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SIGHT VOCABULARY, ORAL READING AND COMPREHENSION PERFORMANCE OF JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN JEBBA, KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study examined the reading performance of Junior Secondary School (JSS) students in Jebba, Kwara State, Nigeria, in three core reading dimensions: sight vocabulary, oral reading and reading comprehension. A descriptive survey design was adopted. Through stratified random sampling with proportional allocation, 180 JSS 3 students (97 private and 83 public) were selected from the ten secondary schools in Jebba, Moro Local Government Area. Data were collected with the Alternative Diagnostic Reading Assessment (ADRA), a three-phase instrument developed by the researchers to measure sight vocabulary, oral reading and comprehension (30 marks each). The ADRA was validated by experts and pilot-tested, and its test-retest reliability over a three-week interval was r = .88. Data were analysed with means, standard deviations and frequency counts; supplementary analyses used Welch's t-test, Pearson correlation and multiple regression. Mean scores were 19.87 (SD = 6.94) for sight vocabulary, 17.77 (SD = 6.68) for oral reading and 14.43 (SD = 5.63) for comprehension, all within the average band (11–20) of the performance scale, with comprehension the weakest. Inferential comprehension was particularly weak (35.6% correct). Private-school students outperformed public-school students on all three dimensions, and oral reading was the strongest predictor of comprehension. When conventional informal reading inventory criteria were applied, only 8.9% of students reached the instructional level in comprehension. The study concluded that the students' word-level skills were moderately developed but their comprehension lagged. It recommended targeted instruction in vocabulary development, oral reading fluency and comprehension strategies, especially inferential comprehension, with particular attention to public schools.

Keywords: *sight vocabulary, oral reading, reading comprehension, reading performance, Jebba*

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Introduction

Reading is widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of academic learning and the gateway to knowledge acquisition across all subject areas (Castles et al., 2018; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). As a cognitive, linguistic and socially situated process, reading enables learners to decode written symbols, construct meaning and engage critically with the world around them (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). In the Nigerian secondary school context, reading proficiency at the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level is especially critical because it forms the foundation upon which students move from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" across the curriculum.

Despite the recognised importance of reading, persistent evidence points to widespread reading underperformance among Nigerian secondary school students. Studies conducted in various parts of Nigeria have documented deficits in students' reading abilities, ranging from poor word recognition to inadequate reading comprehension (Bello, 2004; Ikonta, 2010). The situation in Jebba, Kwara State, however, has received limited scholarly attention, creating a knowledge gap that this study sought to address.

Reading performance is a multidimensional construct encompassing several interrelated sub-skills. Three dimensions are particularly fundamental at the JSS level: sight vocabulary, oral reading and comprehension. Sight vocabulary refers to words that learners recognise on sight without deliberate decoding, often called "look and say" words, and it forms a critical foundation for fluent reading (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri, 2015). Oral reading, the ability to read text aloud accurately and fluently, provides teachers and researchers with observable evidence of phonological awareness, decoding skill and expressive fluency (Fuchs et al., 2001; Güneş, 2013). Reading comprehension, the goal of the reading process, encompasses the reader's ability to extract and construct meaning from text, integrate prior knowledge and respond to literal and inferential questions (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

This article reports findings from a broader diagnostic study of reading performance among JSS 3 students in Jebba. Specifically, three research questions guided this aspect of the investigation:

Research Questions

1. What is the students' level of sight vocabulary performance?
2. What is the students' level of oral reading performance?
3. What is the students' level of comprehension performance?

By establishing empirical baseline data on these three reading dimensions, the study provides actionable insights for teachers, school administrators, curriculum planners and educational policymakers in Kwara State and in Nigeria more broadly.

Literature Review

The Nature of Reading

Reading is fundamentally a meaning-making process that integrates decoding, comprehension and prior knowledge in a dynamic and interactive manner (Akyol & Boyaci-Altinay, 2019; Castles et al., 2018). The Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018) holds that reading comprehension is the product of decoding skill and linguistic comprehension, both of which must be adequately developed for proficient reading. Contemporary theories further situate reading within socio-cultural frameworks, recognising that language background, instructional quality and socioeconomic environment interact with cognitive processes in shaping reading outcomes (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014).

