THE READABILITY LEVEL OF SELECTED NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

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Abstract
Newspapers generally inform, entertain and educate the reading public. The newspaper editorial, a distinct journalistic form deals with contemporary topics and shows greater concern to communicate and shape the opinion of the public. Therefore, the message of the print media should be for all levels of readers. The implication is that the newspapers should be written at a readability level which all literate readers can read and understand. Unfortunately, Nigerian newspapers have been accused of insensitivity to whether or not their readers comprehend the text offered them. This study therefore, analysed the readability level of our national newspaper editorials and the extent the intended readers understand or comprehend the editorials. This study derives its theoretical framework mainly from Schema and readability theories. The schema theory is based on the assumption that the knowledge stored in the mind is organised into framework and used for processing new information. Therefore, the theory stresses the role of background knowledge in the comprehension of a text. The implication is that when relevant schema is activated by a writer in his text, adequate comprehension is enhanced. Readability theory relates to approaches to the measurement of readability and the theoretical basis of each approach. The formula approach was used in this work to determine the readability level of the sample newspaper editorials. The readability formula used for this study is Flesch Reading Ease Formula ($206.835 - [1.015 \times ASL] - [84.6 \times ASW]$). It was used to determine the readability level of twenty newspaper editorials systematically selected from five national newspaper editorials. It was discovered that the newspaper print media hand out to the reading public written texts with no regards to the varied audience or readers. This is evident in the use of long sentences, unfamiliar polysyllabic and high sounding words. The readability level of the editorials was found to be very low, that means, the editorials were difficult and confusing to the average and low literacy readers but readable to undergraduates and graduates. Recommendations on how to make the newspaper editorials readable to all literate readers – the highly educated readers and the majority of the readers whose ability in English is just barely adequate were made. Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Introduction
Readability is a measure of how well and how easily a piece of writing passes on its intended meaning to a reader. According to Umolu and Oyetunde (1989), "Readability is the extent to which printed material has the potential for effective communication between author and reader". The consideration here is whether the material is suitable and comprehensible to the level of the reader or not. If a reader cannot comprehend the material offered him/her, it means the material is above the language level of the reader. When a text is written at a language level which is too difficult for the reader, it simply indicates that the writer has no proper assessment of the target audience. There should be correct assessment of the reading level of the reader, otherwise, the material which is expected to serve as an "information bank" will provide little or no desired information to some of the readers. The language of a text should be easy to read and to understand. A text is said to be readable when the language is clear and easily deciphered (Edgar and Challs, 2014).

According to Joe and Dowin (2013), many experts have compiled golden rules of documentation writing. These rules apply regardless of medium and are aimed at enhancing readability. They are as follows: "use short, simple, familiar words, use culture and gender–neutral languages, use simple sentences, active voice and present tense, begin instructions in the imperative mode by starting

sentences with action verb, use simple graphic elements such as bulleted lists and numbered steps to make information accessible.

Regrettably, Nigerian newspapers have been accused of insensitivity to whether or not the readers comprehend the texts offered them. This means that the print media offer the readers written texts above their readability level. Consequently, a good percentage of the population fails to comprehend what is offered by the print media. Unoh (1986) lending credence to the assertion above says: Nigerian newspapers have been accused of using "Incomprehensible, bizarre, over pretentious, tortuous but intelligible structures... and bombarding the reader with bombast...."

This article, therefore, assesses 20 national newspaper editorials from five national newspapers; Daily Champion, The Guardian, Vanguard, The Nation and Daily Sun to ascertain the truth or otherwise of the accusation. The purpose of this study is to find out how readable the editorials are to Nigerian literate audience, the readability level of the editorials and whether or not the readers are adequately served by the print media.

The instrument used was Flesch Reading Ease Formula: a readability formula that assesses the readability level of a text based on the length and complexity of words and sentences that make up the text. This paper would make a significant contribution to knowledge by creating awareness and consciousness to the writers of newspapers, specifically the writers of the newspaper editorials on the need to bear the readability level of their readers in mind while writing for them. They should know the audience. Texts for the public should be written in clear and straight-forward manner that would carry all literate readers along.

