# Impact of Writing on Improving the Reading Competence of Nigerian Adolescents

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## Abstract

*In recent times many Nigerian adolescents do not read and have developed a poor reading habit. This study investigated the impact of writing in improving the poor reading habit of Nigerian adolescents. The area of study was Umuahia Municipal of Abia State, Nigeria. It was an experimental study and the population of was 400 in-school adolescents, with a sample size of 52 adolescents. The sample was put into two groups using the simple random sampling technique, of 26 adolescents in each group. One group formed the control group (C) while the second group formed the experimental group (E). The experiment lasted for two weeks and consisted of the treatment experimental groups being given written assignments, like essays, answering the questions after a comprehension passages and being drilled reading of comprehensive passages from their English text books. The control group was only drilled on reading. The instruments consisted of comprehension passages from their English text books and a verbal aptitude test. Four research questions were posed to direct the study, their scores from their aptitude tests, and performance in reading for the control group and in scores from the written assignment produced. The pair-wise correlation coefficient, simple regression analysis and simple t-test were used to analyze the data. The findings showed that writing, aptitude, sex and age had positive effects on reading. Reading seemed to progress in the same direction as aptitude and writing. The paper concluded that, since reading is a learnt behaviour, adolescents can improve their reading ability through practice in writing. The paper recommended that parents and adolescents need to be encouraged to read and create conducive home environments to encourage reading. Special training should be given to English teacher and reading as a teaching subject should be included in the school curriculum.*

## 1. Introduction

No one is born reading. Everyone acquires the taste for books over time. Reading is a learnt behaviour, and for most avid readers, the origin for their love of reading started at a tender age. It was either at school (pre-school, primary) or in the home, that the interest in books was nurtured, developed and blossomed. If children, especially at a tender age, come to associate reading with fun, then the habit sticks with them to adulthood.

Okwilagwe asserts that reading is more concerned with reasoning, meaningful interpretation of words, phrases and sentences, requires all types of thinking, such as critical, analytical, creative, imaginative evaluation, judgemental and problem solving [1]. This involves the acquisition of the intended meaning of the writer, as well as ones interpretation, evaluations, and reflections about these meanings. The person who is reading should therefore, be thinking, predicting, defining and redefining what is being read. Comprehension is at the centre of reading. Collins and Cheek describe reading as a process that requires the use of complex thought processes to interpret printed symbols as meaningful units, and comprehend them as a thought unit, in order to understand a printed message [2]. Through reading humans have the tool to transmit knowledge to each succeeding generation, and it allows one to listen to the wisdom and people of other ages and culture [3].

Teachers and parents hold the magic wand to get children hooked on books. The passion from a teacher or parents, who is in love with books, is contagious and children can easily get infected. Some teachers however, make kids see reading as a bitter medicine or punishment. With that attitude, many children get rid of their books as soon as they leave school.

Reading must be nurtured from a child's earliest years. It is an indispensible tool of learning. Every course of study is accomplished partly through reading. Academic success at every level is like a multidimensional phenomenon, that includes language proficiency, learning, study strategies and certain personal characteristics. In order to perform well in their academics, all students must read and pass their courses. Success in any academic endeavour demands knowledge of facts and understanding of ideas, much of which is accomplished through the written word. Knowledge is power and most knowledge is acquired through reading.

Adolescence is a period of multiple transitions involving education, training, employment and unemployment, as well as transition from one living circumstance to another. The period is usually accompanied by an increased independence allowed by the parents or legal guardians, and less supervision as compared with preadolescence. Cognitive advances during adolescence encompass both increases in knowledge and in ability to think abstractly and to reason more effectively [4]. There are marked improvements in both of their working and long term memories [5]. Adolescents think more quickly than children. Studies since 2005 indicate that the brain is not fully formed until the early twenties.

