INCULCATING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN READING COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH USING THE WEBQUEST APPROACH

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Abstract
In this age of technological advancement in which the world is a global village, teachers can provide effective teaching via the World Wide Web. This shift in pedagogical medium is forcing academic institutions to rethink how they could deliver course contents to students. The purpose of this research was to determine between the WebQuest and lecture method of teaching which method would prove more effective in teaching critical thinking skills in reading comprehension to students. A pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group design was used for the study. The population of this study is the 119 300-level students of Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba. The purposive sampling technique was employed to sample all the 119 students for the study. 60 participants (28 males and 32 females) were randomly selected through balloting to constitute the experimental group, while 59 participants (22 males and 37 females) constitute the control group. The instrument for data collection was a reading comprehension test tagged "University Students' Reading Comprehension Tests" (USRCT). The research questions were analysed using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were subjected to analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The results of the study show that the experimental group achieved higher than the control group. The finding also revealed that even though the gain score of the females is higher than the males, statistically, there is no significant difference in the achievement of males and females. These findings indicate that WebQuest is a valuable strategy for an extensive reading activity; that teaching strategy may not matter if students are exposed equally to language stimuli, they will perform well irrespective of gender. It was recommended, among others, that language teachers should adopt teaching strategies, such as webQuest, that will help students develop the critical thinking abilities and skills necessary to succeed in the world of work and future job market.
Key words: Critical thinking, Reading comprehension, WebQuest, English.

Introduction

There seems to be poor handling of the teaching of English in schools in Nigeria. The fact that most teachers continue to use the traditional lecture method rather

than engaging their students in active learning is quite disturbing (Omachonu, 2021a). There are numerous issues with traditional teaching methods, particularly with implementation, a static learning environment, and a dearth of learning resources. Omachonu (2021b) argues that the way English is taught in secondary schools now makes it impossible for students to develop the critical thinking abilities and skills necessary to succeed in the world of work and future job market. "The teacher bears full responsibility for preparing students to tackle these challenges" (Omachonu, 2021b: 153). Through authentic projects that prioritized inquiry-based learning, teachers have always looked for ways to encourage higher-order thinking. Numerous researches have concentrated on the process of teaching and raising students' achievement via the use of suitable technological procedures and resources. According to researchers, learning online can help to ease restrictions and can offer a more adaptable and effective collaborative learning environment (Alshumaimeri & Almasri, 2012).

One learning strategy that makes use of the internet as the main delivery method for teaching and learning is the WebQuest. March (2003), defines WebQuest as a scaffolded learning structure that encourages students to explore a central, open-ended question, develop their own expertise, and take part in a final group process that aims to turn newly learned information into a more sophisticated understanding. It does this by using links to important resources on the World Wide Web. The term “WebQuest” was first used in 1995 by Bernie Dodge, a professor of education at San Diego State University, to refer to an inquiry-based activity in which students use web-based resources and tools to translate their learning into meaningful understandings and practical tasks. There are two types of WebQuests: a brief version which can be completed within one to three class periods, and a longer one which lasts between one to four weeks (Akhand, 2015).

The idea that learning is an active process in which students generate new ideas or concepts based on their existing or prior knowledge is crucial (Metsamuuronem & Rasaon, 2018). The key idea behind this strategy is that learning is an active process of knowledge creation rather than knowledge acquisition. Students are given the opportunity to learn by creating their own perspectives of complex subjects when Internet technology is incorporated into the course curriculum. Through the use of WebQuests, students are required to engage in the cognitive processes that lead to comprehension and the construction of meaning from personal experience. The constructivist theory of learning and the significant impact of technology on education serve as the foundation for this study. Although WebQuest has been around for a while and has been well-received by educators, not much research has been conducted on how this technology-based approach affects reading comprehension in Nigeria.

The study of reading comprehension and critical thinking has attracted a lot of interest recently and is now a well-liked subject in cognitive psychology. Theoretical frameworks for understanding and conceptualizing reading comprehension have been constructed by contemporary cognitivists using a variety of related concepts, including critical thinking, previous knowledge, inference-making, and metacognitive abilities (Limbach & Waugh, 2010, Zabit, 2010). The schema theory, which is seen as a theory of knowledge and how knowledge is represented and arranged to enable the application of prior knowledge to enhance reading comprehension, is one of the trends.