At the secondary school level, reading

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changes from a skill being learned to a tool for learning. JSS students are expected to engage with increasingly complex academic texts, which demand a broad sight vocabulary, fluent oral delivery and multi-layered comprehension. Failure to develop these skills early has well-documented cumulative effects on later reading growth and academic performance (Torgesen, 2002).

Sight Vocabulary and Word Recognition

Sight vocabulary, the store of words a reader recognises immediately without deliberate phonological decoding, is pivotal for reading fluency. According to Ehri (2015), sight word reading develops through orthographic mapping, whereby the phonological, semantic and orthographic information of words is consolidated in long-term memory. Poor readers may have deficits in phonological recoding, which impair the reading of unfamiliar words, or deficits in word-specific orthographic knowledge, which impair the recognition of irregular words by sight (Castles & Coltheart, 1993). Both patterns result in an impoverished sight vocabulary, albeit through different mechanisms.

Torgesen (2002) noted that poor readers tend to over-rely on contextual guessing when they encounter unfamiliar words, reflecting limited sight vocabulary. An adequate sight vocabulary enables rapid, automatic word identification, thereby freeing cognitive resources for higher-order comprehension (Akyol & Boyaci-Altinay, 2019; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

Oral Reading Performance

Oral reading fluency, measured in terms of accuracy, rate and prosody, is both an indicator of foundational reading skill and a predictor of reading comprehension (Bastug & Akyol, 2012; Kim et al., 2011). Research consistently demonstrates that students who read aloud accurately and expressively comprehend text better than those who read laboriously or with frequent errors (Homan et al., 1993; Kuhn et al., 2006). Güneş (2013) further warns that a premature move to silent reading, before adequate oral reading fluency is established, can negatively affect pronunciation, intonation and overall speaking development.

The oral reading behaviours that teachers observe provide diagnostic information about underlying reading difficulties. In miscue analysis, deviations from the text such as substitutions, insertions, omissions and repetitions are analysed as windows into the reader's use of graphic, syntactic and semantic cues (Goodman, 1969). At the JSS level in Nigeria, where English is typically the medium of instruction and a second language for most students, oral reading presents additional challenges, because the linguistic features of the first language shape the development of second-language reading (Koda, 2007).

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the goal of literacy instruction and a prerequisite for academic success across all subject domains (Armbruster et al., 2010; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) framework identifies three key elements of comprehension: the reader (with prior knowledge, motivation and cognitive resources), the text (with its structure and vocabulary demands) and the activity (the purpose and context of reading). Effective comprehension requires the integration of background knowledge, inferencing, vocabulary knowledge and metacognitive monitoring (Oakhill et al., 2015).

Comprehension is commonly described at three levels: literal comprehension, which involves identifying explicitly stated information; inferential comprehension, which requires drawing conclusions from implicit cues; and critical or

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evaluative comprehension, which demands judgement and synthesis (Basaraba et al., 2013). Research with Nigerian secondary school students suggests that while literal comprehension may approximate average levels, inferential and critical comprehension remain underdeveloped (Bello, 2004; Ikonta, 2010).

Reading Levels

Informal reading inventories (IRIs) classify a reader's performance on a given text into three levels (Betts, 1946). At the *independent* level, the reader comprehends at least 90% of the material without help. At the *instructional* level, the reader comprehends about 75–89% and can read the text profitably with teacher support. At the *frustration* level, comprehension falls below 50% and the text is too difficult even with support. These criteria provide an external benchmark against which students' comprehension scores can be interpreted.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for systematically characterising reading performance in a defined population (Siedlecki, 2020). The design allowed quantifiable data to be collected from a representative sample of students without experimental manipulation. The target population comprised all JSS 3 students in the ten secondary schools (four public and six private) in Jebba, Moro Local Government Area, Kwara State, Nigeria. JSS 3 students were selected because they are expected to have fully made the transition to the "reading to learn" stage and are preparing for the Basic Education Certificate Examination. Using stratified random sampling with proportional allocation by school type, 180 students were selected: 97 from private schools and 83 from public schools. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample (N = 180)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	106	58.9
Male	74	41.1
Age (years)		
8–10	7	3.9
11–15	124	68.9
16 and above	49	27.2
School type		
Public (4 schools)	83	46.1
Private (6 schools)	97	53.9

