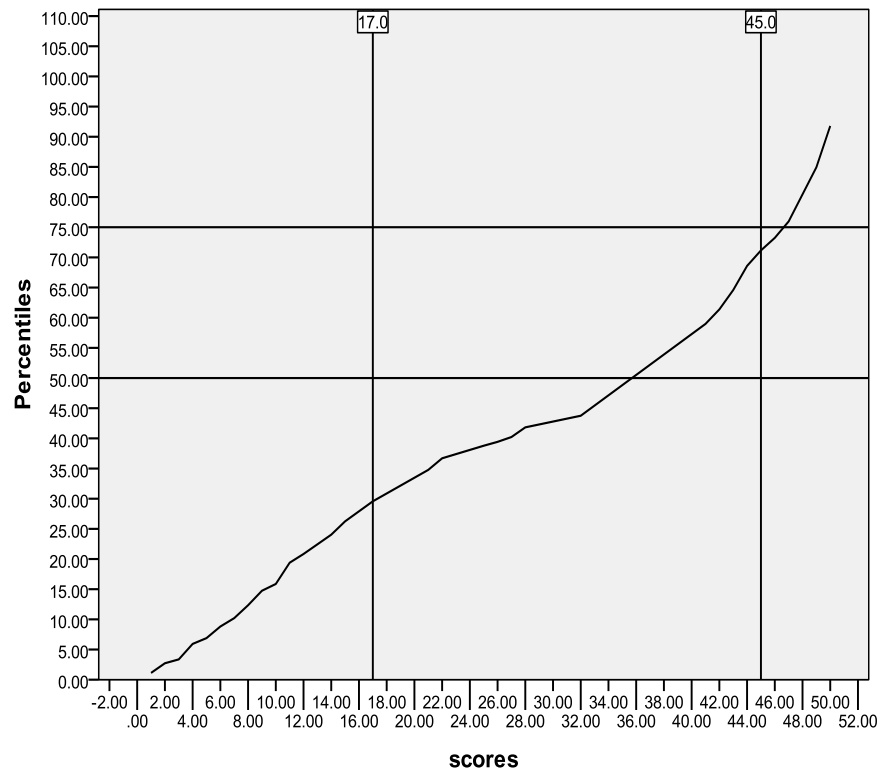
- A.No of words = 100
- B.No of syllables in words= 125
- C.No of sentences=5
- $B \div A = 125 \div 100 = 1.25 \times 84.6 = 105.75$
- $A \div C = 100 \div 5 = 20 \times 1.015 = 20.3$
- $105.75 + 20.30 = 127.217$
- $206.835 - 127.217 = 79.6\%$

- Purple Hibiscus= 76%

- A Woman in Her Prime=74%

Table 1: Students' Performance in Cloze test based on Lord of the Flies

		Percentiles						
		5	10	25	50	75	90	95
Weighted Average(Definition)	scores	2.4000	4.8000	9.0000	17.0000	45.0000	50.0000	50.0000



Interpretation of Percentile Chart

- Golding's *Lord of the Flies*= 50 % of entire study population did not answer correctly more than 17 out of 50 questions. Readable but not comprehensible.
- Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*= 50% of population answered correctly 41 or less out of 50 questions.=Readable &Comprehensible
- Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*= 50% scored 34 out of 50 questions= Readable &Comprehensible

Table 2. Showing some lexical, grammatical, and stylistics features of the sample texts by frequency

Texts	Asyndetic Sentences	Code Mixing	Parallelism	Proverbs	Double Negative Construction	Logopodia	Unfamiliar Words
Purple Hibiscus	110	1400	67	8	-	12	68
Lord of the Flies	34	-	12	-	25	5	213
A woman in her Prime	7	11	10	4	-	3	12

Findings from Corpus analysis of Lord of the Flies

Examples of unfamiliar words:

- i. Ralph *pursed* his lips and *squirted* air into the shell....p.23
- ii...Piggy *snivelled* and Simon *shushed* him quickly.....p.86
- iii.Can I borrow yours, Ralph ,to make a *nick in the hilt*...?p.87
- iv.A shadow *fronted* him *tempestuously*. P.113
- v.As though they were *serenading* the rising sun, Jack went on ...p.155

Examples of double negative constructions:

- i.We never done nothing, we never seen nothing. Nobody don't know.p.20
- ii.Nobody don't know that we're here. Your dad don't know. Nobody don't know.
- iii.The most important thing on the island is the smoke and you can't have no smoke without fire.p.160
- iv.It's them that haven't no common sense that make trouble on the island.p.164
- v.I didn't vote for no ghost.p.113

Table 3
Percentages and Frequencies of Teachers' Questionnaire

	Adichie's Purple Hibiscus n (%)	Golding's Lord of the flies n (%)	Woman in her prime n (%)
Level of difficulty			
Difficult to understand	0 (0.0)	11 (22.0)	0 (0.0)
Simple and easy to understand	44 (88.0)	5 (10.0)	40 (80.0)
Technical and incomprehensible	0 (0.0)	28 (56.0)	0 (0.0)
Literal and comprehensible	0 (0.0)	6 (12.0)	10 (20.0)
None of the above	6 (12.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Strange idioms and proverbs			
Yes	0 (0.0)	39 (78.0)	6 (12.0)
No	50 (100.0)	11 (22.0)	44 (88.0)
Appropriate use of figures of speech			
Yes	50 (100.0)	16 (32.0)	44 (88.0)
No	0 (0.0)	34 (68.0)	6 (12.0)
Most commonly used sentence types			

Interpretation of Teachers' Questionnaire

- 10% of the teachers agreed that *Lord of the Flies* is easy to understand, 56% indicated that the text is incomprehensible while 78% conceded that the text contains strange idioms and proverbs.

This result collaborates findings of cloze test but is a departure from finding of Flesch Readability formula which placed the readability scale of the text at 79.6%

- 88% of teachers noted that Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is easy to understand while 100% of the respondents agreed that *Purple Hibiscus* contains no strange idiom or proverb
- This result collaborates findings of both cloze test and Flesch Readability formula which placed the readability scale of the text at 76%
- 80% believed *A Woman in her Prime* is easy to understand, 100% conceded the text has no strange proverbs thus aligning with the results of the cloze test and Flesch readability formula which placed the readability scale of the text at 74%

Findings

- Predominance of rare words, unfamiliar background and negative constructions made *Lord of the Flies* difficult for study population.
- Even though *Purple Hibiscus* is a very long for reluctant readers, familiarity with background of text, predominance of simple sentences and code-mixing elements made it readable to study population.
- Some literature in English teachers, even in private schools, do not read recommended texts they teach.
- Teaching a book repeatedly can make a difficult text an easy –read therefore teachers require objective tool to measure text readability.

Findings 2

- Most texts used in primary and secondary schools were written by university teachers and some university teachers write difficult- to read -texts .
- Readability is not a yardstick for book selection in secondary schools in Nigeria.
- Book selection in secondary schools depends on teachers' subjective choice, influence of publishers or government.

Conclusion

- Only one out of 3 recommended texts, *Lord of the Flies*, is unreadable .
- Since two texts are readable yet students fare poorly in literature in English examinations, low readability appears not to be the reason why students are not reading recommended prose texts.
- Linguistic features responsible for text difficulty of *Lord of the Flies* include rare words double negative constructions, & unfamiliar background

Recommendation

- To overcome reading phobia among students, writers could adopt *lassiez- faire* readability- a process where demand of students determine what writers supply.(De George et al,1984:110)
- This means writers study linguistics patterns in texts that students enjoy and use such in writing academic texts, including prose texts.
- Government, school authorities and teachers should use objective tools to measure readability profiles of texts used in schools,not personal opinion or experience of teachers.
- Sufficient background should be provided where author comes from a background different from that of the students.

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