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Original research

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STORY RETELLING ON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION AND WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

The poor performance of Nigerian students in the English language, both in internal and external examinations, poses a challenge to scholars of reading. This study sought to find out if story retelling as a technique of teaching reading comprehension and writing will in any way affect the ability of Junior Secondary School (JSS 3) students to comprehend text, retell given stories as well as improve their writing. The quasi experimental method was used to conduct the study. Eighty subjects in two junior secondary schools in Owerri, East of Nigeria, were grouped into Experimental and Control groups. Both groups were taught the same content of the school syllabus; the period of instruction was the same for both. However, while the Control group was taught using the conventional method, the Experimental group was taught through the use of story reading and retelling. At the end of the treatment, a post-test was administered on both the Control and Experimental groups. The transactional theory of learning which sees reading and writing as personal meaning-making processes was used to guide the study. The scores of students from their written retellings constituted the data and were analyzed using means and standard deviation. It was found that the performance of students (both Control and Experimental) in the pre-test were within the same range. But there was a marked difference between the performance of the Control and Experimental groups in the post-test. Noticeably, the Experimental group performed better in the post-test than in the pre-test, as well as better than the Control Group. The paper therefore concluded that the story retelling strategy was effective in improving the comprehension, retelling and writing of students.

**Key Words:** Retelling, Meaning-making, Impact, Performance, Achievement.

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## **1.0 BACKGROUND**

Students' results in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations in recent years have been a cause for consternation and concern across the Nigerian society. The poor results, especially in the English language, have been attributed to the inability of students to comprehend texts of examination materials as well as to write intelligibly (WAEC Chief Examiner's Report, 2017& 2018). Areas of most difficulty, according to the above reports, border on knowledge acquisition through reading as well as use of grammatical constructions and understandable expressions in writing. A student who is deficient in comprehension and writing is already handicapped and cannot hope to do well in the examination.

Possible causes of such poor performances could be lack of a culture of reading and writing in the society in general. People prefer watching television and video programmes to reading books. In majority of the public schools, which present a large number of the candidates for the qualifying examinations, reading and writing are not taught as distinct subjects but are sandwiched into the English language lesson. As such, the strategies/methods of teaching these skills could be culpable for the said poor performances. Therefore, a strategy that could awaken the interest of students and make them become actively involved in the learning of these language skills would be of great benefit in improving their performances in their various subjects. Hence the story retelling strategy was examined for this study.

## **1.1 REVIEW OF CONCEPTS**

### **1.1.1. Story**

A story is a type of communication which may be written or oral. It may even be a mime. It is a message that is made up by one who conceives it or one who is reporting it to another person. Stories are most times in narrative form, but they can be portrayed through drama or poetry. From time immemorial, stories have been used to teach or entertain the young and the not so young. These stories are wrapped as folk tales in which animals play a major role, or narratives about goings-on in the society meant to teach a lesson. They may even come as songs. The main thrust is that each story has messages or lessons which it is meant to deliver.

Stories may be fabricated or real life events that are reported orally or in writing. Thus the online Dictionary of Literary Terms lists stories as fiction and non-fiction and points out that stories have been an integral part of human culture.

Studies have shown that stories are central to the lives of children in and out of school (Jegade 1997). Children love to listen to and read stories. Their interest in stories has long been utilized by teachers and scholars to enhance comprehension of text, especially in the kindergarten and primary schools (Gambrell & Dromsky, 2000; Nathanson, 2006). Morrow (1989) and Nathanson (2006) citing several studies, point out that there is a very strong relationship between story reading to children and their literacy development. The researchers note that in classrooms where children are frequently read to, they perform significantly better on measures of the words they know and use, comprehension and ability to make sense of language than other children who have no such opportunity because stories activate the interest of children and even adults, putting them in a state of eagerness and anticipation for their lessons.

### **1.1.2 Story retelling**

Story retelling has been used as a means of training students to read for comprehension and oral communication, and to improve writing (Miller & Penny cuff, 2008). Retelling stories in writing helps to develop students' proficiency in writing as they would be able to practice appropriate construction and use of sentences, the organization of different types of stories and other compositions as well as the technicalities of writing while retelling texts that they have read. This is especially important for students in the secondary school who would be sitting for examinations in which the tools of evaluation are their written responses. Story retelling would help to enhance students' ability to interpret stories based on their own personal understanding and experience. This would make it easier for students to generate interest and willingness to practice reading and writing. It is based on the important benefits of the story retelling strategy that it was adopted for this study.

