Literature Circles as a Model of Prose Fiction Instruction at Colleges of Education in Lagos State

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Abstract

This study determined the effects of literature circles instructional strategy on preservice English Language teachers' achievement in prose fiction, using the pretest-posttest control group quasi-experimental design. The participants for this study 120 year two preservice English Language teachers in two college of education in Lagos State. Two instruments were used namely, Prose Fiction Achievement Test (r=0.76), Literature Circles Instructional Guide and Literature Circles Tools Kit. Data were analysed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 alpha level. Findings revealed that Literature Circles significantly enhanced achievement of NCE English Language Students in prose fiction ($F_{(2,116)} = 176.171$, $p<0.05$) with the group exposed to Literature Circles strategy obtaining a higher achievement score (26.77) than the conventional lecture method. Based on the findings, it was recommended that literature circles strategy should be adopted as a model of Prose Fiction instruction in our colleges of education.

Keywords: Literature circles, potentials, prose fiction, achievement, Preservice teachers

Introduction

The essence of teaching and learning in any educational institution is the achievement of the learners in any given instruction. The achievement which is crucial in determining the level of success or failure of such programme of instruction is equally premised on the influence of many factors which include the method of content delivery, teacher, learner, school, home, gender and many others which are identified in two classes, as internal and external factors (Farooq, Chandhry, Shafiq, & Berhanu, 2011). The way a teacher delivers any instruction or body of knowledge to learner is very important. This is because the outcomes are the quality indexes of the education level of any given society. In that regard, researches are made on the academic achievement of learners always in order to avoid any serious damage to the quality of citizens' education. Hence, stakeholders and policy-makers have not relented in their quest at making sure that pedagogical means with which knowledge is passed to the learner is improved upon for better achievement. Therefore, the level of learning outcomes of learners at all levels of education is always a subject of great concern to stakeholders globally.

It has been observed that despite the availability of an array of effective teaching strategies that are in content delivery of knowledge to learners, teachers at the colleges of education level generally still make more use of conventional method (lecture method) which has been found to be grossly inadequate and ineffective. Specifically, too studies have revealed that methods of teaching Literature-in-English in Nigerian schools have grossly remained conventional. Fakeye and Ruth (2014) asserted that the traditional formal classroom instruction alone is not sufficient and appropriate to promote efficient learning of the content of literature-in-English programme in senior secondary schools. Equally, Lecture method cannot be adequate for effective and efficient teaching and learning in Colleges of Education where pre-service teachers are trained.

Prose as a literary term is one of the major genres of Literature with fiction occupying a very prominent position among other sub-genres like non-fiction, folktales and others. Prose Fiction is a written work of art presenting life experiences through imaginary characters and events for readers' enjoyment and other gains. Prose Fiction is an integral part of the Literature in English studies in Nigerian schools from primary to the tertiary level. It is an aspect that seems to be more familiar and easily accessed by readers. It is possible to find people reading in vehicles while travelling, homes, offices, and other public places at leisure hours for different purposes.

Literature Circles are small groups of students meeting to thoroughly discuss reading passages (poems, short stories, novels, fiction or non-fiction.) Literature Circles were first implemented in 1982 by Karen Smith, an elementary school teacher in Phoenix, Arizona who was handed a box of books (containing different novels) by a colleague. He took, kept and forgot about them. Later in the year, some of his fifth-grade students expressed an interest in reading them, organized themselves loosely into groups, and started to discuss the novels. Smith was surprised at the degree of their engagement with the books and the complexity of their discussions despite having no outside help or instruction from their teacher (Daniels, 1994). Coccia (2015), states that Literature circles are important because the literacy method promotes cooperative learning as well as the opportunity for students to deepen their understanding of a text through the thoughts and ideas of others.

Literature Circles can also intrinsically motivate students to be involved in the act of reading because they are associating the method with the pleasurable of act of conversation with their peers. From this experience Literature Circles evolved into reading, study and discussion groups based around different groupings of students reading a variety of different novels. They differ from traditional English instruction where students in classrooms all read one "core" novel, often looking to the teacher for the answers and the meaning and literary analysis of text. They highlight discussion, students' response, free choice, and collaboration, providing a way for students

to engage in critical thinking and reflection (Schlick, 2013).

Literature Circles have been found highly beneficial and effective in enhancing stronger reader-text relationships, improved classroom climates, enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and a learning environment, more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners. Reviewing some research works, Daniels (2002) concludes that, in Literature Circles students have opportunities to create connections between texts and personal experiences, to listen to various interpretations presented by others, as well as to monitor and take ownership of their own learning through discussion and sharing with each other, thereby, deepening their understanding and heightening their enjoyment of the texts. The overwhelming reports of the success of Literature Circles in other countries' education systems have been another source of inspiration for this study in order to ascertain whether such result would be recorded in the Nigerian education system. Hence, this study found out the effects of the use of Cooperative Strategy and Literature Circles on the achievements of Nigeria Certificate in Education students in Prose Fiction.