Instrumentation

The Alternative Diagnostic Reading Assessment (ADRA) was developed by the researchers as a three-phase, individually administered instrument based on three reading passages drawn from *Spectrum High Standard English for JSS 1–3*, a widely used textbook that aligns with the Basic Education Curriculum. One passage was taken from each book of the series: JSS 1 (pp. 10–12), JSS 2 (pp. 18–20) and JSS 3 (pp. 51–53), so that the passages rose in difficulty with class level. A single, neutral textbook was chosen because the schools in the study used different English

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textbooks, and this series aligns with the current basic education curriculum.

Phase one (sight vocabulary) assessed students' immediate recognition of 20 words drawn from each of the three passages (60 words in all), with the difficulty of the words matched to the class level of the passage. Each word was worth half a mark, so that each word list carried 10 marks; a half mark was deducted for every word the student could not read correctly on sight. The maximum score was 30.

Phase two (oral reading) required each student to read the three passages aloud to a trained assessor. Oral reading fluency is commonly judged on accuracy, rate and prosody (Kuhn et al., 2006; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). During reading, the assessor coded miscues (insertion, omission, repetition, reversal and mispronunciation). Each passage carried 10 marks, and a half mark was deducted for every reading problem (miscue) the assessor recorded. The score thus reflects mainly oral reading accuracy; rate and prosody were observed but not scored separately. The maximum score was 30.

Phase three (comprehension) was administered after the student had read each passage silently, and consisted of 10 objective questions on each passage: six literal, three inferential and one critical question. Each correct answer earned one mark, giving a maximum of 30 (literal = 18, inferential = 9, critical = 3).

For descriptive reporting, each dimension score was classified into one of three equal-interval, criterion-referenced performance bands: below average (0–10, i.e., one-third of the maximum or less), average (11–20) and above average (21–30). These bands describe the level of performance relative to the maximum score; they are not reading levels in the IRI sense. To relate the findings to conventional reading levels, the comprehension scores were also converted to percentages and classified with Betts's (1946) criteria.

The ADRA was validated by expert faculty members in the researchers' department, who judged the relevance of the passages, word lists and questions to the JSS English curriculum and the clarity of the scoring scheme. It was then pilot-tested on a small group of JSS 3 students from the target population, and some items were modified in light of the pilot results. Reliability was established with the test-retest method over a three-week interval, which yielded a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = .88$.

Data were collected by the researchers with the support of a trained research assistant and the cooperating English language teachers in each school, after permission had been obtained from the relevant school authorities. Each student was assessed individually in a quiet, separate place provided by the school, so that the conditions resembled those of an oral diagnostic interview. Students' names were not recorded, in order to protect their anonymity. During the oral reading phase, the assessor recorded each miscue with a code: Is (insertion), Om (omission), Rp (repetition), Rv (reversal) and Mp (mispronunciation).

The research questions were answered using means, standard deviations, 95% confidence intervals and frequency distributions computed from the students' actual (ungrouped) scores. Supplementary analyses compared public- and private-school students with Welch's *t*-test (with Cohen's *d* as the effect size), examined the relationships among the three dimensions with Pearson correlation, and tested whether sight vocabulary and oral reading predicted

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comprehension using multiple linear regression. One student had no sight vocabulary or oral reading score, so n = 179 for those two measures. All tests were conducted at the .05 level of significance.

Results: Research Question 1: What is the students' level of sight vocabulary performance?

Table 2: Students' Level of Sight Vocabulary Performance (n = 179)

Performance level	Score range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below average	0–10	26	14.5
Average	11–20	49	27.4
Above average	21–30	104	58.1
Total		179	100.0

Note.M = 19.87, *SD* = 6.94, 95% CI [18.85, 20.89]; median = 21.