Reading and Reading Comprehension
Reading is a kind of interaction or communication with written text. It is a cognitive activity and a receptive skill. It results in obtaining information from written material. Reading is a language skill with which we communicate ideas and acquire knowledge. The eye, the mind and the brain are involved in reading. Hence, the reader is seen as participating in arriving at the meaning. This means that reading involves the reader and the text. Each brings something to the understanding of the text. As one reads widely, he is armed with pieces of information that can lead to the development of a backward person or area. According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, "Reading is the single most important skill necessary for happy, productive and successful life". (Fountlas and Gay, 2016). Reading is important to attaining success in life. It provides the experience through which one may identify, extend and intensify his interest and have understanding of himself, of others and of the world at large.

Reading among other things relieves emotional tension and insight to personal problem. Realizing the need for reading and the vast scope the reading of newspaper editorials affords the reader, it is expedient that the text given to readers should be made readable to them. This is because much of the success in reading depends on the readability of the text. Readability here relates to the probability of comprehension for an audience. This implies that reading calls for a special contribution on the part of the writer who is expected to take his audience into consideration while writing. He must carry them along. Since we cannot afford the expensive climate of living in ignorance, the media writer must perform his task creditably as an informer, educator, entertainer and correlator of his environment (Unoh, 1986).

Readability and Schema theories form the theoretical framework of this work. Readability theory relates to the approaches to the measurement of readability and the theoretical basis of each approach. A theory of readability would take into account the aspects of written texts that enhances or impedes comprehension (Bailin and Grafstein, 2016). The formula approach of readability theory is used in this article. It is a simple algorithm which measures text readability based on sentence length and word length (Crossley, Allen and McNamara; 2011). The readability formula used in this work is the Flesch Reading Ease Formula:

RE = 206.835 – [1.015 × ASL] – [84.6 × ASW].
RE = Reading Ease
ASL = Average Sentence Length (i.e. the number of words divided by the number of sentences)
ASW = Average number of syllables per word (i.e. the number of syllables divided by the number of words).

The schema (plural schemata) theory explains the role of background knowledge in the comprehension of a text. Anderson (2015) asserts that the schemata a person already possess are a principal determiner of what will be learned from a new text and that inadequate comprehension may occur due to a failure to activate relevant schema.

Using prior knowledge makes comprehension ability much easier than it would have been without prior knowledge or motivation to read. (Okeke, 2013; Travis Dixon, 2017; Kimberly, 2014).
By using familiar words and less difficult structures the writer provides the reader with a gateway to a better understanding of the text. This makes the text presented to the reader readable. It is therefore, expedient that newspaper writers should bear in mind the reading level and language ability of their varied readers while writing. When a text is written in a language that is higher than the reader, the implication is that the writer has no knowledge of the reading level of the reader. Although readability is affected by both the text factors and the reader factors, this article focuses on text factor.

Review of Related Literature
In the course of the review of related scholarly work it has been established that the author and the reader are all involved in comprehension. There is effective communication when the language used by the author helps the reader to get the author's intended meaning, easily.

In January - February, 2015, a readability analysis of Nigerian National Daily Newspapers was carried out by Adamma C. Eberendu and Eleano Muma. They used one readability measure – Gobbledygook (SMOG) in their research. The results showed that the readability level of these papers was low, meaning that the texts were difficult to many of their readers. This agrees with Unoh (1986) who conducted a research on the Readability levels of selected Nigerian newspaper editorials using two Nigerian newspapers. She noted that the editorials were difficult to the average and low literate readers. She also observed that the difficulty level of a passage can be reduced by decreasing the frequency of the occurrence of polysyllabic words and by reducing sentence length.
Many other researchers observed that texts given to the public were at too high a level for a varied audience. (NALA; 2014, Ezeoma, Emmanuel; 2011 etc).