As a result of cognitive development, adolescents experience a significant shift from the simple concrete and global self descriptions typical of young children. At this point they are expected to be able to read with understanding, and due to their increased physical development, they are full of excess energy and activities. Relationship with peers becomes so important that adolescents are willing to do anything that will enable

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them retain their relationship with their peers and friends. This could involve their giving up important or necessary activities or responsibilities, and getting involved in risky behaviours, to gain the approval of their friends and peers. Research shows that relationships have the largest affect over the social development of an individual [6]. Peer relationships can be positively harnessed to develop and promote the reading habits of adolescents.

Reading as a habitual activity is unfortunately confined to a relatively small segment of adolescents. This habit does not appear to be a prominent feature in the lives of many adolescents, who come from different backgrounds and have different life experiences, which have great impacts on their ability to read. A small group of adolescents, though, are curious about many things, and are aware of their own need for information. These groups of students often consist of the brighter ones, and are eager to read.

How many Nigerians read the daily newspapers or magazines from time to time, not to mention literature books or novels? These feature arises as a result of a poor acquisition of reading skills and culture. Anyone who develops the habit of reading will always look for something to read. The shocking and sad truth is that reading as a habit, has dwindled over the past few decades. Young people are not just reading, to the detriment of scholarship. The Apostle Paul admonished Timothy to "study to show yourself approved unto God" (2 Timothy 2:15).

It has been asserted that every child must become fully competent in reading to succeed in academics and to discharge his responsibilities as a citizen [7]. Reading is closely related to vocational efficiency. Students and employees in every field must read to keep abreast of what is happening in their fields, and emerging innovations. It is one of the important activities of life through which we enter into the life and experiences of others, and it extends our knowledge, scope of experience and enjoyment.

Due to technological development, reading habits have changed drastically. While technology is slowly taking control of individual lives, their reading habit is fast vanishing. Students now lack the skill or the interest in reading. They spend long hours on the electronic media, browsing the net, playing with handsets and sending text messages hours on end, thereby, making reading a book or any other piece of written material to seem to be an archaic idea for most school children and adults [8]. Obama in his speech pointed out that children cannot achieve unless they raise their expectations and turn off television sets [9]. Shabi and Udofia assert that active learning from books is better than passive learning, such as watching the television and playing games [10].

Ofili believes that there is not much difference between the reading habit of adolescents of today and that of their parents in yesteryears [11]. He believes that there are only technological changes in reading which many people have failed to realize or embrace. He posited that if books were removed from the libraries and put in the internet, and cell phones and made easy for children to access, children would read them. He argues that what many people see as the cause of the poor reading habit of adolescents could actually be the solution to it. In his opinion, while Nigeria has changed from what it used to be and populations have exploded, our libraries have largely remained the same, and books have remained stuck in libraries and in expensive books store, consequently our reading culture has suffered. For this to improve Ofili suggests that books need to be moved beyond libraries and placed in the same gadgets that people, especially adolescents, love to use, the internet and other communication applications [11]. This would involve creating mobile book reading appliances, specifically prepared for the Nigerian market.

Ofili asserts that he has successfully converted two of his books into mobile applications that can easily be purchased via SMS [11]. It is interesting to note that many Nigerians, including youths, access the internet via different mobile devices, to read online messages and information. Unfortunately, instead of embracing the technological changes to enhance reading, many people, especially adults, criticize and condemn them and see them as the cause of adolescents' poor reading habit and their poor performance in academics.

Reading is an essential part of an individual's learning, growth and development [12]. Ideal reading streams from the need to sustain and preserve knowledge for the next generation. In one of his quotes Harry S. Truman asserts that "not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers". Reading inspires leading, because in every book there is knowledge, skill, wisdom and the ability to stand out, having added value to yourself each time you read a book. In Nigeria, like in most African countries, the oral mode of communication was the method of transmitting information/knowledge. Obviously, this means was limited as it could inspire misinterpretation, a change in the content of the information, and it lacked an appropriate mode of preservation, and as such, information could easily be lost. Hence, the need for a better means of preserving and passing on information through reading and writing.

