An Assessment of the Impact of Extensive Novel Reading on Performance in English Language at Secondary School Level in Gweru District, Zimbabwe: An Action Research

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Abstract: Passing English at Ordinary level in Zimbabwe is still a prerequisite into any further studies that learners may want to do. Many educationists in Zimbabwe are worried at the low pass rate in English at O' level. It is a worrying factor that learners get to form three unable to read fluently with comprehension, considering that they would have spent eleven years in school whose classroom activities are based on reading and writing. This Action Research carried out at classroom level with form three learners at one high school in Gweru, Zimbabwe, assessed the impact of intensive novel reading on performance in English comprehension to combat failure rate of English Language at Ordinary Level in Gweru District, Zimbabwe. The study used descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-test and one-way ANOVA to analyze data. The study found out that Intensive Novel Reading significantly improved performance in English comprehension. Findings showed that there was no interaction of gender and method. It is recommended that intensive novel reading be employed with learners who are poor performers in English comprehension. The method should be tested on other aspects of English language teaching.

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1. Introduction

First language acquisition and competence in one's mother tongue has been a subject of interest for many centuries. The Second half of this century has seen linguists beginning to analyze child language in a systematic manner in order to ascertain the nature of psycholinguistic processes which enable all human beings to acquire fluent control of a complex system of communication, (Halliday in Jones, 2010). These records give invaluable glimpses to teachers of second languages as they draw analogies from first language acquisition theories to help them teach second and foreign languages. It helped teachers to build methods of teaching based on

the principles of first language acquisition, (Sacks, 2017). Research has helped teachers of language to realize that the role of first language must not be overlooked or underestimated in L2 learning. One must make use of their experience in L1 and use it in learning L2, after all, learning is supposed to be cumulative (Jones, 2010). According to Krashen (1998) in Jones (2010) there is nothing like L1 interference in L2 learning but rather L1 provides the learner with strategies to learn L2.

When learners cross over to secondary school after seven years of learning, teachers assume that they are already fluent in L2 both in competence and performance. However, this is not always the case. In Zimbabwe, it has

become a common phenomenon to have learners who can barely read or write at O level. Learners do come to high schools in some cases unable to read or write. Chomsky in Brook, (2017) reiterates that all learners should be able to be taught as many languages after their own depending on the quality of the teaching and proper application of theories of language learning.

Present day scenario is such that some learners come to high school unable to read, (Brill, 2017). Most high school teachers become desperate and do not know how to help the learners. Research shows that it is never too late to teach them and that their situations can change dramatically for the better, (Irujo, 2012). According to Feldman (2015) children who struggle with reading can easily become literate by increasing time-on-task with the same methods used for younger learners. All these learners need are dedicated teachers who do not give up. The most important element in the process is for these handicapped learners to know that learning to read and write is what they should do for themselves and that it is an important skill they cannot afford to go through life without, (Fieldman, 2015).

Teachers need to close the literacy gap in adolescence otherwise school becomes horrible and something to shun (Brill, 2017). This is not pleasant, considering that learners spend the greater part of the day in school than at home. In the final analysis, these learners with reading difficulties fail to achieve to the extent to which they are capable (Sacks, 2017). Teachers need to explore other unchartered paths to try and help learners to be proficient in English as a second language which would enhance their overall performance as it is also the language of instruction across school curricular.

It is in this regard that this research seeks to investigate the extent to which extensive novel reading could be applied as a method to teach secondary school learners fluency and understanding in English Language. Research has shown that teachers generally do not apply the novel to enhance proficiency and performance in comprehension as a planned method of teaching the skill (Mpofu & Jager, 2018). The novel is generally found in literature classes and it has been found out that those learners who have a subject combination that includes Literature in English rarely failed their Ordinary Level English language while those who only do English language and not literature are amongst those who fail to make the grade at the same level (Rukato, 2013).

2. Related Literature

Teachers of language in the United States of America (USA) argued that comprehension is a core concept across subjects (Lynch, 2015). In English language teaching, comprehension is a skill that is basic in performance in the language. As a result, every teacher of language comprehension needs to have strategies for the teaching of

comprehension to equip learners to understand text at deeper level as well as for analysis purposes (Huw & Krashen, 2014). One of the strategies which teachers have been found to yield can employ in teaching comprehension is novel reading (Wexier, 2013). Novel reading helps learners acquire the second language in an unconscious way, which is the way linguists, encourage teachers to use (Hatfield, 2013). According to Krashen, Language acquisition does not necessitate a broad use of conscious and tedious drill (Krashen & Terrel, 2015). Novel reading helps students acquire language in an interesting way without having to submit to a quiz or test afterwards.