### **1.1.3 Writing and Reading**

Writing (putting down marks, which serve as a code which a language community has agreed to ascribe certain meanings to, on clay, paper or any other medium) is a very important

medium for storytelling and retelling. These marks on paper have served as a repository of information which is communicated from generation to generation or from culture to culture. All the knowledge of history, experiences and activities of different peoples, which could have been lost or altered if these information were handed down orally alone, have been documented and preserved through writing. Even communities which did not have the culture of writing have had their knowledge written down in these modern times. Thus writing has made available a plethora of texts or stories which are used in schools for various educational purposes.

Reading, on the other hand is the reverse side of writing. The information encoded by a writer must be decoded by a reader in order for that message to be of benefit to anyone. Thus writing will be of little benefit if it cannot be read. Therefore the technique for reading and understanding written documents is one of the key tasks that educational systems undertake to inculcate in their students. That is why the developed nations devise various educational and instructional strategies to ensure that their citizens become proficient in reading, comprehension and writing. To this end, story retelling is considered in this paper as a valuable technique for teaching reading so as to derive the benefits of effective comprehension.

Three research questions guided the conduct of this study.

**RQ<sub>1</sub>.** What impact does story retelling have on students' comprehension achievement?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>.** What impact does story retelling have on students' ability to retell stories?

**RQ<sub>3</sub>.** What is the impact of story retelling on the writing achievement of students?

The study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the story retelling strategy on the reading and writing proficiency of junior secondary school students. Specifically, it sought

- a. To assess the effectiveness of story retelling on the reading comprehension achievement of the students.
- b. To assess the effectiveness of story retelling on students' ability to retell stories in writing.
- c. To assess the effectiveness of story retelling on the writing achievement of students.

## Hypotheses

**H<sub>01</sub>**. Story retelling is not effective on the comprehension achievement of students.

**H<sub>02</sub>**. Story retelling is not effective on students' ability to retell stories

**H<sub>03</sub>**. Story retelling is not effective on students' writing achievement.

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The transactional theory of learning (Rosenblatt, 2013) posits that every individual has a unique personality, experience and prior knowledge attributable to things that have happened to him in his family, community and larger world. Based on this, a person transacts with a written piece of text in order to construct his/her own peculiar meaning from that text. It is also based on this that he will produce a text. Therefore, the same piece of text read by different people will have different meanings for them which will be determined by the blend of their personality, experience and previous knowledge. Same goes for their writing. To this end, Rosenblatt's (2013) Transactional theory was used as a guide for the study since every student would have to read, interpret the text and write their own stories based on the peculiar mix of individual experience, prior knowledge and the text before them. For this study, the students were expected to answer comprehension questions and write their answers and retellings based on their personal construction of meaning from the stories before them.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The Pre-test, Post-test control group quasi-experimental method was used to examine the influence of story retelling on children's reading comprehension and writing. This was necessary since the subjects were in already designated classes which could not be tampered with because of government regulations. Junior Secondary School Three (JSS3) students of two secondary schools in Owerri, South East of Nigeria, were the subjects of the study. The subjects were selected using a simple random as well as purposive procedure. The random procedure was employed through which two out of the schools in Owerri Zone of Imo State were selected. Then out of all the classes in these two schools, JSS 3 classes were purposively selected because the JSS 3 class is the exit class for junior secondary schools and as such they would be sitting for the initial exit exam for secondary schools. A total of 80 students were used for the study. One class

of 40 students each was used as experimental group in one school while one class of 40 was used as the control group in the other school.

A cursory assessment of the reading attitude of both the Control and Experimental teachers indicated that both groups had similar attitude to the subject matter. The Experimental group teachers were given an intensive one week workshop on the use of storytelling/retelling during their English language lessons. The teachers were then asked to use the story retelling technique in their classes for a period of six weeks. The Control teachers continued their normal English lessons but without using the story retelling method. Both groups of teachers used the same content from the school syllabus for the same period of time for their lessons. Both made use of the same textbooks. The researcher and a research assistant observed and monitored the lessons in the different classes over the period of instruction.

Before the commencement of the study, the Control and Experimental subjects were administered an achievement test as a pre-test. Another test was administered at the end of the instructional period as a post-test.

The subjects were expected to interpret the stories and retell them based on their own unique understanding. The story for the pre and post- tests was one that the students could relate with since it was about a newly admitted fresh secondary school student who told about his experiences in the boarding house.

The questions on the passages administered on the subjects sought to test the following skills on comprehension, story retelling and writing.

### **3.1 Comprehension**

The comprehension questions required students to deduce meaning from text, pick out relationships in the story, make suppositions on real life situations based on story read, say implications of certain actions in the story as well as exhibit knowledge of story elements.