The British colonization of Nigeria brought about the introduction of books, reading and education, which enable and increase knowledge, and exposure to things beyond the immediate environment. The reading culture grew to the level of inspiring Nigerian scholars who became literary icons, such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, Chimamanda Adichie, John P. Clark and others. The common feature among these literary icons is that they were great "readers". In the case of Chinua Achebe, he actually found, in the course of his reading, that Africans were always portrayed in a poor light by foreign authors. That prompted him to write books from the perspective of an African.

Popoola, Ajobade and Etim reported that a few of their previous teachers never loved to read [13]. Although many of them knew how to read, they preferred to gather information through television, movies, websites and conversations. Ojielo confirmed this when he said that many Nigerians prefer listening to stories to reading, a practice which accounts for the popularity of home videos among Nigerians [14]. Ilogho asserts that the rising population of reluctant readers in this age of information explosion is disturbing [15]. The pathetic thing is that the Nigerian society is either not reading or if they are, they do so reluctantly. The Nigerian society, is composed of the partially literate, alliterate, and literate and readers [15]. The partially literate can neither read nor write but have

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acquired informal education. The literate avid readers are highly motivated individuals who take delight in reading, and read with passion and for pleasure. They love and enjoy reading. The alliterates however, can read but refuse to read, and if they read, they do so reluctantly. They are uncommitted and lack the enthusiasm for reading. Beers noted that the alliterates in the society seem to have outnumbered the illiterates [16].

In most Nigerian schools, students are hardly seen around reading, except for reasons of test, examination or homework. They are not easily given to reading for the love of doing so, instead most engage in group discussions or gossip, cracking jokes and in indoor games, during their free periods. They use their break periods to play footballs and other outdoor games. Students who have access to computers and internet facilities prefer to brows, chat, send e-mails, SMS, use facebook and yahoo messenger, and play computer games. In addition, at home adolescents watch the television, entertainment programmes, films, comedies, listen to music, watch dancing competitions and so on. There is more than enough activities competing for the little available time to students.

Occasionally, one may find isolated cases of students engaged in reading as a recreation. A few years back it was a thing of pride to be seen reading. One does not fail to wonder what must have gone wrong. The purpose of education is to give students every advantage at making a good life for themselves, and one way of doing so is to take advantage of the richness and benefits of reading [17].

## 2. Importance of Good Reading Habit

Reading is one of the most fundamental skills a child needs to learn to succeed in life. Good reading habits are vital to a child's future, both academically and in everyday life.

Reading develops vocabulary. The more a child reads, the more new words find their way into his vocabulary. It allows for exposure to words and phrases that one might not use as part of normal speech.

Reading increases the attention span of adolescents. Good reading habits should be encouraged at an early age, so as to develop their attention span, which would them to focus better, and for longer periods of time. It combats the poor attention span in today's children.

The development of reading habit early, leads to a lifelong love of books. Children who start reading regularly from an early age are more likely to enjoy reading later in life. This serves them well in their education and beyond. Reading encourages a thirst for knowledge. Children with good reading habits learn more about the world around them, and develop interest in other cultures. Reading leads to asking questions, and seeking answers, thus, enabling children to learn more, every day. It provides adolescents and indeed everyone with other people's views of life, and broadens ones horizon.

## 3. Causes of Poor reading Habits

Reading is a decision an individual has to make. A number of factors have been blamed for the dying reading culture. Psychological factors such as lack of enthusiasm, urge, drive, desire or motivation to read, have been held responsible for this state of affairs. The attitude and interest of students towards reading has been negative. The amount of technology available in most homes has constituted another important source of distraction, which draw youths away from recreational reading. Many students return home from school and spend the rest of the day playing video games, surfing and chatting on the internet, watching television, listening to music or talking on the telephone. Reading requires more thinking and imagination than any of these high tech activities. With a nation of latch key children like Nigeria, it is easy to see why reading is not taking top priority as an after school activity of choice. Ilogho asserts that alliterates are more prone to being engaged in the high tech gadgets in their homes and with peer group discussions in preference to reading books, magazines and newspapers, etc [15].