Research in the United Arab Emirates revealed that when teaching English to second language speakers, the novel is a vital resource for the development of language skills and enhancement (Oda & Khaz'al, 2010). Researchers there posit that the novel exposes the learner to a wide variety and full range of linguistic performance in a stimulating and concrete way which does not demand dedicated analysis on the literary aspects of the novel (Krashen & Terrel,2015Fieldman, 2015; Oda & Khaz'al, 2010). The novel is a written performance of language with all the nuances of the cultural aspects and its full technical aspects displayed, which enables the learner to effortlessly absorb and acquire the language pleasantly.

English language is the language of instruction for the greater part of sub-Sahara Africa and as such is taught as a second language to most school going children in the region. It is every English language teacher's burden to find methods of instruction that make English language learning palatable and easier to acquire for learners. Teachers in the region agree that novel reading is an area that need to be explored through research as to its viability as a teaching method especially in reading with comprehension lessons (Huw & Krashen, 2014). In Kenya, educators posit that a greater number of learners face challenges with reading with comprehension in English which has a negative impact on proficiency and performance (Okwonkwo, 2015). This is attributed to the learners' home setting which do not afford opportunity to practice the language in actual situations. Given such situations, using the English novel as a method of teaching becomes advantageous as it offers language in practice with a variety of settings given exposing learners to an alternative way of the acquisition process (Bilash, 2013).

Research in Zambia found out that a dearth in familiarity with English as a language of instruction in everyday communication as the source of poor comprehension skills in performance (Tambulukani & Bus (2011). According to research findings in the same country, this situation compromise the quality of education for the country and gave rise to new policies where learners start off by using their native tongues in learning as they come to school and adopt English along the way, however, this did not help with proficiency in comprehension later at secondary school level ((Bilash, 2013). Novel integration as a

teaching methods in English comprehension was found to be beneficiary to learners of English as a second language (Wexler, 2018).

In Zimbabwe, English language at Ordinary Level is one of the most failed papers, even when examination papers leak, it is the English paper that is one of them; the comprehension section of paper two contribute greatly to the failure (ZIMSEC Report, 2015). The Comprehension section of the paper includes vocabulary and contributes 30 marks out of 50, which is a sizable percentage of the paper whose failure results in overall failure of the paper.

According to Oda & Kaz'al, (2012), in the process of teaching English comprehension, the novel should be tested as a player because of its variety of language with tangible language in action. They also posit that stories and action involved should provide a stimulating source of teaching and learning comprehension minus focused dedicated enquiry into the learnt material. Therefore, the novel then becomes a rich source of all varieties of language which teachers may utilize for student performance in comprehension which in Zimbabwe is crucial to passing exit examinations at O level. Lynch (2015), argue that teachers of English language should use the novel strategy in order for them to see an increase in understanding English written text, which translates into better performance in examinations.

Literature indicates that education plays a critical role in the successful inclusion of characters into the society (Dokora, 2015; Athiemoolam & Kibui, 2012). However, the present failure rate in English language in the country inhibits students from proceeding to further studies or college entrance as English is a prerequisite for one to have a full certificate at Ordinary Level. It becomes every teacher of English language's concern to improve performance in learners, thus this action research, to assess the impact of intensive novel reading if it can be successfully employed as intervention to improve comprehension skills of poor performing students at form three level preparatory for exit examinations at form four.

This Action Research tried to find a solution to the recurrent poor performance in English Language at Ordinary level in the country by incorporating intensive novel reading as a method of teaching comprehension. Literature shows that continued practice and exposure to the target language improves acquisition and performance (Chomsky in Brill, 2017). The outcome of this Action Research attempts to fill the gap in literature and practice where English novels are selected and brought into the classroom for the purposes of improving comprehension. The results of this study would help to highlight to teachers of English as a second language, the value of intensive novel reading in relation to comprehension performance in English language. The results will provide data based decision making on the place of English novel for form threes as a way of improving their comprehension skills in English as a second language.

2.1 Statement of Problem

When learners join secondary education after seven years of primary schooling in Zimbabwe, it is assumed that they all can read fluently and write coherent and well formulated compositions. This is because literacy is a core component of the primary school curriculum in Zimbabwe. However, there is a worrying trend in most high schools where learners come to form one classes almost illiterate. Many could recognize words, even up to form four, but they bark at them. The evidence is clearly seen when the majority of them fail to pass English Language at O level each academic year. Therefore, this study sought to find out if intensive novel reading can be used as an intervention method to teach competency and performance in English as a second language at secondary school level.

2.2 Research Questions

1. What is the performance in English comprehension of one selected class on entrance into form three?
2. Is there a significant difference in performance in English comprehension between the pre-test and post-test results of the study group?
3. Is there an interactive effect of gender and method of teaching on performance?

