

## **Connecting Reading and Writing Through Whole Language Activities: A Strategy For Achieving Literacy for National Development**

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### **Introduction**

Of paramount concern to all countries of the world is the need to adequately develop their citizenry to cope with the challenges of the today's knowledge societies. This concern recognizes the fundamental importance of teaching literacy skills, not only as a means for people to be able to read and handle words, sentences and ideas, but it also requires them to take the information they have read, apply it for their own purposes, and also learn new things. Good reading, comprehension and communication skills are therefore essential in handling the wide range of knowledge people are exposed to in their daily life.

Literacy is not a static concept. Leu (2000) saw it as a deictic term, because its meaning is continually changing, depending upon the context in which it occurs. It is fundamental for learning in school and serves a crucial to the success of individuals in both their career aspirations and their quality of life. Strong literacy skills are deemed necessary for employment, decent earnings, and access to varied opportunities. Literacy is also a basic need in our world. Without an ability to read and write well, people suffer poorer health, unemployment and poverty. A population's literacy skills also have a bearing on how well a country performs economically. Countries that are successful in endowing their populations with strong skills are usually in a better position to meet the economic challenges of operating in a globalized information economy and in meeting complex social challenges such as health and population issues, governance, resource-allocation, education, infrastructure and other social issues. A measure of the importance of literacy is the fact that two of the six goals of the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) in providing education for all by 2015 emphasized literacy. In fact, it is seen to permeate all the six goals. (UNESCO, EFA GMT, 2006).

As a signatory to the Dakar Framework of Action, Nigeria, not willing to be left behind in the 2015 target, has initiated some moves to ensure that its population moves beyond the 46% literacy rate recorded in 2004. Key among these moves is the introduction and launching of Universal Basic Education in 1999. The UBE has as one of its key goals the acquisition of functional literacy by the country's population. In fact, one of the principal objectives of the National Policy on Education is "to inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and the ability to communicate effectively (NPE, 2006). Before the introduction of UBE, the federal government embarked on a nationwide assessment of its primary education system between 1991 and 1995 Tagged Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA), the project, under the joint sponsorship of FGN-UNESCO and UNICEF, was the first nationwide assessment of learning achievement of pupils in primary one to four. The results, as reported by Aderinoye (2002) showed that:

1. The mean percent scores on the literacy, numeracy and life skills test were 25.1 percent 32.29%, and 32.6% respectively. The performances were generally poor, but pupils demonstrated less competence in English Language skills and displayed relatively more understanding of the tasks in Mathematics and Life Skills.
2. The poorest piece of performance of the pupils nationwide was on the writing sub-test of the Literacy test, where they obtained a mean percentage score of 18.2. This is against the mean scores of 39.2 and 31 they obtained on Reading Comprehension, and Lexis & Structure, respectively. The score of 18.2 indicates that the pupils had had little or no exposure to writing skills. (15-16).

Since a key indicator of educational progress is the extent to which schools are successful in equipping their students with strong literacy skills, it can be concluded from this report that schools could be impediments in the achievement of EFA and UBE literacy goals. Available literatures tend to blame students' poor reading and writing skills on ineffective mode of teaching these skills (D' Angelo, 1981; Adesanoye; 1990; Kolawole, 1991; Maduekwe, 2007). According to Weaver (1988) the traditional teaching methods obviously have failed many students with its consequent increase in dropout and illiteracy rates. Recognizing these inadequacies, UNESCO-EFA GMR (2006) suggests that for literacy challenges to be met, countries need to expand quality primary and lower secondary education; base literacy programmes on an understanding of learners demands, in terms of language preferences and motivations for attending class; and develop curriculum on the above demands, with clearly stated learning objectives and the provision for adequate learning materials. (17)

This position has been previously established by Allen (1984) that:

Where English is serving as lingua franca or second language, course materials for use need be firmly rooted in the culture and traditions of the country where the teaching is to take place. English can be presented realistically and naturally in its role as second language in use for a variety of purposes within the learner's own country, this has the advantage that learners can see the direct relevance of English to their daily lives and future prospects, with all that entails in terms of positive motivation,(63)

Such realistic and natural teaching, according to Williams (1990), include the awareness of the problems faced by students who are required to express themselves in the language that is not native to them. Allen (1984) therefore concluded that our teaching must have at its base a consideration of what our students need to learn, that is, what they will do with English on completing their course. This involves the teacher looking beyond the confines of the classroom into the outer worlds and focusing his attention on the use the individual will make of what he has learned in a situation that

is not primarily a learning situation.