Libraries play an important role in the promotion of reading habits. In many places libraries are non-existent or are very poorly equipped. They are not sited where they are needed, while the few existing ones are not properly equipped. Libraries are not available to a greater proportion of the population at large, nor in schools. Where they exist, many of their materials are outdated. This inhibits the development of a good reading habit. Some education stakeholders attribute the drop in the reading culture in Nigerians to the lack of adequate awareness of its importance.

Such societal factors as the non-availability of human and material resources for the teaching of reading as a school subject, and the general literacy level of the society are held responsible. Like many other African nations, Nigeria still has a prevalence of oral-tradition mentality. A popular adage says that – "If you want to hide something from an African, put it in a book." This indicates that the oral tradition that governed life in the pre-historic societies still reigns in Nigeria. This can be seen in habit of utter disregard for data and facts for rumors, and in the utter disregard for record keeping [18]. Nigeria would need to take a giant mental leap from oral to written culture, as a necessary first step to attuning our minds to reading.

There is no provision for reading as a taught subject in the Nigerian secondary school curriculum, either at the primary or secondary school level. The only visible effort made towards recognizing reading as an important part of learning is the existence and activities of the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN). This is an organization for tertiary personnel, and is far removed from the participation of the average Nigerian or adolescents. There are no reading laboratories in any secondary school in Nigeria, except for a few language laboratories that are in the State Education Boards. There are no facilities, to train reading specialists, and trained reading teachers are nonexistent in most schools.

One important cause of aliteracy could also be found in the way schools educate children, and specifically, how teachers handle reading as a subject. One can postulate that if students had opportunity to read what they found

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interesting, they would develop a positive experience with reading, which would provoke other positive experiences with other books.

## 4. Consequences of Illiteracy

The Director-General of UNESCO Rene Maheu M. 1972 was quoted as saying that the book is the most dependable and most convenient instruction of communications ever devised by man. With the book, the human mind is able to conquer time and space. The book promotes individual fulfillment and social progress, gives everybody the chance to appreciate the best that the human mind could ever offer the world, and serves to enhance a better understanding of people of different cultures.

Consequently, not reading, for whatever reasons, could have grave consequences, both for the individual and for society. The Bible attests that "My people perish for lack of knowledge". (Hosea 4:6) Much knowledge is acquired through reading. Not reading has great consequences, which such as –

- Lack of in-depth knowledge of subjects and life issues.
- Lack of new vocabulary and new terminology.
- Inhibition of one's intellectual abilities.
- Denying an individual of the benefits of knowing places you may never visit.
- Limiting one of mental imaginations and deliberate thinking.
- Inability to envision a bigger and higher future. (Adapted from [11].

There is power in printed words. Brummitt Yale asserts that reading affects writing and writing affects reading [19]. According to recommendations from the major English Language Arts professional organizations, reading instruction is most effective when intertwined with writing instruction and vise versa. According to her research has shown that when children read extensively they become better writers. Reading a variety of genres helps children learn text structures and language, which they can then transfer to their writing. Practice in writing helps children build their reading skills.

Most adolescents tend to read solely to pass examinations [20]. The materials students read often consist only of lecture notes and text books. Many have not developed the interest to read for pleasure. Lawal found that the reading problems in adolescents included difficult words and slow reading [21]. Emenyonu found that 60% of responding students admitted that they read two or three novels a year, for pleasure [20]. He contended that there are definite skills, attitudes and habits that should be taught, if children are to learn to read with efficiency, understanding and for pleasure, to assure life-long reading. This scholar believes that good reading habits are formed with the regular application of good reading skills and attitudes, which must be introduced early in life.