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This Action Research study was based on Krashen (1998)'s composite Monitor Model of language acquisition. Krashen (1998) posits that there are two autonomous systems of performance in second language, namely, the learned system and the acquired system (Huw & Krashen, 2014). Krashen's model is made up of six core hypotheses, which are the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, the Monitor hypothesis, the Natural Order hypothesis, the Input hypothesis, the Affective Filter hypothesis and the Reading Hypothesis. This study focused on the Acquisition-learning hypothesis as it is dealing with one language concept, that of comprehension.

The Acquisition-Learning hypothesis is more inclined towards the explanation of how adults become competent in a second language (Hatfield, 2013). Form three learners are more adult than babies, therefore the Acquisition theory applies to them as they work towards gaining competence in English as a second language. The Acquisition-Learning theory is based on the premise that adults develop competence through practical use of the target language in context and real situations (Huw & Krashen, 2014). Novels are language in action and as learners in secondary schools have already undergone the rudiments of learning the basics of reading and writing, comprehension can be easily acquired through practical use of the language than through drill (Bilash, 2013).

This process leads to what Krashen (1998) called Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), which involves novels and any written text without a quiz or test follow-up (Bilash, 2013). This process helps learners acquire vocabulary and understanding of the target language. According to Bilash (2013), Krashen claimed that widespread novel reading gives second language learners with context based English language usage which results in them improving their comprehension and communication skills. Thus, novel reading is labelled as the best tool in language acquisition process in adults by this theory.

3. Methodology

The method involved liaising with the school librarian to put aside novels for the form three class for them to borrow without restrictions for six weeks. Each learner would read at least one novel per week, that is, from Monday to Friday. On every Friday of the six weeks each learner submitted a summary of the novel they had read that week to the teacher for marking. The summary was not less than four pages. Fast readers were allowed to read more novels and made as many summaries. This was done consistently until the six weeks were over. On the Monday after the six weeks, a posttest was administered, marked and recorded for analysis using SPSS.

3.1 Research Design

This study is an Action Research and as such is limited to one group of learners, one form three English language class at one school in Gweru District Zimbabwe. The Action Research was carried out with 28 students, 14 boys and 14 girls. One English language teacher was involved in the study, with the researcher as an observer. The intensive novel reading was done in a period of six weeks after the pre-test then a post-test was administered. This Action Research used the quantitative design. This design employed the statistical data analysis package to ascertain the validity of the claim that intensive novel reading improves comprehension in learners of English as a second language at form three level in secondary schools. A pretest was first given to test homogeneity and the level of comprehension of the chosen group for the study (Sacks, 2017). Data gathering in the process of the study involved only two extreme ends of the study; at the beginning of the study with a pretest and at the end with a posttest (Yin, 2015). The posttest was used to test the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in performance before and after the administration of intensive novel reading on comprehension.

3.2 Population and Sampling Techniques

The target population for the Action Research was one form three class in one high school in Gweru Zimbabwe.

Purposive sampling was used. Data collected was all quantitative from 28 learners, 14 females and 14 males. After the whole class of 52 wrote their pretest, the researcher selected 28 learners, 14 females and 14 males who scored the least as target population for the study. This was done to ensure homogeneity of the study population before the new method intervention. For six weeks the target population went through intensive novel reading as intervention for English comprehension. Data analysis was then done after the administration of a posttest.

3.3 Research Instruments

This was a quantitative research. The pretest and posttest were used as research instruments. A standardized test from the June 2018 ZIMSEC past examination paper comprehension passage was used for both pretest and posttest. The Head of Department for English, herself an examiner with ZIMSEC provided the marking guide for the tests.

3.4 Data Gathering Procedure

This is an Action research carried out by a teacher in the process of teaching and learning. Action Research is the lifeblood of progressive teaching and learning. It helps teachers improve the process and to evaluate the curriculum at grassroots level. Thus, unlike all other forms of research, a classroom practitioner need not seek permission from elsewhere to carry out such studies in their classrooms during the course of their teaching and learning.

The whole form three class had a pretest administered on them. It was marked and recorded. 28 poorly performing learners were selected using the pretest 14 females and 14 males. The Librarian was called and an arrangement agreed upon on how learners were to access novels. The reading schedule was drawn by the class teacher. The program ran for six weeks. Thereafter, a posttest of the same paper administered at the beginning of the experiment was administered on the same learners. It was marked and recorded.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

The researcher used a Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) June 2018 past examination paper 2, which is a standardized question paper for Ordinary level learners. For grading the pretest and posttest, the English Head of Department in the school is an examiner with ZIMSEC and she graded the papers using ZIMSEC standardized marking scheme. The same paper was used for both pretest and posttest using the test retest method to enhance reliability.