Statement of the Problem

The achievement level of Nigeria Certificate in Education English Language students in prose-fiction is generally poor in many examinations. On many occasions, majority of the teachers use inadequate and ineffective teaching method. The use of effective and result-oriented teaching strategies is lacking. Some research outcomes have identified this situation, which till now has not been remedied, hence, the decision of the researcher to identify and examine the efficacy of Literature Circles strategy in improving the Nigeria Certificate in Education English Language students' achievement in Prose Fiction. Therefore, the study determined the effectiveness of Literature Circles strategy on the achievement of the NCE English Language students in Prose Fiction.

Research Question:

To what extent will Literature Circles strategy improve on post-achievement score of NCE English Language students in Prose Fiction?

Null Hypothesis

H_0. There is no significant main effect of Literature Circles strategy on Nigeria Certificate in Education English Language students' achievement in Prose Fiction.

Empirical Studies on Literature Circle

Covert (2009), and Clarke and Holwadel (2007) found that because of literature circles their students enjoyed and understood books so much more. Chase and Pheifer (2003) discovered literature circles to be beneficial in the following ways: (1) stronger reader-text relationships, (2) improved classroom climates, (3) enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and (4) a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners.

Covert (2009) states that students had the opportunity to discuss what it is they are reading, they are able to stretch their thinking beyond their own limits and gain the insight of others. Long and Gove (2003) found that students who participated in literature circles became more curious about what they were reading as well as more involved and absorbed in the texts. A claim is made that Literature Circles contributed to the development of skilful and thoughtful readers at all grade levels (Daniels, 2002). Readers collaborate to build conversational skills for talking about texts in personal and thoughtful ways. Literature Circles can also function as a method of helping students generate their own ideas about what they read and provide conversational structures that help students and teachers break away from typical discourse patterns. They can gradually enable students to take responsibility for reading, comprehending, interpreting, developing discussion of text, and engaging in increasingly more complex levels of reading and thinking (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). Students' insights and reflections, rather than ready-to-use questions from the teacher, drive the learning in literature circles. Students and teacher work together to break away from the traditional literature teaching methods. These learners also generate their own ideas and contribute to thoughtful conversation about what they read. This kind of practice helps to develop thoughtful, competent, and critical readers (Brabham & Villaume, 2000).

Moore (2008) researched into the efficacy of this innovative teaching strategy. His concern was to determine the effectiveness of using Literature Circles in a secondary English classroom. Two different sophomore English classes were used during the course of this research project. Each class was divided into literature circle groups for the duration of reading a novel. The first class read Chris Crutcher's *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* while the second class read *A Lesson Before Dying.* The first class received no prior instruction on the process of a Literature Circles; and the second group received instruction on the process of Literature Circles before the reading of their novel. At the end of the study, he concludes that for a short amount of time, students in both classes appeared to be engaged with the text, they were participating in discussions of the novel within their groups. Students in the second class also demonstrated engagement with the text by going beyond what was required of them during the Literature Circles meetings. The study also indicated that Literature Circles became more effective in the high school classroom when students understood the structure better.

Karatay (2017) in her quest to improve the text-analysis skills, reading desires, and interests of prospective teachers of Turkish used “Literature Circles”. According to the report of the study, a total of

92 third-year students in two sections of the department of Turkish Education voluntarily participated in the study. In order to improve the students' book reviewing skills and reading interests, "Literature Circles" was implemented for a period of 12 weeks for one class hour. At the end of the implementation of "Literature Circles" when the students' reading comprehension pre-test and post-test scores were compared, a significant difference was observed. Based on the results of the study, it was suggested that "Literature Circles" was effective in developing students' abilities to find the theme, main idea, and keywords in a text and established that the students pointed out that the implementation of this strategy increased their interest and desire for communication, their self-confidence, cooperative learning, critical thinking, reading objectively without bias, and independent reading skills. Conclusion of this report is highly interesting, revealing and encouraging for anybody to attempt the use in the classroom.

In another study by Okewole, Odejobi, and Ajayi (2018), it was recommended that strategies such as literature circles, dialogic reading and self-selection vocabulary should be given consideration by teachers towards the improvement of pupils' reading comprehension at the basic level of education. Reporting the results of the study, it was asserted that Literature Circles strategy had a positive significant effect on the pupils' reading comprehension.