Using language beyond the confines of the classroom involves using language wholly and integrally, hence, the skill-oriented approach to teaching reading and writing and English language in general has been variously criticized. Weaver (1990) asserted that the traditional transmission concept of education has resulted in extensive and relatively ineffective skills in instruction in reading and writing at the expense of real reading and writing that foster literacy developments. He observed that reading and writing are often taught as a matter of mastering discrete isolated skills rather than the ability to construct meaning from language (reading) and through language (writing). Czerniewska (1992) supported this view:

The curriculum in English clearly separates writing from talk and from reading in its profile components with little reference to their interrelationships. Of course, it is convenient for analysts of language structure to isolate certain aspects of language for close inspection, but the separation made in theory can develop a false sense of reality so that we forget how much our use of one mode depends on our use of other modes. (20).

With these attributes, language teaching lacks integration, the central cord without which language as communication does not emerge. Goodman (1986) therefore summarized that if language is learned best and easiest when it is whole and in natural context, integration should be a key principle for language development. This view is strongly held by language educators (Krashen 1981; Breen 1984; Goodman 1986; Caudlin 1987; Prabhu 1987; Freeman and Freeman 1992) that language as communication is blocked and can hardly be achieved when it is being explicitly taught, focusing on grammatical rules rather than use; is not made to do things or used in solving problem and is released in fragments rather than discourse units.

Since communicative competence is the ultimate goal of any worthwhile language-teaching programme (Widdowson, 1978; Lawal, 1989; Adeosun, 1998), this premise emphasizes the need for integration in language teaching. This could be emphasized in the proper connection between the rather isolated skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing to lead to effective language communication (Williams, 1990). Again, language learning should be made natural by relating language teaching to other subjects in the curriculum as well as the linguistic and the socio-cultural background of the learners. (Weaver, 1990; Ubahakwe, 1999). This study therefore responds to the need to teach literacy integratively through wholistic strategy.

Apart from the students' inherent problem with literacy skills, other variables are known to effect greatly students' achievement in reading and writing. These include students' attitude to the English language, as well as the level of parental' support for children's' literacy development (Nesser, 1996). It is therefore essential to further ascertain the moderating influence of these variables on students' performances in reading and writing as a step towards facilitating and enhancing the students' literacy skills.

### **Theoretical Framework: Whole Language Philosophy**

Mohan (1986) opined that since English is only a means to an end for most students in ESL classes, teachers must make the best use of learners' time by concentrating on the kind of English and English related skills that will best serve their academic needs. Based on this, he suggested that the integration of language learning and content learning should be an important consideration in the field of pedagogy and research. It is on the premise of integration that the skill-model of language teaching and learning is faulted. This is because rather than focus students' attention on interesting content and require students to think, generate original responses and make real linguistic choices, many skill oriented classrooms and textbooks are replete with 'exercises of fragmented language related only by linguistic operations the learner is expected to perform' (Blanton, 1992). A radical reaction against such traditional methods evolved in the concept of Whole Language. Bullock (1975) observed that a child learns language primarily by using the four modes of talking, listening, reading and writing in close relationship with one another. Thus Zerniewska (1992) surmised that looking at language events rather than language systems points to the fact that writing practices are intertwined with talk and reading. This showed that the different modes of language are not separable in practice as they are in theory.