Culp and Spann posited that the relationship between reading and writing has long been acknowledged by authorities in both fields [22]. Reading and writing are considered part of a total language process, with reciprocal inter-relationship, and several studies have confirmed that some relationships do exist. Barbig and LaCampa found that better writers did significantly more voluntary reading than average writers [23] [24]. In a study of ninth graders, Maloney found that the reading comprehension of good writers was significantly better than that attributed to average writers [25]. Doctorow, Wittrock and Marks found that sixth grade students who were given paragraph headings and who wrote one sentence summaries after reading the paragraphs showed greater comprehension and recall than students using other methods [26]. Collins found that expressive writing practice, combined with reading instruction, improved reading comprehension significantly, more than did reading instructions alone [27].

Most of the researches cited above on the relationship between writing and reading are foreign based. To the best of the knowledge of the researcher, no study or very few studies have been conducted in Nigeria in this area. Hence, this study on "The impact of writing on improving the reading performance of Nigerian adolescents".

## 5. Methodology

The study used a quasi experiment design. The area of study is Abia State, Nigeria. The population of the study is all in-school adolescents in Abia State. Specifically, 400 in-school adolescents of a private school in Umuahia Municipal, Abia State form the population. The exiting Junior Secondary School two (JSS II) of the school was used as the sample giving, a sample size of 52 JSS II pupils. The random sampling technique was used to assign the children into two groups of Experimental (E) and control (C) groups, with twenty-six (26) in each group, made up of 14 males and 12 females in each group. Sex and age were used as moderator variables.

Four Research questions were formulated to guide the study. They are:

1. Does writing have a positive effect on the reading of in-school adolescents?
2. Does aptitude have a positive effect on the reading ability of in-school adolescents?
3. Does age affect the reading ability of in-school adolescents?
4. Does sex have an effect of the reading ability of in school adolescents?

Before the treatment session the two groups E and C, were given a verbal aptitude test consisting of 25 items. The experimental period lasted two weeks. While the experimental group was exposed to two weeks of treatment (writing) and reading, the Control group was only drilled in reading. The treatment consisted of reading comprehension exercises from their English text books, and writing short essays on topics like "how I will spend my holidays, what I like or hate most about my school". After the treatment which lasted for thirty minutes during each treatment session, each student was given opportunity to read comprehension passages from their English text books. The reading of each subject was graded using the following criteria – pronunciation, fluency of reading, reading with confidence, reading with

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meaning and understanding. After each writing exercise, they read compression passages from their English text books. Each pupils reading was assessed and scored. Their scores on the verbal aptitude test was computed and analyzed.

The Control Group (C) was only drilled in reading the same comprehension passages from their English Text book that the Experimental Group read. Each subjects reading was assessed using the same criteria used for the Experimental group. The only difference was that the group was not exposed to the treatment - writing exercises. Their reading scores were also compiled.

## 6. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: Does writing have a positive effect on the reading of in-school adolescents?

**Table 1.**

| | Writing | Reading |
|---|---|---|
| Writing | 1.0000 | |
| Reading | 0.1014 | 1.0000 |

The result of the analysis showed that writing has a positive effect on the reading of in-school adolescents. This means that writing and reading moves in the same direction. The implication of the result is that reading by in-school adolescents increases as their writing ability increases that that writing and reading had reciprocal inter-relationship. This is in line with the findings of Obanya, Maloney and Collins who found that expressive writing practice, combined with reading instruction improved reaching comprehensive significantly [18] [25] [27].

Research Question 2: Does aptitude have a positive effect on the reading ability of in-school adolescents?

**Table 2. Pairwise Correlation Coefficient Between Writing and Reading**

| | Writing | Reading |
|---|---|---|
| Writing | 1.0000 | |
| Reading | 0.1014 | 1.0000 |

The result of the pairwise correlation coefficient shows that aptitude has a positive effect on reading, that is, there is a positive relationship between aptitude and performance in reading. This is in line with the finding of Okwilagwe [1].

Research Question 3: Does age affect the reading ability of in-school adolescents?

