# EXAMINATION OF JSS II STUDENTS' READABILITY OF PROSE PASSAGES IN OYO STATE

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**Abstract**

*This work examined the readability of prose passages for Junior Secondary School II students reading to learn prose in order to ascertain the suitability of the text to the learners proficiency level. Eight (8) secondary schools were selected in Oyo State. Four (4) representing those in rural areas while the remaining four (4) represented the schools in urban areas. From each of the schools, fifty (50) subjects were randomly selected; totaling four hundred (400) subjects. Three research questions were formulated and cloze test was used as the main instrument for data collection. The findings revealed that the text recommended for the students is not suitable enough because majority of them read at frustration level. It was recommended that stakeholders should always select appropriate reading materials taking into consideration the cultural neutrality of the text and the standardized contemporary language; publishers and writers should use standardized readability formulas to grade texts and teachers should teach reading in line with other communication skills in order to assist the students in acquiring a wide range of vocabulary needed for reading a text.*

**Introduction**

Reading, whether for pleasure or for academic purposes, is an essential habit that forms the bedrock of greatness in everyone, regardless of age, gender or status. According to Eyeruroma (2014), the only pathway to discover and trap the rich treasure in the print is reading. It is the link that connects the past, the present and the future. It is the basis for development of a total man.

For the proper understanding of the term "reading to learn", one has to know the meaning of learning. Wikipedia (2015) defines learning as the act of acquiring new, or modifying and reinforcing existing knowledge, behavior, skills, value, or preference and may involve synthesizing different types of information. Learning allows for the use of the learner's creative powers in shaping his life and the society.

In reading to learn prose therefore, a reader requires proficient reading ability before he can engage in a meaningful reading. Prose can be fiction or non-fiction. Prose fiction is imaginative composition involving characterization, plot, and dialogue. Depending on its

scope, length or level of realism, prose fiction comprises romance, novel, novelette and short-story. The prose, non-fiction on the other hand, is factual in the sense that they have not been invented or imagined. This includes the autobiography and the biography. The central method of suggesting meaning is the story itself. Stories are not told in any fixed order; the reader has to mentally re-arrange the story himself in such a way to make it appear in a sequential order. How well a reader is able to do this depends on his level of understanding of the story.

Three areas of importance in assessing readability are legibility, interest and ease of understanding. The yardsticks mostly used to assess readability are the length of the sentences and the length of words. Others include directness of sentences, number of ideas per sentence, use of lead sentences per paragraph, presence and absence of irrelevant thoughts and continuity of thoughts. However, it seems the reading teachers are faced with the problem of selecting the appropriate materials. They appear not to take into consideration such factors as the cultural neutrality of the text, the standard contemporary language, high interest value for the learners, ideological compatibility at least at the lower levels of education and variety of writing especially at the higher levels, so as to avoid monotony. The most important consideration is matching the level of the difficulty of the reading material to the overall proficiency of the learners. The attempt of matching the text with the reader's comprehension level is known as readability. Readability rates text's complexity in terms of words and grammar but we are more interested in the text's difficulty in terms of reader's comprehension of the text.

## Statement of the Problem

Literature comprises three main genres namely, poetry, drama and prose. They are creative works imitating true life events for the purpose of teaching moral lessons in character moulding. Poetry is composed in stanzas laying emphasis on rhyme and rhythm for sound effects; drama is written in acts and scenes and the structure is hinged on dialogue while prose is constructed in sentences, paragraphs and chapters. The researchers focused on the prose aspect. They investigated the readability of prose passages among Junior Secondary School II students in Oyo state.

In spite of the educational and linguistic values of Literature; and the conscious efforts made by publishers to produce books with Nigerian background, there seems not to be any attempt to match readers to the reading materials to see whether the books are suitable for the students or not. There is the need to check the recommended textbooks to see whether they are the right type of books. Learning could be made an interesting art if this is done.

### Research Questions
The study tries to provide empirical answers to the following research questions:
(1) Is the book used by JSSII students for prose passages suitable for that class?
(2) Does school location affect students' performance in reading prose passages?
(3) What are the students' reading levels in comparison with the text?

### Methodology
The researchers adopted a descriptive survey design. It is a simple survey because only part of the population is studied.

### Population and Sampling
The target population for the study is all Junior Secondary School II students in Oyo state. Eight (8) schools were randomly selected from Oyo state.
The schools selected are:

*Rural areas*
(1) Ijawaya Community High School
(2) Otefon Community Grammar School, Otefon
(3) Igangan High School, Igangan
(4) Lagunna Grammar School, Lagunna

*Urban areas*
(1) Oba Akinbiyi High School 1, Mokola, Ibadan.
(2) Elekuro High School, Ibadan
(3) Ogbomoso High School, Ogbomoso
(4) Obaseku High School, Eruwa

In each of the eight schools, fifty (50) students were randomly selected; totaling four hundred (400) students in all.