The schema theory was one of the leading cognitivist learning theories which was introduced by Bartlett in 1932. The term "schema" was first used in psychology by Barlett (1932) as "an active organization of past reactions or experiences" (p. 201); later, when discussing the crucial role of background knowledge in reading comprehension, Rumelhalt (1984), Carrell (1988), and Hudson (1982) introduced schema into reading. Schema is described as "a data structure for representing the genetic concepts stored in memory" (Rumelhart, 1984, P. 34). It describes how readers make use of prior knowledge to understand and gain information from text. The fundamental tenet of schema theory assumes that written word cannot convey meaning on its own. In contrast, a text only gives readers instructions on how to draw meaning from their own already acquired knowledge. According to Barrlett (1932), this prior knowledge is referred to as the readers' background knowledge and the previously acquired knowledge structures are referred to as schemata. A reader's schemata are arranged in a hierarchy, with the most general schemata at the top and the most specialized ones at the bottom. Schema theory holds that reading comprehension involves a dialogue between the reader's prior knowledge and the text. Effective comprehension necessitates the capacity to connect the textual content to one's prior understanding. Every act of comprehension, according to Anderson (1977, p. 369), "involves one's knowledge of the world as well." A schema is a person's organized knowledge of people, things, locations, events, processes, concepts, and pretty much everything else that serves as a foundation for learning (Rumelhart, 1984). Schema theory "explains how knowledge is organised in memory and how these structures affect incoming information,"(Bos & Anders, 1990 p. 49). Schema theory, according to Anderson and Wilson (1986), explains how people's prior knowledge influences comprehension.

There is a strong relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension. Reading and critical thinking go hand in hand, as is clearly documented in literature. For instance, Norris and Phillips (1987) point out that

reading involves thinking as well as stating what is written on the page. Additionally, according to Beck (1989), "there is no reading without reasoning". Ruggiero (1984) is another researcher and theorist who acknowledges that reading requires thinking. Reading involves thinking in order to create meaning. One of the most efficient methods for improving the notion of reading comprehension is to apply and combine schema theory with the fundamentals of critical thinking (Norris and Phillips, 1987). According to Norris and Phillips, critical thinking offers a way to explain the capacity to resolve ambiguous text by coming up with alternate interpretations, weighing them against knowledge and experience, deferring judgment until more information is available, and accepting alternate explanations. They concluded that the reader's comprehension process involves critical thinking. The ability to think critically about a matter—to analyze a question, situation, or problem down to its most basic parts—is what helps us evaluate the accuracy and truthfulness of texts we read. Baker (2023) refers to it as the sharp knife that, when honed, separates fact from fiction, honesty from lies, and the accurate from the misleading. Critical thinking skills are perhaps the most fundamental skills involved in making judgments and solving problems. Critical readers thus recognize not only what a text says, but also how that text portrays the subject matter. Readers recognize the various ways in which each and every text is the unique creation of a unique author.

As computers are used in classrooms more frequently, researchers focus on using computers to teach students how to read (Aleven, Beal, & Graesser, 2013). The use of computer tools and programmes is the subject of an increasing number of study, however most of these studies focused on drill and practice. But there has been a rise recently in the use of computer programmes and tools to improve understanding (Cristia, Ibarrarán, Cueto, Santiago & Severin, 2012; Cullen, Alber-Morgan, Schnell, & Wheaton, 2014). As a result, using computers to improve comprehension seems promising because of how flexible they are and how well they enable students to master comprehension abilities (Stetter & Hughes, 2010). Using WebQuests, which are websites that give an inquiry-based lesson on a teacher-selected topic, is one approach to take advantage of the flexibility of the Internet (Pak, 2015). A classical WebQuest has always 5 to 6 stages: the introduction, the task, the process, evaluation and a conclusion. In many of the WebQuests, there's also a tab for other resources and links. Students are guided through the teacher-designed, project-specific website through interlocking text pages, which also contain links to other pertinent websites.

Numerous studies have been done on the relationship between WebQuest use and student's achievement. In a study on the effect of WebQuest and gender on writing

achievement in professional Business English, Awada and Ghaith (2015) found that WebQuest enhances students' performance. The study additionally showed a sizable achievement gap in favour of the female students. A study on the effects of WebQuest-based sheltered education on enhancing academic writing abilities, soft skills, and reducing writing anxiety was also conducted by Salem (2022). The study's findings demonstrated that studying in safe internet contexts may be an engaging and inspiring experience. Salem came to the conclusion that WebQuest must be used as a safe online instruction approach for language acquisition.

