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STUDENTS-LED DISCUSSION LEARNING STRATEGIES, VERBAL ABILITY AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TO LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of two students-led discussion learning strategies (story mapping and Socratic circles) and the conventional method (control) on students' attitude to Literature-in-English. The moderating effect of students' verbal ability was also examined using a pre-test, post-test control quasi experimental research design with a sample of two hundred and forty three senior secondary school Literature-in-English students selected from six government owned secondary schools in Owerri. Two instruments were used to collect data and two hypotheses were tested. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance while the Estimated Marginal Means (EMM) was used to determine the group with the highest mean score. The result indicated that there was significant main effect of treatment on students' attitude to Literature-in-English ($F_{(2,215)} = 3.31$; $\eta^2 = 0.03$). The Socratic circles group had higher posttest mean attitude score ($\bar{x} = 56.76$) when compared to control and story mapping groups respectively. There was no significant main effect of verbal ability on students' attitude to Literature-in-English. From the findings of this study, it was recommended that Literature-in-English teachers should adopt students-led discussion strategies to enhance students' attitude towards the subject and that teachers should operate without prejudice to students' verbal ability level in accomplishing their pedagogical tasks. Whether a student is of low, average or high verbal ability level, students must be given equal opportunity to participate in classroom activities.

Keywords: *Discussion learning strategy, Verbal ability, Attitude, Literature-in-English*

1. Introduction

Literature-in-English is one of the subjects studied at the junior and senior secondary school levels of education in Nigeria. At the junior secondary school level it is integrated into the English language curriculum while it is a subject on its own at the senior

secondary. Although designated a non-vocational elective, it is a prerequisite for admission into tertiary institutions in Nigeria for courses such as law, music, mass communication, theatre arts, among others.

The contribution of Literature-in-English in achieving an all-round development of learners which education the world over aims at may have necessitated its inclusion in the school curriculum. Nevertheless, today, some people believe that Literature is simply not important. Hence, they underestimate its abilities to stand the test of time and provide great knowledge (Sahr, 2015). According to Uwaifo (1979), the study of Literature-in-English is vital at the secondary school level for it is through it that students learn the humane approach of examining thoughts and actions. To these, Williams (1990) adds that Literature teaches life and thereby develops character. That is, when the student is confronted with an image of himself in a character in a novel; when he recognises a style of behaviour in a short story, there is likely to be some positive effect on his personal growth.

It is obvious from the foregoing that the objectives of the Literature curriculum are aimed at the complete development of the learner with respect to literary appreciation. To achieve this goal, effective teaching and learning of all the genres of Literature-in-English become very important. However, the reports from public examination bodies in recent times revealed a prevailing under-achievement in the subject which has been attributed to negative attitude towards the subject on students' part and poor teaching approach on teachers' part among other factors. There have been many attempts made to enhance students' academic achievement. It has been the concern of teachers and parents that their students and children be as much successful as possible. In relation to this, many teachers are convinced that students need a positive attitude to succeed academically. Often a student's verbal ability is believed to exert a great influence on his/her attitude to and achievement in learning (Riazi & Mansorian, 2008).

Verbal ability refers to a person's facility at putting ideas into words both orally and in writing. This facility involves possessing not only a strong working vocabulary but also the ability to choose the right words to convey nuances of meaning to a chosen audience. Verbal ability also includes the ability to organise words in coherent ways (Billy, 2003). In other words, it is important for communicative competence. Verbal ability/intelligence, according to Martin and Mann (2005) is the ability to analyse information and solve problems using language based reasoning. To them, verbal tasks involve skills such as:

1. ability to listen and recall spoken information
2. understanding the meaning of written or spoken information
3. solving language based problems of a literary, logical or social type
4. understanding the relationship between language concepts and performing language analyses or comparisons and;
5. ability to perform complex language based analysis

The influence of verbal ability on learning has been the focus of a substantial number of empirical studies in recent times particularly in Nigeria. According to Nwosu (2002) and Odiaka (2002), verbal ability is an individual's intelligence or language development level and his/her ability to do abstract reasoning. Studies on the effect of verbal ability on students' attitude to school subjects have provided conflicting results hence, the need for the present study.