**Table 3. Simple Regression Analysis on Reading and Age**

| Variable | Coef. | Std. Err. | t-ratio |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 0.4487952 | 0.2754488 | 1.63 |
| Cons | 13.40663 | 6.086487 | 2.20 |
| R-squared | 0.2373 | | |
| Adj R-squared | 0.1246 | | |
| F-ratio | 1.898* | | |

A simple linear regression analysis was used to analyze data on research question 3. The result of the analysis showed that the coefficient of age was significant at10 percent level of probability and negatively related to the reading ability of adolescents. The result implies that reading ability of an adolescent increases as he gets older, all things being equal. This is in line with findings of Smith and Handler that the effort to arouse children's interest in reading should start in the home in the first years of life [4].

Research Question 4: Does sex have effect on the reading ability of in-school adolescents?

**Table 4. Simple Regression Analysis of Reading and Sex**

| Variable | Coef. | Std. Err. | t-ratio |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sex | -.0844156 | 10.26 | -0.68 |
| Cons | 7.727273 | | 2.20 |
| R-squared | 0.2373 | | |
| Adj R-squared | 0.1046 | | |
| F-ratio | 1.65* | | |

A simple linear regression was used to analyze data on research question 4. The result of the analysis showed that the coefficient of sex was not significant. However, it was negatively related to reading ability which implies that female adolescents have more reading ability compared to their male counterpart.

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**Table 5. Test of Significance Difference Between the Experimental Values and the Control**

| Variable | Mean | Std. Err. | Std. Dev. | t.value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | | | | |
| Experiment | 12.76 | 0.21 | 1.05 | 0.98 |
| Control | 12.48 | 0.16 | 0.82 | |
| Writing | | | | |
| Experiment | 7.72 | 0.38 | 1.88 | 1.23 |
| Control | 7.16 | 0.17 | 0.85 | |
| Reading | | | | |
| Experiment | 7.72 | 0.52 | 2.54 | 0.59 |
| Control | 7.16 | 0.15 | 0.74 | |
| Aptitude | | | | |
| Experiment | 19.48 | 0.85 | 4.25 | -0.25 |
| Control | 19.72 | 0.48 | 2.39 | |

A test of significant was carried out to determine if there is a significant difference between the experimental values and the control values. The result is presented I the table below. The result showed that there was no significance difference between the mean values of the variable for the various defined items – age, writing, reading, and aptitude. In order words there was no significant advantage for either the experimental or control variables. Test of significant difference between the experimental values and the control.

## 7. Recommendations

The paper recommends the following:-

- The habit of reading should be encouraged and inculcated into children at an early age (pre-school and primary school). This could be encouraged by providing them with age appropriate reading materials.
- Students should be given time during the school day to read. This could be done by giving them a period on the time table, specifically for reading.
- Professional development programmes should be provided for English teachers to receive a professional development over a sustained period of time.
- Adequate funds and facilities should be provided for the development of libraries in the school and the community.
- Book clubs should be established to focus on the reading interests of adolescents. They could be established in their schools and neighbourhoods.
- There is a need to partner with parents to promote and encourage leisure reading. Studies have shown that parents play a significant role in developing and sustaining the leisure reading habits of children and adolescents (28).
- Parents should read and make sure their children see them do so. They should also stimulate adolescents to read by keeping reading materials at strategic places in the house. This will increase the child's access to books and printed materials.
- Both the young and old should be encouraged to read for leisure.
- Writers should be encouraged to put more books in electronic forms and encourage Nigerian adolescents to use just them as they use other social media forms.

## 8. Conclusion

The paper concludes that the reading habits of in school adolescents are generally poor. Many of them could not pronounce words properly or read fluently. Some were even reluctant to read during the treatment sessions. A lot needs to be done to improve the situation. Prevalent factors like poverty, influence of the pre-historic and oral culture of the African, and the environmental factors have to be addressed. The present campaign of the Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan "Bring back the Book", to improve the reading culture of Nigerians is a step in the right direction. More still needs to be done, in funding and equipping libraries, making libraries accessible to more people and training more oral English teachers.

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