### **3.2 Story Retelling**

Based on the story retelling analysis generated by Jegede (1997) and Morrow (1989) in testing the students ability to retell what they had read, they were expected to recall the title and introduction of the story, who the main character and antagonist were, the actual number of

characters in the story, where the story was set, what were the problems encountered by the main character, the episodes in the story as well as necessary details contained in the story. The students were also required to recall how the story ended.

### 3.3 Writing

To test students' writing, the content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy of their retellings were examined. Content showed whether the subjects were able to recall the facts of the story while the organization showed the extent to which the subjects gave the various episodes of the story as they appeared in the original, also whether their retelling had a beginning, middle and ending. Expression measured the use of language by the subjects, their use of grammatical constructions and knowledge of words. Their spellings, proper use of capital letters and punctuations came under mechanical accuracy.

At the end of the post-test, students' retellings were graded and their scores were used as data for the study. The data were analyzed and measures of central tendency, mean and standard deviation, were used to compare the pre and post- tests as well as confirm or reject the hypotheses.

## 4.0 DATA ANALYSIS

**Research Question 1:** What impact does story retelling have on students' comprehension achievement?

Before the study commenced, all subjects in both the experimental and control groups were administered a pretest. The scores of the students were used as the data and these are presented in the tables below.

**Table 1:** Pre- test analysis of comprehension data based on means and standard deviation

	Mean Scores	Std. Deviation
Exp. Group	51.74	7.24
Con. Group	51.91	6.03

From the data in Table 1 above, it was observed that the scores of the experimental and control groups did not differ in any significant way from each other. Though the mean score of the control group was slightly more than that of the experimental group, both groups were almost the same showing that both groups were at the same level of comprehension. The standard deviations of both groups indicate that there is a slightly greater spread of individual students in the experimental group than in the control group. But the picture is different in Table 2 which shows their scores at the post-test.

**Table 2:** Post-test analysis of comprehension data based on means and standard deviations

	<b>Mean Scores</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Exp. Group	60.83	8.35
Con. Group	54.44	9.37

From the data in the above table, it is observed that the achievement of both the experimental and control groups differ significantly from one another. The mean score of the experimental group is significantly higher than that of the control group thus indicating a superior achievement by the experimental group. The standard deviation of both groups also show that more individual students performed poorly in the control group than in the experimental group. To further examine the effectiveness of the story retelling strategy Hypothesis 1 was raised.



**H<sub>01</sub>** Story retelling is not effective on the comprehension achievement of students

**Table 3:** Effect of Story retelling on students' comprehension

Method	N	Pre-test	Post test	Mean Gain	Diff. bw grps
Story Retelling	40	51.47	60.83	9.36	
Conventional	40	51.91	54.44	2.53	
					6.83

The table above indicates that the experimental group obtained a significant mean gain when their achievement at the pre-test is compared with that of the post test. It is observed that there was a significant improvement in their achievement at the post test compared to the pre-test. But the control group did not obtain such a difference between their pre and post- tests. The difference between the mean gains of the two groups is highly significant in favour of the experimental group who received the story retelling treatment. The null hypothesis is therefore not accepted and the alternate accepted.

**Research question 2:** What impact does story retelling have on subjects' ability to retell stories?

**Table 4:** Pre-test data analysis for Story Retelling

	Mean Scores	Std. Deviation
Exp. Group	50.85	7.23
Con. Group	49.25	7.18

From the data in Table 4, it is seen that the students were not different from one another in their ability to retell stories before the study commenced. The mean score of the experimental group was almost the same as that of the control group. But the data in the post test tells a different story.

**Table 5:** Post-test analysis of data for Story Retelling

	<b>Mean Scores</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Exp. Group	58.24	8.63
Con. Group	52.86	7.58

After the experimental group was taught for six weeks with the story retelling strategy, it was obvious that they achieved better than the control group at the post-test. The mean score of the experimental group was significantly better and higher than that of their pretest as well as that of the control group.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** Story retelling is not effective on students' ability to retell stories

**Table 6:** Effect of retelling on students' ability to retell stories

<b>Method</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Pre-test</b>	<b>Post test</b>	<b>Mean Gain</b>	<b>Diff. bw grps</b>
Story Retelling	40	50.85	58.24	7.39	
Conventional	40	49.25	52.86	3.61	
					3.78

There is a marked mean difference between the pre and post- test achievements of the experimental group far above what the control group achieved. The difference between the gains made by both groups is also markedly in favour of the experimental group, thus indicating that the story retelling strategy was effective in training the students to retell stories. The null hypothesis 2 was therefore not accepted and the alternate accepted.