2. Statement of the Problem

Teaching methods vary (Felder, 1995). Some instructors lecture, others demonstrate or discuss; some focus on rules and others on examples; some emphasise memory and others understanding. To Felder, how much a given student learns in a class is governed in part by that student's native ability and prior preparation but also by the compatibility of his or her characteristic approach to learning and the instructor's characteristic approach to teaching. Over the years, there have been increasing clarion calls for interactive instructional strategies that involve much more learners' input in Literature classes. Previous studies in response to this call focused more on cooperative and

teacher-led discussion instructional strategies. Therefore, the problem of this study is to determine the effect of story mapping and Socratic circles on students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English.

3. Hypotheses

Ho_1: There is no significant main effect of treatment on students 'attitude to Literature-in-English.

Ho_2: There is no significant main effect of verbal ability on students' attitude to in Literature-in-English.

4. Scope of the Study

Literature as studied at the secondary school level of education in Nigeria is divided into three genres– drama, poetry and prose. The study was specifically on prose. It examines the effect of two students-led discussion learning strategies on students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English.

5. Methodology

The study adopted the pretest-posttest control group quasi-experimental design. Participants in the study were 243 senior secondary two (SS II) students drawn from six purposively selected senior secondary schools in Owerri, Imo State. The purposive sampling technique ensured that the selected schools were far from each other so as to avoid students' influence on one another. From each of the six schools, one intact class was randomly selected. Thereafter, two intact classes were randomly assigned to each of the treatment and control groups. Two research instruments– Students' Attitude to prose Literature-in-English Questionnaire (SAPLEQ) and Verbal Ability Test (VAT) were used to collect data which gave Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.81and 0.85 respectively. The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed using the pretest attitude scores of students as covariates. The Estimated Marginal Means (EMM) was used to determine the group with the highest mean score.

6. Results

Ho_1: There is no significant main effect of treatment on students' attitude to Literature- in-English.

Table 1. Summary of ANCOVA of posttest scores of students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English by treatment and verbal ability

Source	Type III Df sum of squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected model	2098.220	27	77.712	1.417	.091 151
Intercept	13227.237	1	13227.237	241.271	.000 .529
Pre_att	4.643	1	4.643	.085	.771 .000
Treatment	363.110	2	181.555	3.312	.038* .030
Verbal Ability	35.158	2	17.579	.321	.726 .003
Treatment + V Ab	237.779	4	59.445	1.084	.365 .020
V Ab + L Style	179.244	4	44.811	.817	.515 .015
Error	11786.998	215	54.823		
Total	746103.000	243			
Corrected Total	13885.218	242			

R Squared = .151(Adjusted R Squared = .045) *significant at p<.05

Results in Table 1 show that there is significant main effect of treatment on students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English ($F_{(2,215)} = 3.31$; $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = 0.03$). This means that the students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English after exposure to story mapping, Socratic circles and lecture strategies was significantly different. In view of this, Hypothesis 1 is rejected. Furthermore, the results of the Estimated Marginal Means which show the group that has the highest post attitude mean score is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Estimated Marginal Means for posttest attitude scores by treatment, verbal ability and learning style

	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval

			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Treatment				
Conventional methd.	54.663	.913	52.863	56.463
Socratic circles	56.764	.871	55.047	58.482
Story mapping	53.221	1.082	51.088	55.354
Verbal Ability				
Low	55.462	.888	53.712	57.213
Average	54.506	.887	52.758	56.253
High	54.681	1.057	52.597	56.764

From Table 2, students in the Socratic circles instructional group have the highest posttest mean attitude score ($\bar{x}$ = 56.76) followed by students in the conventional method group ($\bar{x}$ = 54.66) while students in the story mapping group have the lowest mean score ($\bar{x}$ = 53.22).