Lauren (2015), in her study of Literature Circles and their improvement of comprehension which focused on elementary students, concluded that literature circles are adaptable and can be a highly successful method when it comes to improving students' motivation towards reading as well as guiding students to developing comprehension skills that will stick with them for a lifetime. He submitted further that Literature Circles offer opportunities for students to interact and be a part of a social group and those students who master teamwork skills in school will learn to be a part of a team which is a crucial ability to have when seeking a job or career in the future. It was also found that all the students in the study improved their accuracy in decoding the text, comprehended the text and increased their reading ability by one whole reading level. His final assertion is that there is no correct way to run Literature Circles in any given classroom but that it could be adopted and adapted to fit classrooms all over the world. Hence, he suggested to teachers who are considering trying Literature Circles within their classrooms to review the literature surrounding, the innovative reading strategy and create a version of literature circles that work best for his students.

Methodology

This study adopted the pretest-posttest control group quasi-experimental design. The participants for this study were 120year two preservice English Language teachers in two colleges of education in Lagos State. The instruments used were Prose Fiction Achievement Test (r=0.76), Literature Circles Instructional Guide and Literature Circles Tools Kit. Data were analysed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 alpha level.

Results

Research Question: To what extent will Literature Circles strategy significantly improve on post-achievement score of NCE English Language students in Prose Fiction?

Table 1: Achievement in Prose Fiction Scores using Literature Circles strategy

VA RIABLES		N	Mean	S. D	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Literature Circles strategy	Lit.Circles PRETEST	40	14.73	2.94	9.00	21.00	12.00
	POSTTEST		41.5	6.42	25.00	55.00	30.00
	Control PRETEST	40	9.78	3.63	2.00	18.00	16.00
	POSTTEST		27.25	8.74	6.00	21.00	15.00
	Total PRETEST	80	10.67	3.55	2	21	19.00
	POSTTEST		20.59	3.26	6.00	59	53.00

In table 1, the analysis revealed that the Literature Circles group had the higher achievement mean gain of 26.77 than the lecture method. From treatment, NCE English Language students in the Literature Circles group had the higher post-test achievement of Prose Fiction mean score of 41.5 (S.D= 6.42), while the control group has the lower mean score of 27.25 (S.D=8.72). The table also shows that NCE English Language student from the Literature Circles group recorded the higher post-test score of 55 marks while the lower post-test score of 6 marks was from NCE English Language students in the Control group.

Testing the null Hypotheses

H_o: There is no significant main effect of Literature Circles strategy on Nigeria Certificate in Education English Language students' achievement in Prose Fiction.

Table 1: Analysis of Covariance of students' Achievement in Prose Fiction by treatment

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	8854773[a]	18	491.932	10.344	.000
Intercept	12732.060	1	12732.060	267.724	.000
PRE-TEST	18.023	1	18.023	.379	.540
TREATMENT	6214.652	2	3107.326	65.339	.000
Error	4803.227	101	47.557		
Total	186938.000	120			
Corrected Total	13658.000	119			

Table 1 shows a significant effect of Literature Circles on the achievement of NCE English Language Students, ($F_{(2,116)} = 176.171$, $p<0.05$). Thus, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected. This by implication means that the academic achievement of NCE English Language Students in Prose Fiction largely depends on the learning strategies adopted by the teachers.

This implies that the treatment had a medium significant effect on the learning of Prose Fiction.

Discussion of Findings

The effectiveness of Literature circles might be because it is highly interactive and learner centred. Literature Circles gives room for independent learning, opportunity to share views with mates, create avenue for thinking, allows discovering facts by questioning and reflecting on relative matters of life as revealed in various characters presented in the text. It engages learners in reasoning, construction of meaning, search for knowledge and self-confidence. Thus, the interactive nature of Literature Circles generally encourages learning without coercion and restriction for independence in the atmosphere, making individual learners express themselves freely. It allows opportunities for students to assume new perspectives based on discussion with their peers. When children engage in Literature Circles they are interacting and learning from those around them, both peer and teacher. Since Literature Circles are set up as heterogeneous groups, learners are able to challenge each other's thinking productively. This finding corroborates Daniel's (2002) submission that the Literature Circles enabled students to question one another, change their point of view, and push each other to delve deeper into the text. Findings also support Clarke and Holwadel (2007) who reported Literature Circles made students to enjoy and understand prose fiction texts so much more and that Literature Circles provide great opportunities to discuss books and get students enthusiastic to read.

Conclusion

The study determined the effects of Literature Circles strategy on Nigeria Certificate in Education English Language students' achievement in Prose Fiction. Literature Circles Strategy had the higher level of potency in influencing the achievement of Nigeria Certificate in Education English Language students in Prose Fiction than the Lecture Method.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and implications of this study as discussed, the following recommendations are offered.

1. Literature Circles strategy should be adopted for teaching and learning Prose Fiction in our colleges of education.
2. Literature Circles strategy should be employed by teachers at all levels of education system to stimulate the interest of learners generally in reading literary works.
3. Teachers should attend seminars to acquaint them with the steps involved in implementing literature circles in their classes.

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