One important concept in students' academic success is gender. According to Musa, Dauda, and Umar (2016), gender refers to socially taught behavioural patterns that reflect emotional expressions of attitudes that separate men from women. Gender is something that people learn via socialization and is greatly impacted by the culture of the society in question. Tatarinceva (2019) sees gender as a social and psychological experience that affects how differences in people originate and grow. Gender equity continues to be a key issue on a global scale, particularly for academics and decision-makers. It is well recognized that reading motivation and success are systematically correlated with gender (Wigfield, Gladstone & Turci 2016). According to studies (Wigfield, Gladstone & Turci, 2016; Lepper, Stang, & McElvany, 2021), girls tend to have higher reading desire and read more frequently in their free time, which supports their reading accomplishment. Consequently, a large number of research conducted outside of Nigeria show that girls on average have greater levels of reading achievement than boys (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Hooper 2017). In Nigeria, however, research on gender disparities in reading has produced contradictory findings. Akinwunmi (2017), Amadi (2019), and Oluyomi and Yiljep (2022) all reported that gender had no bearing on students' reading achievement because their individual investigations found no appreciable difference between males and females' reading achievement. This study, which aims to ascertain the effects of WebQuest on students' achievement in critical thinking skills in reading comprehension using gender as one of the variables of interest, is necessary in light of the apparent inconclusiveness of the debate on the influence of gender on students' achievement in Nigeria. Two research questions and three null-hypotheses guided the study. These are:

Research Questions

1. What is the difference in the mean achievement score of students taught reading comprehension with WebQuest approach and those taught with the lecture method?
2. What is the difference in the mean achievement score of males and

females taught reading comprehension with the WebQuest approach?

Hypotheses

$H0_1$: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement score of students taught reading comprehension with the WebQuest approach and those taught with the conventional lecture method.

$H0_2$: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement score of males and females taught reading comprehension with the WebQuest approach.

$H0_3$: There is no significant interaction effect of method and gender on the achievement of students taught reading comprehension with the WebQuest approach.

Method

This study adopted the pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group design. 119 300-level students of Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, participated in the study. The participants were randomly selected through balloting into experimental and control group. 60 participants (28 males and 32 females) constitute the experimental group, whereas 59 participants (22 males and 37 females) constitute the control group. The WebQuests that were used in this study were created by the researcher. They were two pages WebQuest: one for the teacher and one for the students. There are five sections on the student's page. The introduction, which provides background information on the WebQuest, the task, which outlines what the students must complete, the third section is a detailed process breakdown for the students, while the fourth section explains how the students will be evaluated. The conclusion is the fifth section, and it gives the students links to further websites where they can read more about the subject. The teacher's page contains guidelines for teachers using the WebQuest.

The web quest centered on eight stories, and the tasks were designed to test students' knowledge of the reading comprehension competencies. The web quest tasks included learning about the author of the stories, reading the story, unlocking difficulty with context clues, taking notes, inferring, drawing conclusions, recognizing crucial plot aspects, etc. videos on some articles' summaries were also provided. Additional information was also provided, such as connected historical accounts which are connected with the stories. Each narrative has an output that must be provided in response to the text. Making their own version of the story's conclusion, writing essays on the themes of the stories, creating comic strips, writing letters to the characters or the author, creating poster campaigns, putting together power point presentations, creating a story grammar or story pyramid, etc. are some examples of these outputs. The researcher displayed the WebQuest's homepage on the White Board in the English Language

Resource Centre, describing every component in detail. The students then worked in group independently after the researcher's guidance. However, the researcher kept eyes on the students to provide them advice on how to respond to inquiries and deal with technological issues. The instrument for data collection was a reading comprehension test tagged "University Students' Reading Comprehension Tests" (USRCT). The research questions were analysed using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were subjected to analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Students' Achievement in Reading Comprehension using the Webquest Approach

Variables		Pre test		Posttest		Mean gain
	N		SD		SD	
WebQuest strategy	60	42.83	9.52	62.57	6.19	19.74
Conventional lecture Med.	59	40.62	9.89	56.31	9.23	15.69
Total	119	41.82	9.72	59.69	8.32	17.87

The results on Table 1 show that the experimental group has a post-test mean of 62.57 and a standard deviation of 6.19 with a gain score of 19.74, while the control group has a mean score of 56.31 and a standard deviation of 9.23 with a gain score of 15.69. This means that the experimental group achieved higher than their counterparts in the control group.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of males and females Taught Reading Comprehension Using the Webquest Approach

Variable		Pretest		Posttest		Mean gain
Gender	N		SD		SD	
Male	28	44.19	9.85	59.01	9.79	14.82
Female	32	38.07	8.27	60.76	5.09	22.69
Total	60	41.82	9.72	59.69	8.32	17.87

The result on Table 2 shows that the post-test mean of the males is 59.01 and a standard deviation of 9.79 with a gain score of 14.82, while the post-test mean of the females is 60.76 and a standard deviation of 5.09 with a gain score of 22.69. This means that the females achieved higher than their male counterparts in the WebQuest Approach.