3.6 Statistical Treatment of Data

For Research question one, a one-sample t-test on the pretest was used. This was done to ascertain homogeneity of scores obtained by the sample which resulted in authentic findings at the end of the experiment. To answer Research question 2, a paired sample t-test was used to analyze posttest data. Research question 3, a one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the interactive effect of the method in English comprehension performance between boys and girls.

4. Results and Discussion

Research Question one: What is the performance in English comprehension of one selected class on entrance into form three?

Table 1: Pretest scores

	Test Value = 20					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
pretest	-30.676	27	.000	-15.286	-16.31	-14.26

Table 1 compares the pretest scores on the performance of the subjects in English comprehension before the experiment using a one sample t-test. The 28 students selected for the study were comparable in their performance before the experiment. Sig .000 indicated homogeneity of scores of all the students. Their level of performance was the same. There was no significant difference in performance in the pretest. All performed poorly out of the test value of 20. Thus the sample chosen was appropriate and made findings reliable (Berg, 2012). The mean in the pretest was very low on a scale of 1 to 20. This was indicative of the poor performance in English comprehension of the selected group before the experiment as indicated by table 2.

Table 2: Pretest mean

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest	28	4.71	2.637	.498

Research Question Two: Is there a significance difference in performance in English comprehension between the pre-test and post-test results of the experiment group?

Table 3: Comparison of pretest-posttest performance

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pretest & posttest	28	.123	.531

Table 3 shows statistical comparison using paired sample t-test on the paired sample correlations; p = .531 > .05. Therefore, there is a significant difference in performance in English comprehension by the group between their pretest scores and their posttest scores. Findings were that before the experiment, the group performed poorly in comprehension and performed significantly better in the posttest, thus, intensive novel reading significantly improved performance in English comprehension.

Table 4:Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	4.71	28	2.637	.498
	posttest	12.46	28	2.925	.553

Table 4 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the means of pretest and posttest performance in English comprehension. The posttest mean was higher at 12.46 compared to the pretest mean of 4.71. On a scale of 1 to 20, a performance mean of 4.71 was very poor and that of 12.46 was quite high. The improvement gap of 7.75 was a significant difference and implied improved performance of the research group after the experiment. This was in line with literature which stated that performance can be improved through change of method of teaching (Kotrlik & Redmann, 2010; Sinnada, 2013; Wexler, 2018). Therefore, intensive novel reading improved performance in English comprehension, significantly.

Research Question 3: Is there an interactive effect of gender and method of teaching on performance?

Table 5: Interactive effect of method and gender

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	.036[a]	1	.036	.004	.950
Intercept	4350.036	1	4350.036	489.766	.000
gender	.036	1	.036	.004	.950
Error	230.929	26	8.882		
Total	4581.000	28			
Corrected Total	230.964	27			

a. R Squared = .000 (Adjusted R Squared = -.038)

Table 3 illustrates the results of a one-way ANOVA describing whether there was an interactive effect of gender and method on performance in English comprehension for the group in the posttest after the experiment. The Test of Between - Subjects Effects on posttest and gender showed .950 > .05. Therefore, there was no interactive effect of method of teaching on performance in English comprehension. The Lavene's test presented homogeneity of variance between females and males. There was no significant difference in the impact of the method of teaching on the subjects irrespective of gender.

Findings suggested that there was room for improvement in the class but the onus was on the teacher who should vary methods as a result would find one that helps improve learner performance in a given area (Brill). Findings also are in line with research that there is a close link between performance and method of teaching (Huinec, 2015). This was substantiated by the dramatic improvement in comprehension performance by the group after the experiment.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Intensive novel reading significantly improved performance in English comprehension for form three students. The method was found to be gender neutral. Therefore, the method can safely be employed by teachers in the a bid to try and improve performance in English comprehension and combat high failure rate presently existing in ZIMSEC English language exit examinations at Ordinary Level.

The performance of the target population was below the expected standard at the level of form three which would result in poor performance at exit examinations at the end of their course. The results of the experiment showed that intervention with novel reading caused a dramatic surge of the learners' performance for the better, therefore should be employed by teachers at that level to help learners perform better in exit examinations. Whereas the population's performance in the pretest was very low, the posttest performance showed a marked improvement as such emphasizing that English novels should be adopted as a teaching method to combat the high failure rate in the subject at Ordinary level.

The novel method showed that it had no interaction between males and female learners, making it ideal for its gender neutrality. Teachers of English language can easily apply the method without discrimination in their mixed classes or single sex classes with the same results.

However, further studies should be carried out to ascertain the effects of the same method on other aspects of English language such as composition writing, vocabulary and fluency.

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