As an evolving philosophy, Whole Language is a belief system about the nature of learning and how it can be fostered in the classroom. Freeman & Freeman (1992) posited that Whole Language brings together modern scientific knowledge of teaching, learning, language and curriculum and puts it into a positive humanistic philosophy that teachers can identify with and which offers them strong criteria for the professional decisions and teaching practice. Weaver (1990) gives a summary of its features "Language is kept whole, not fragmented into skills, literacy skills and strategies are developed in the context of whole authentic literacy events, while reading and writing permeate the whole curriculum; and learning within the classroom is integrated in the whole life of the child" (12).

Harste (1999) also gave three key ideas in Whole Language; (i) Language is learned through use (ii) The child as informant, and (iii) Education is enquiry. These ideas define Whole Language as an open invitation to learn about language and to support it using children as curriculum informants. It is a radical departure from the traditional classroom where learners are regarded as "banks into which teachers deposit knowledge" (Freire 1970); it is therefore learner-centered as learners are expected to "construct their own learning" (Freeman & Freeman 1992). It is also based on the assumption that as the human mind seeks unity among parts for a wholeness of understanding, so do English language arts require integrating all the elements of language before students can make sense of the processes of thinking, listening, speaking, reading and writing (Freeman & Freeman 1992). Quoting an American Arts Framework of 1987, they further asserted that in-depth learning of any kind presumes various levels of efforts and involvement of all the human senses and facilities, therefore the whole perception is necessary in learning.

This is related to Gestalt Theory, which maintained that learning involves restructuring, reorganization of perception and gaining of insight in a purposeful activity (Anozie 1997). This organization allows the learner to perceive new

relationship, solve new problems and gain basic understanding of the subject. Whole Language therefore emphasizes, among other things, the teaching of language, not as isolated or artificially contrived skills but within the context of reading a variety of genres and writing for a variety of purposes and audience (Weaver 1990). One can conclude that whole language is therefore a broad philosophy which covers every sphere of language teaching and learning. However, the tenets of integration of skills, functional use of language, and learner-centeredness shall be explored; through the following steps. Writing will be taught in relation to other language skills of reading, speaking and listening, particularly by emphasizing the reading-writing connection through selected reading passages within learners' experience. Learners are involved in the selection of content materials, as well as the evaluative procedures. The activities in the class are selected based on learner's interest. Reading and writing shall be taught as a process by guiding the learners through the process of thinking through ideas to elicit information, drafting, redrafting, editing and evaluating to rewriting. Within this process, children are exposed to a lot of reading materials to help their creative process.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The traditional language classroom has been variously criticized for impeding the development of communication and literacy skills in second language learners of English (Weaver, 1990, Omojuwa, 1992, Oglan 1997). Given the persistent decline in the literacy level of school children despite the several measures taken to improve the situation, and in recognition of the growing awareness of the importance of literacy in the world of knowledge economy, the study determines the effect of whole language based instructional strategies on students' achievement in and attitude to reading and writing. It also determined the interaction effects of parental educational support on the dependent measures.

### **Research Questions**

Will students exposed to reading and writing through whole language strategies perform better than those taught through the skill-oriented traditional methods? What possible impact does Parental Educational Support has on developing the literacy ability of students? What other factors are responsible for children's poor achievement in reading and writing?

### **Hypotheses**

- HO<sub>1</sub>** There is no significant main effect of treatment on students'  
 (a) Achievement in reading and writing.  
 (b) Attitude towards reading and writing.
- HO<sub>2</sub>** There is no significant main effect of Parental Educational Support on students'  
 (a) Achievement in reading and writing.  
 (b) Attitude towards reading and writing.
- HO<sub>3</sub>** There is no significant interaction effect of treatment and Parental Educational Support on students'

- (a) Achievement in reading and writing
- (b) Attitude towards reading and writing.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a pre-test, post-test, control group quasi-experimental design. It made use of intact classes that were randomly assigned to different treatment conditions. This is to prevent the disruption of the normal classroom programmes that occurs when students are selected into different study groups. One experimental group was exposed to Whole Language Based Instructional Strategy, while the control group was exposed to its normal lessons in composition using Conventional Strategy. The subjects for the study consisted of two hundred and ten (210) Junior Secondary School III students drawn from two secondary schools in Ifako-Ijaye local government area of Lagos State.