**Research Instrument**

The main instrument used was a cloze test. Cloze tests require the ability to understand context and vocabulary in order to identify the correct words or type of words that fit in the deleted passages of a text. Words may be deleted from the text in question either mechanically (every –nth words) or selectively depending on exactly what aspect it is intended to test. It is a suitable instrument for assessing readability in a second language situation. According to Nielsen (2011) cloze test provides empirical evidence on how easy a test is to read and understand for a specified target audience. This is in consonance with the view of Wikipedia (2014) which says that the methodology is the subject of an extensive academic literature. The cloze test is known for its simplicity, versatility and power. It is a suitable criterion referenced test in a second language situation because it develops its test from the textbooks that students are to read.

A cloze test was constructed from *New Oxford Secondary English Course for Junior Secondary Schools (Upper Basic Education) Book 2*. Writing team; Ayo Banjo, Adekunle Adeniran, Ayo Akano, and Uzoma Onaga.

Three passages were chosen from the text. One selected at the beginning of the text (pp.17-18), another at the middle (p.103) while the last was selected from the latter part of the text (pp.190-191). The first and the last sentences from each of the passages were not altered to aid good understanding. Beginning with the second sentence, every fifth word was deleted throughout the passages. Where an item due for deletion happened to be a name of a person, it was skipped and the next word was deleted.

The testees were asked to supply the missing words. It was not only the missing words that were accepted as correct, any appropriate synonyms were accepted.

**Method of Data Analysis**

A pair of acceptance table was used at a time. One for frequency distribution and the other for a conversion to percentage. The table is used in showing simultaneously the number of subjects within and between the groups scoring at each competency level in the cloze test. The subjects were distributed on the basis of their performance in the test into three reading competency levels: frustration level (0-39%), instructional level (40-50%) and independent level (60-100%).

*Research Question 1: Is the book used by JSS II students for prose passages suitable for that class?*

**Table 1: Suitability of the text**

| Competency level | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Frustration (0-39%) | 256 | 64% |
| Instructional (40-50%) | 102 | 25.5% |
| Independent (60-100%) | 42 | 10.5% |

The table above showed that out of four hundred (400) students used for the study, two hundred and fifty six (256) that is, sixty-four per cent (64%) of them read the passages under 0-39% competency level which is the frustration reading level. One hundred and two (102), that is 25.5% of the subject read at instructional level while forty-two (42) of them, that is 10.5% read at independent level.

The result revealed that majority of JSS II students reading to learn prose read the prose passages at frustration reading level. Thus, it seems the commonly used textbooks assigned to JSS II students are not very adequate for the class. The selection of a suitable material to match students' reading level goes a long way in improving their reading habit. This is in consonance with Erikokpo (2005) view that selecting books to suit the various needs of the students is important.

*Research Question 2: Does school location affect students' performance in reading prose passages suitable?*

**Table 2: Influence of school location**

| School Location | Competence Reading Level | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Frustration | Percentage | Instructional | Percentage | Independent | Percentage |
| Rural | 152 | 76% | 32 | 16% | 16 | 08% |
| Urban | 104 | 52% | 70 | 35% | 26 | 13% |

The above table shows that one hundred and fifty-two (152), that is, 76% out of the two hundred (200) students used in the rural area read the passages at frustration level, thirty-two (32) students, that is, 16% read at instructional level while only sixteen (16) of them, that is, 8% read the passages at independent level. For urban area, one hundred and four (104) students (52%) read the passages at frustration level, while seventy (70), that is, 35% and twenty-six (26) that is 13% of them read at instructional and independent levels respectively.

The findings revealed that students' competence reading level in urban area is higher than competence reading level of those students in rural area. This could be due to economic hardship that is common in many families that most parents manage to pay their wards school fees and forget about buying books.

*Research Question 3: What are the students' reading level in comparison with the text?*

**Table 3: Suitability of the text**

| Passages | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 80 | 20% |
| 2 | 120 | 30% |
| 3 | 144 | 36% |

Table 3 reveals that eighty (80) subjects, 20% out of four hundred (400) subjects used for the study scored above average in passage one while one hundred and twenty (120) and one hundred and forty-four (144) that is 30% and 36% scored above average in passages two and three respectively. This implies that students' readability level is very low in passage one when compared with other two passages. This could be due to the length of passage one. It indicates therefore, that the longer the passage, the lesser the rate of comprehension among students. Stakeholders should have this in mind when recommending textbooks. It seems the textbook under study is very difficult for a greater number of JSSII students.

**Conclusion**

From the findings, it was revealed that the recommended textbook for JSS II students reading to learn prose is not suitable for the class because most of them read their books at frustration level. School location and the length of the passages also influence students' readability level.

In conclusion, the assessment of readability of a text with cloze procedure gives insight to the levels at which students read their recommended text.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

The most important consideration is concerned with how to match the level of reading materials with the overall proficiency of a learner. Curriculum planners should select appropriate reading materials. They should take into consideration such factors as cultural neutrality of the text, standard contemporary language, that is, the generally acceptable language, high interest value for learners, ideological compatibility at least at a lower level of education, variety of writing especially at higher level in order to prevent educational disaster. Linguistic experience and social interest of the students must be taken into consideration.

Publishers and writers should not adapt strictly to the method of using readability formulas that are not standardized on Nigerian students for grading texts. They should use the cloze procedure which matches the students to the text directly.

Teachers should teach reading and other communication skills, namely listening, speaking, and writing to their students. This shall help the students to acquire a wide range of vocabulary needed for reading a text.

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