Ho_2: There is no significant main effect of verbal ability on students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English.

In table 1, results show that there is no significant main effect of verbal ability on students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English ($F_{(2,215)}$ = 0.32; p> .05; η^2 = 0.00). Based on this result, hypothesis 2 was not rejected. Table 2 also shows that students with low verbal ability have higher attitude score ($\bar{x}$ = 55.46) than their high verbal ability ($\bar{x}$ = 54.68) and average verbal ability ($\bar{x}$ = 54.51) counterparts. The difference is however, not significant.

7. Discussion

The results show that there was significant effect of treatment on students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English. The result of this study in relation to the significant effects of treatment on students' attitude to prose in Literature might be attributed to Siti's (2008) and Wan's (2009) assertion that students possess positive and negative attitudes in

varying degrees and that attitudes are not static and can be changed through the learning process by teachers using thoughtful and a variety of attractive teaching strategies. The result further illustrates the practical situation about students' disposition to the new instructional strategies. A meeting with the research assistants after the posttest revealed that the students were excited when the strategies were introduced. Teachers who handled the Socratic circles experimental classes reported that students embraced all the activities involved in the strategy with enthusiasm especially the discussion partner and seminar evaluation activities. However, they noted that students were hampered by their limited proficiency in English language. Teachers of the story grammar experimental groups equally reported that students were excited to do things differently from the usual activity of merely taking notes in class. The teachers equally indicated their interest to continue teaching Literature-in-English through the strategies. In essence, the finding suggests that students are favourably disposed to innovative classroom activities during Literature-in-English lessons and are always excited and eager to learn through new methods.

Verbal ability was found to have no significant effect on students' achievement in and attitude to prose in Literature-in-English. This means that students' verbal ability level has little or no contribution to their achievement in and attitude to prose Literature-in-English. This result is contrary to expectation. Students' poor language ability has been identified as one of the major factors responsible for students' under-achievement in prose Literature-in-English (WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports, 2005 - 2011). It is then assumed that poor language ability contributes to students' negative attitude/lack of interest in prose Literature-in-English. However, the strategies used in the study could account for the result obtained here. The strategies are metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies refer to student-generated and controlled cognitive operations which help them to construct meaning from texts as they read and solve problems and complete tasks independently (Blachowicz & Zabroske, 1990). According to Ijiga (2014), metacognitive strategy instructions help students to increase their capacity to comprehend written

passages. Udosen (2006) supports this stance when he observed that metacognitive strategies cater for students' varied language needs and could rule out dropouts as all the ability levels are actively engaged in the learning situation. The implication of the result obtained here is that teachers should de-emphasise same ability groupings during classroom activities. They should encourage mixed-ability grouping because when students interact among themselves, the differences in their verbal ability levels tend to even out.

The result of this study in relation to the insignificant effect of verbal ability on students' attitude to prose Literature-in-English may be related to Kessing's (2006) view that it is important not to make automatic assumptions regarding students' attitude towards reading or any other school subject based solely on perceptions in terms of verbal ability. He contended that peer influence, age, sex and type of school a student attends are factors that could influence attitude towards school subjects. In the present study, none of these variables was considered.

8. Conclusion

Results also suggest that students' negative attitude to Literature-in-English generally and prose Literature-in-English in particular could be effectively addressed through exposure to teaching strategies that keep students engaged to solve problems and interact among themselves during classroom activities. Again, the findings have demonstrated that even low verbal ability students stand to gain much with the use of strategies that keep students actively engaged in the learning process. Based on the findings of the present study it was recommended that teachers should operate without prejudice to students' verbal ability level in accomplishing their pedagogical tasks. Whether a student is of low, average or high verbal ability level, students must be given equal opportunity to participate in classroom activities.

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