Three response instruments were used: English Composition and Comprehension Achievements Tests (ECCAT) which was designed to measure the attainment level of students in composition writing and reading comprehension before and after the treatment. It consisted of two essay topics and two comprehension passages of JSS standard, which was presented to experts in English Language curriculum for face and content validity. The reliability coefficient was established using test-retest method and was found to be 0.8. The English Composition and Comprehension Attitude Questionnaire (ECCAQ) consisted of 33-item Likert (four-point) attitude scale, consisting of Strongly Agree (SA) Agree (A) Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) graded on points ranging from 4, 3, 2 to 1 respectively and with a reliability alpha value of 0.78. The Parental Educational Support Questionnaire (PESQ) consists of 23-point instrument designed to determine the various levels of parental supervision and parental promotion of students' literacy and academic development both within and outside school. It also includes information on age, sex, and socio-economic background of the subjects. The Coefficient Alpha was established through test-retest and valued at 0.76. The Instructional guide for the experimental group constituted the stimulus instrument. It is basically an activity oriented and learner centred instructional package where learners were exposed to a wide range of whole language strategies such as Reading-Writing Conferences, Author's Circle (Burke, 1983; Graves, 1986), Author's Folder (Newkirk & Artwell 1988), Generating Written Discourse (Kucer, 1983), Group Composing (Harste, Short & Burke, 1988), Schema Stories (Watson 1994), and Folktales (Ubahakwe, 1999). The content of teaching was drawn from the Junior Secondary School Integrated English Studies Curriculum.

### **Procedure**

The initial procedure involved visits to the schools to familiarize and inform them about the research. Once the permission was granted the experimental treatment was mounted in one school, while the second school served as control and exposed to the conventional strategy. Both groups were exposed to the same language content but through different instructional strategies. Four English language teachers in both schools were recruited as research assistants. The teachers were trained on the purpose and principles governing the study and the handling of the treatment. The study lasted

for twelve weeks between January and March. It took the researchers two weeks for training of research assistants, one week for administering pre-test and questionnaires, eight weeks for treatment and the last week for post-tests. The researchers visited the school/classes during each treatment session to ensure that the teachers comply with the instruction given in the manuals.

**Results**

The descriptive statistics for the pre-test and post-test scores on the two dependent variables {achievement and attitude} were computed for the experimental and control groups. This is presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Pre-test Post-test Achievement and Attitude Scores According to groups**

		Experimental N =55			Control N = 50		
Test Type		Pre-test	Post-test	GS	Pre-test	Post-test	GS
ECCAT	X	21.02	27.69	6.67	16.76	17.74	0.98
	SD	8.03	9.79		8.96	9.53	
ECCAQ	X	68.40	60.05	8.35	56.86	57.86	1.35
	SD	10.11	11.35		9.99	8.07	

An examination of the mean scores of both groups reveals that there are differences among the post-test scores of the experimental and the control groups. The experimental group obtained higher post-test mean scores than the control group in achievement. The table also reveals that the attitude of the students to reading and writing is very low. The differences in the post-test mean attitude of the groups are close, with the control group having the highest gain score in attitude. In order to estimate the effects of the independent variables and the intervening variable in the observed differences in the pre- and post-treatment scores of the subjects on the dependent measures, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was run, using the pre-test scores as covariates and the post-test scores as criterion. ANCOVA is used to adjust for the initial differences that existed within the groups, since they were randomly selected. The results of these analyses are presented in table 2.

Table 2 shows a significant main effect of treatment on students’ mean achievement scores { $F(3,209) = 46.292, P < 0.05$ }, while there are no significant main effects of Parental Educational Support { $F(1,209) = .030, P > 0.05$ }. The table also shows a 2-way interaction effects, and there are no significant interaction effects of Treatment and Parental Educational Support { $F(3,209) = .915, P > 0.05$ }. Table 3 gives an indication of students’ post-test attitude.