Methodology
The design used was an empirical assessment of newspaper texts using Flesch Reading Ease Formula. It is a readability formula that assesses readability level of a text based on the length and complexity of words and sentences in a text. The area was Anambra State of Nigeria. It was focused on Nigerian national newspapers published in the English language, twenty editorials of five national newspapers: The Vanguard, Daily Champion, Daily Sun, The Nation and The Guardian were deliberately selected and used for the study. The newspapers were selected because of their wide circulation and the wide readership they enjoy. Flesch Reading Ease Formula was used to test the readability of the editorial of each of the sample newspapers. This instrument is a standardized readability formula and need no adaptation for this study, since it has been tested and approved by many researchers for many years.
The Reading Ease Formula was based on
   a) Systematic (beginning, middle and end) selection of one hundred (100) word sample from the text.
   b) Determining the number of syllables per one hundred (100) words which is referred to as word length (WL).
   c) Determining the average number of words per selected sentence – sentence length (SL). The first sentence was chosen and the two following were left. The fourth was chosen and the two others were left, in that order. The number of words was calculated and divided by the total number of sentences used.

    d) Calculating the prescribed equation
      where
      RE = Reading Ease Score
      WL = Word Length in syllables
      SL = Average Sentence Length in words
      The formula = 206.835 – [1.015 × ASL]–[84.6 × ASW]
      The mean readability indices for the newspaper editorials were calculated using the formula.
      The resulting score was used to look up in a chart to interpret the level of difficulty or ease of the text.

Table 1: Readability Chart

Reading Ease Score	Description of style	Estimated Reading Grade
90 – 100	Very easy	5th grade
80 – 90	Easy	6th grade
70 – 80	Fairly easy	7th grade
60 – 70	Standard	8th grade
50 – 60	Fairly difficult	10th – 13th grade
30 – 50	Difficult	14th – 16th grade (college)
0 – 30	Very difficult to read	College graduate

(Saverin and Tankerd in Nduka, 2013)

It is important to understand that 60 – 70 reading ease score is grouped as plain English, standard, easily understood by grade level 8th students.

Table 2: Equivalent Grade Levels of Readability: American/Nigerian

American	Nigerian
Grade level 4	Primary 4
Grade level 5	Primary 5
Grade level 6	Primary 6
Grade level 7 – 8	Secondary 1 – 2
Grade level 9 – 11	Secondary 3 – 4
Grade level 12 – 13	Secondary 5 – 6
College level 14 – 16	Colleges / College graduates

(Odejide in Nduka: 2013)

Table 3: A summary of the Reading Ease of All the Editorials used

Paper	Average number of Syllables per Word (ASW) Word Length	Average Sentence Length (ASL)	Flesch Reading Ease (RE)
Daily Champion	1.6	30	38.3
The Guardian	1.71	27.5	34.7
Vanguard	1.67	24	43.4
The Nation	1.68	24.8	39.5
Daily Sun	1.76	22	35.9
Total	1.68	25.7	38.4

From the tables above, the twenty (20) samples taken from five national newspapers are at least difficult on the average. They are suited for university undergraduates but confusing to 11th to 13th grade level (senior secondary students). This is in consonance with the linguist's assertion that Nigerian newspapers

are difficult and that the writers are insensitive towards the reader's ability to comprehend the text offered them.

The average RE is 38.4 and the chart used to interpret the level of difficulty or ease of a text indicates that 38.4 is a difficult text and suitable for university undergraduate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the readability level of Nigerian newspaper editorials was found to be low. It was found suitable for university undergraduates. From the results of the standardized readability formula used for the study, it was observed that many sentences were very long, ranging from forty (40) words to a hundred (100) words and above. The longer the sentence, the more complex the text and the more difficult it is to comprehend. This violates the USA Press Association Standard number of words in a sentence – seventeen (17) words. This is an indication that newspaper editorials are written at very high grade level instead of the largely considered acceptable reading grade level when writing for the general public. (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2014; Ekwenchi, 2002; Galaa, 2019; Okunna, 2002 and Unoh, 1986).

Recommendations

This paper therefore, recommends as follows:

- Our media writers should aim at the most important techniques in writing –the technique that would enable them meet their reading audience at the different levels of readability.
- To make our newspaper editorials easy to read by all literate persons, it should be written at about the eighth grade level (JSS2) students.
- The editorials should be written in such a clear and straight forward manner that everyone who is literate would understand them easily. No matter the topic, the content should be easy to the highly educated, the students and the less literate (the masons, taxi drivers, the tailors, the okada and Keke drivers, the mechanics or dry cleaners). A true newspaper has been defined as a paper that among other things is readable to the people of ordinary literacy (Aliyu, 2004).
- Pictorial aids and cartoon should be used to improve readability.

If these suggestions are applied, readership would increase and information would spread widely.

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