Table 3: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) for Significant Difference in the Achievement of Students Taught Reading Comprehension Using Webquest Approach

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Decision.
Corrected Model	549.507[a]	4	137.377	4.691	0.00	0.24	
Intercept	6480.168	1	6480.168	221.275	0.00	0.78	
Pretest	2.171	1	2.171	.074	0.78	0.00	
Methods	258.243	1	258.243	8.818	0.00	0.13	S
Gender	146.451	1	146.451	5.001	0.20	0.04	NS
Methods * Gender	1.920	1	1.920	.066	0.79	0.00	NS
Error	1727.853	114	29.286				
Total	62609.000	119					
Corrected Total	2277.359	118					

Note: S = Significant, NS = Not Significant and η^2_p = partial eta squared

Table 3 shows the summary of ANCOVA for significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught reading comprehension. The result revealed that the F-value for method is 8.81 with the significant value of 0.00. This value of F is significant at 0.05. This is because 0.00 is less than 0.05, that is ($p = 0.00$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the hypothesis claiming no significant difference is rejected. Hence, there is significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught reading comprehension with the WebQuest approach and those taught with the lecture method. In other words, method is significant.

Table 3 equally shows that the F value for gender is 5.00 which is significant at 0.20. Since 0.20 is greater than 0.05, that is ($p = 0.20$; $p > 0.05$), the hypothesis claiming no significant difference is accepted. On the interaction of method and gender, the results on table 3 show that the F value for method and gender is 0.06 which is significant at 0.79. Since 0.79 is greater than 0.05, that is, ($p = 0.79$; $p > 0.05$), the hypothesis claiming no significant difference is also accepted.

Discussion

The result on Table 1, show that the experimental group performed better than its counterparts in the control group in terms of mean gain score. In other words, those taught using webquest strategy achieved higher than those taught with the lecture method. The result is in line with those of Ebadi and Rahimi (2018), who discovered that using WebQuests in the classroom had a significant and favourable impact on EFL learners' critical thinking and academic writing skills. The WebQuest may have extended their learning experience, piqued their attention, and improved their knowledge of the passages more than those taught using the lecture method, which is likely why the experimental group performed

better than the control group in achievement.

The data on table 2 indicates that the females outperformed the males in terms of achievement. This finding is consistent with the reports of Wigfield et al. (2016), Lepper et al. (2021), and Mullis et al. (2017) who in their different studies held that females performed better than males in reading comprehension. The gender gap in reading can be attributed to females' superior self-control and higher self-efficacy. In general, girls read more frequently and with greater motivation than boys. This could have been the reason for their reading achievement.

However, the result on Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference in the achievement of males and females thereby aligning with the findings of Akinwumi (2017), Amadi (2019), and Oluyomi and Yiljep (2022), which showed that males and females fared similarly in English reading comprehension. With regard to the interaction effect of method and gender, results on Table 3 also reveal that there is no interaction effect of method and gender. This is in line with the finding of Umuna and Amazu (2020) who reported that there is no interaction effect of method and gender on students' achievement in English.

This study has demonstrated the common social dynamics in which both males and females fight for survival in a social environment. The rising gender parity in academic attainment can be attributed to changing gender roles, more female labour force involvement, and institutional and social structures that make education appealing to both males and females (Newman, Groom, Handelman & Pennebaker, 2018). Information and communication technology (ICT) and Internet access has increased, exposing both males and females to language stimuli and role models that is now closing the gender gap that has existed before now.

Conclusion

Given the findings of this study, it can be said that the WebQuest is a beneficial approach for substantial reading activity. The students were happy with it, and they exhibited a greater interest in reading additional English-language texts as a result. Students' independence from the lecturers allowed for the development of autonomy as well. Students had to negotiate the meaning of the text with their peers in order to solve difficulties, discuss viewpoints, and construct it. WebQuest is a fascinating and captivating substitute for teaching reading comprehension. The study's findings also showed that, despite the fact that females performed better than males in terms of achievement, gender was found not to have significant influence on students' achievement just as there is no interaction effect of method and gender on students' achievement in reading comprehension.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following were recommended:

1. The use of the internet is growing to keep the demand of the society. Language teachers should therefore adopt technological resources as teaching approaches that will help students develop the critical thinking abilities and skills necessary to succeed in the world of work and future job market.
2. Workshops and training should be organized for faculty members and students on the use of digital platforms for teaching to enhance their skills.
3. Language teachers should treat all students equally and provide equal support, regardless of gender, while recognizing and appreciating their distinct differences to aid them in their studies.

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