**Table 2: Summary of Analysis of Covariance of Subjects' Post-test Achievement Scores According to Treatment and Parental Educational Support**

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	Sig. of F
Covariates PRE-ECCAT	19356.554	1	19356.554	917.039	.000
Main effect TRT	2932.031	5	586.406	27.782	.000
PES	2931.379	3	977.126	46.292	.000*
	.634	1	.634	.030	.862
2-way interactions TRT PES	57.916	3	19.305	.915	.453
Explained	22544.200	16	1409.012	66.754	.000
Residual	4073.781	193	21.108		
Total	26617.981	209	127.359		

\*Significant at  $P < 0.05$ **Table 3: Summary of Analysis of Covariance on Subjects' Post-test Attitude Scores According to Treatment and Parental Educational Support**

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	Sig. of F
Covariates PRE-ECAT	1434.127	1	1434.127	16.234	.000
Main effect TRT	83.034	5	16.607	.188	.967
PES	37.353	3	12.451	.141	.935
	.033	1	.033	.000	.987
2-way interactions TRT PES	233.095	7	33.299	.377	.915
	6.209	3	2.070	.023	.995
Explained	1888.115	16	118.007	1.338	179
Residual	17049.866	193	88.341		
Total	18937.981	209	90.612		

\*Significant at  $P < 0.05$ 

The summary of ANCOVA as shown in Table 3 above indicates that Treatment was found to have no significant effect on subjects' mean attitude scores  $\{F(3,209) = .141, P > 0.05\}$ . Also, there were no significant main effects of Parental Educational Support  $\{F(1,209) = .000, P > 0.05\}$  on subjects' mean attitude scores. The 2-way interactions show no significant effects of Treatment and Parental Educational Support  $\{F(3,209) = .023, P > 0.05\}$  on subjects' mean attitude scores.

### Discussion: Instructional Strategy and Achievement in Literacy

It was shown that treatment contributed significantly to the gain scores of the subjects in achievement. Oxford et al (1993) and Thompson (1993) noted that the use of appropriate language learning strategies often result in improved proficiency or achievement. By providing learners with both cultural context and all broad content for reading and writing the power of idea generation is greatly enhanced. Learners wrote from concrete things, about real situations instead of abstractions, and by making use of both the previous and present knowledge in the processes of reading and writing. This finding corroborates that of Harste, Short and Burke (1988) that learning occurs when we connect our current experiences to the past ones. The strategy also involves

the process approach to writing which exposes the students to how to generate ideas through brainstorming and dialogue, and how to organize and express these ideas. During the instructions, students were made the focus of the learning process in the sense that they often supply and determine the curriculum context; hence, they saw the instruction as relevant. This is what Olisen and Muten (1990) describes as teaching to and from experience of the students. However, its effectiveness is mostly felt through its techniques for generating ideas. It gave room for students to brainstorm, expand and re-examine their experiences prior to actual reading and writing. July (1980) confirmed the need to teach students how to explore topics, develop ideas and discover relationships between ideas. Its emphasizes on integrating the skills of language focused on reading and writing as an interactive process that promotes cognitive thinking. According to Quinn (1995) reading with writing promotes knowledge transformation, extends and enriches students' engagement in learning, and encourages more thoughtful exploration and elaboration of ideas. This observation also supports Tierney & Shanahan (1991) findings that integrating reading and writing engage the learners in a greater variety of reasoning operations than when writing or reading is taught separately. Whole language strategies ensure high teacher- as well as high student input.

Teachers in whole language classrooms have high expectations for the students and facilitate their taking significant responsibility for their own learning. In support, Kelly (1996) gave some conditions that facilitated learning and which were clearly demonstrated in the use of this strategy. According to him, learning English is facilitated, among others, in an atmosphere that encourages people to be active; facilitates individual's discovery of personal meaning of ideas; emphasizes the uniquely personal and subjective nature of learning; consistently recognizes the right to make mistakes; encourages openness of self rather than concealment of self; emphasizes self-evaluation; encourages trust in themselves as well as in external forces. The most effective teacher creates conditions by which he loses the teaching function.