**Research question 3:** What is the effectiveness of story retelling on the writing achievement of subjects?

To measure the effectiveness of the treatment on the writing of subjects, their stories were graded based on content (the facts and ideas of the story), organization (the arrangement of the story in having a beginning, middle and ending; and since it was narration, it also showed the chronological arrangement of the story), expression examined the grammatical constructions of the subjects and their use of vocabulary, while mechanical accuracy looked at their spellings, use of capital letters and punctuations. These were scored 20%, 20%, 30% and 30% respectively. The errors under each heading were counted, aggregated and turned into percentages which were then used as data.

**Table7:** Pre-test analysis of writing data

<b>Errors</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Organi- sation</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Expre- ssion</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Mech.  Accuracy</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total Number of Errors</b>	<b>%</b>
Exp Grp.	350	11	380	12	1280	40	1200	37	3210	100
Control Grp.	352	11	382	11.9	1276	39.8	1192	37.3	3200	100

From the data of the pre-test in Table 7 above, the students' achievement in writing at the onset of the study did not differ for the two groups. Their scores were almost the same, indicating that both the experimental and control groups were within the same range and proficiency in their writing. But after the treatment of the experimental group, the post test showed that the experimental group achieved significantly better than the control group. Their total numbers of errors aggregated from the different headings were lower than that of the control group as displayed in Table 8 below.

**Table 8:** Post-test analysis of writing data

<b>Errors</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Organi- sation</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Expre- ssion</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Mech  Accuracy</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total Number of Errors</b>	<b>%</b>
Exp Grp.	182	9	202	10	809	40	829	41	2022	100
Control Grp.	258	9.5	286	10.5	1099	40.4	1077	39.6	2720	100

**H<sub>03</sub>**, Story retelling is not effective on students' writing achievement.

From the data displayed in Tables 7 and 8, it is obvious that the story retelling strategies positively impacted the ability of the students in the experimental group to write better than they did before they received the treatment. Hence null hypothesis 3 is also rejected.

## **5.0 DISCUSSION**

From the data analyses above, it is seen that the story retelling treatment was effective on the experimental subjects in their comprehension, retelling and writing. The experimental subjects improved in their comprehension and retelling of stories much better than the control group. In their writing, the experimental group also improved in their ability to focus on the subject of their writing, to organize their narration to have a beginning, middle and an ending more than the control group. Though the highest number of errors occurred in the areas of grammatical expressions in sentence construction, use of improper tenses, subject/verb agreement, as well as in punctuation (using capital letters inappropriately and wrong spellings and improper punctuations) the experimental group also made less number of errors under the different categories than the control group. The 37% improvement of the experimental group in the post test over the control group's 15% indicates that the two groups did not achieve equally in writing. This shows that the story retelling strategy was effective in the comprehension, retelling and writing of the experimental subjects and as such relevant in the overall literacy proficiency of subjects with regard to both reading and writing. This is in consonance with the studies conducted by Sylvia & Widiati (2017) which showed that the story retelling technique had a significant effect on the comprehension achievement of university students, and Rohani & Pourgharib (2015) who also found that the retelling technique was effective on the comprehension of junior high school students in Iran. The results also show that the experimental students were able to use their past experiences and individuality in conjunction with the texts they read (as enunciated by the transactional theory) to construct meaning, retell stories and write much better than the control subjects who were taught using the conventional method in which students depend on the teacher for all their information and also look up to the instructor for "correct" interpretation of text and approval of their written texts as right or wrong. The finding evaluates the application of the transactional theory as a theoretical framework for this study.

Therefore, we may assume that a longer period of the story retelling treatment would help the students to improve their comprehension, retelling and writing ability.

## **6.0 CONCLUSION**

From the study details above, we may say that story retelling is an important strategy which will enable Nigerian students comprehend texts, retell information they get from the text and also improve their writing proficiency. The study also shows that if students acquire the story retelling competence, they will perform better in their academic pursuits and especially in examinations, not just in English language but in content area subjects.

The story retelling technique helps and equips students to exercise their use of language and since they have to rewrite or recreate passages which they have read, their weaknesses are brought to the fore and the teacher is therefore able to identify and address these weaknesses. This technique which encourages students to put their mental and creative abilities to work also helps the teacher to encourage and foster these abilities in the students.

## **7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given the foregoing, it will be helpful if policy makers, teachers and other stakeholders in the education sector consider the adoption of story retelling strategy and other aspects of the literature based instruction in the teaching of reading and writing at all levels of the school system, especially in the primary and secondary schools. This will help to improve the performance of students as they will be in a better position to comprehend texts, and become better readers and writers.

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