On the whole, the instructional strategy is seen to be effective because it all encouraged the students' active participation in their learning. Students played more active role in the learning process, acquiring and developing critical thinking and cooperative learning skills. According to Johan (1989), involvement in meaningful and communicative use of language is central for the development of critical literacy for second language learners. Through conversations and discussions in class with both teachers and other students, learners developed their English language skills as they broaden their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter (Brisk & Harrington 2000).

### **Implications of Findings for the Literacy Development**

The study was necessitated by the concern arising from the observed failures in English in general and specifically in literacy development in Nigeria. The findings of this study have confirmed the need to explore appropriate instructional strategies in teaching reading and writing in schools, especially in the area of idea generation and exploration. Since language teaching is often subjected to many variables,

Osisanya-Olumuiwa (1990) suggested that there is need for teachers to be innovative in employing and exploiting instructional strategies.

Though scholars have variously established the importance of the home in the process of learning to read (Clark 1984; Onocha 1985; Cochram 1986; Ezenwu 1987), this study found no significant effect of parental educational support on students' attitude to and achievement in reading and writing. Keith (1991) suggested that the effects of parental support may vary with the age of the students. It was observed that parental level of involvement in academic and literacy development of their children tend to decline as the children grew older (Hess & Holloway, 1984; Maccoby, 1984). This has implication for this study. The average age of the subjects was thirteen years. This age is often referred to as adolescence which is marked with greater independence of parents. Maturing students have a growing need to develop a sense of self and independence that is separate from their families.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has shown that though the gain scores was found to be significant, however the attitude of the students towards reading and writing generally was found to be low, even after treatment had been administered. One may therefore conclude that some other factors, apart from instructional strategy, could account for the students' attitude towards literacy in English language. It is the teacher's greatest challenge therefore to motivate and meet the needs of each literacy personality in the classroom. All children may learn in different ways and all teachers may teach in different ways, but we can celebrate that diversity. Perhaps, we need a total re-orientation focusing instead on intrinsically motivating students to become independent readers. This corroborates Onukaogu's (2001) assertion that our students and teachers need an English Language curriculum that is sustainable, rich, diverse, vibrant and holistic in all its ramifications.

### **Recommendations**

Teachers should realise that if learning is indeed a catalyst for literacy and personal growth, it must be more than acquiring basic skills and accumulating information, it must help students develop reasoning and valuing abilities. Therefore, English Language curriculum should aim at developing both the linguistic and communicative competence in the learners. This attempt will not only serve the purpose of enabling the students to achieve high grades in examination, but will also equip them with English competence and life coping skills needed beyond the formal school system.

Language instructions should be learner-focused. Instructions should be such that can arouse and stimulate the interest of their students. This can be achieved not only through activity-oriented teaching, but also involving students in the selection of the curriculum content and the evaluating procedures. Teachers need to discover what turns their students on, as well as design units on challenging lessons of which the students are not even aware. This will motivate the students to learn and also help to build a positive attitude to English language and literacy in general.

Reading and writing are significant aspects of language that is acquired and perfected through constant practice. Teachers should give their students reading

and writing assignments regularly, examine such and give feedback to the students. Their marking approach should look at the cumulative efforts of the students as they struggle through the processes of deriving information from materials read, and the writing process in perfecting their skills. Self discovery and peer assessment should be encouraged in literacy classrooms.

Curriculum designers should inculcate the holistic approach within the language curriculum. Apart from selecting language content that merges skills of listening, speaking, and reading and writing, efforts should be made to imbibe the attributes of the first language in promoting second language competence. Nigerian (and Africans generally) students come from a varied rich language and cultural background and our best African writers do often dip into this rich source of knowledge and experience to polish their writings. Why not encourage it from the onset?

English language teaching should be literature based. Students should be encouraged to see the connection between reading and writing and should be exposed to wide variety of literary inputs (facts, fictions and even recommended books) to get ideas of what to write about and how to go about writing it.

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