As shown in Table 2, the mean sight vocabulary score was 19.87 out of 30 (*SD* = 6.94), which places the students' sight vocabulary performance at the average level (11–20). Although more than half of the students (104, or 58.1%) scored in the above-average range, a notable proportion (26, or 14.5%) fell in the below-average band. The distribution was negatively skewed (median = 21), which indicates that a minority of very low scorers pulled the mean below the median. Overall, JSS 3 students in Jebba had a functional but incomplete sight vocabulary.

Research Question 2: What is the students' level of oral reading performance?

Table 3: Students' Level of Oral Reading Performance (n = 179)

Performance level	Score range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below average	0–10	27	15.1
Average	11–20	64	35.8
Above average	21–30	88	49.2
Total		179	100.0

Note.M = 17.77, *SD* = 6.68, 95% CI [16.79, 18.76]; median = 20. Percentages are calculated as frequency ÷ 179 × 100 (e.g., 88 ÷ 179 × 100 = 49.2%).

Table 3 shows that the mean oral reading score was 17.77 out of 30 (*SD* = 6.68), which places overall performance at the average level. Almost half of the students (88 of 179, or 49.2%) achieved above-average scores, while 27 students (15.1%) fell in the below-average band. The oral reading mean was lower than the sight vocabulary mean (17.77 vs 19.87), suggesting that reading continuous text, which demands simultaneous decoding, articulation and pacing, presents additional challenges beyond isolated word recognition.

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Research Question 3: What is the students' level of comprehension performance?

Table 4: Students' Level of Comprehension Performance (N = 180)

Performance level	Score range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below average	0–10	49	27.2
Average	11–20	105	58.3
Above average	21–30	26	14.4
Total		180	100.0

Note.M = 14.43, *SD* = 5.63, 95% CI [13.60, 15.26]; median = 14.

As Table 4 shows, the mean comprehension score was 14.43 out of 30 (*SD* = 5.63), which falls within the average band (11–20). This was the lowest mean among the three dimensions. Only 26 students (14.4%) attained above-average comprehension scores, while 49 (27.2%) were in the below-average range, the highest proportion of below-average performers across the three dimensions. Most students (105, or 58.3%) clustered in the average band.

Table 5 breaks the comprehension score down by sub-skill and shows how the scores relate to conventional reading levels.

Table 5: Comprehension Performance by Sub-Skill and by Informal Reading Inventory Level (N = 180)

Comprehension sub-skill	Maximum	*M*	*SD*	% correct
Literal	18	9.89	3.49	54.9
Inferential	9	3.20	2.06	35.6
Critical	3	1.34	1.04	44.5
IRI level (Betts, 1946)	**Score**	**Frequency**	**%**	
Independent (= 90%)	27–30	1	0.6	
Instructional (75–89%)	23–26	15	8.3	
Between instructional and frustration (50–74%)	15–22	73	40.6	
Frustration (< 50%)	0–14	91	50.6	

Note. Critical sub-skill *n* = 179 (one out-of-range entry was excluded).

The students answered just over half of the literal questions correctly (54.9%), but only about a third of the inferential questions (35.6%). When the comprehension scores were classified with conventional IRI criteria, only 16 students (8.9%) reached the instructional level or above, while about half (91, or 50.6%) scored below 50%, the threshold for the frustration level.

Supplementary Analyses

Differences by school type. Private-school students outperformed public-school students on sight vocabulary (*M* = 21.81, *SD* = 5.50 vs *M* = 17.63, *SD* = 7.74), *t*(145.2) = 4.11, *p*< .001, *d* = 0.63; on oral reading (*M* = 20.65, *SD* = 4.50 vs *M* = 14.45, *SD* = 7.24), *t*(133.0) = 6.75, *p*< .001, *d* = 1.05; and on comprehension (*M* = 17.16, *SD* = 5.31 vs *M* = 11.23, *SD* =

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4.11), $t(176.3) = 8.45$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.24$. By Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, the differences were moderate for sight vocabulary and large for oral reading and comprehension.

Relationships among the three dimensions. Sight vocabulary correlated strongly with oral reading ($r = .92$) and comprehension ($r = .80$), and oral reading correlated strongly with comprehension ($r = .85$); all $p < .001$, $n = 179$.

Table 6: Multiple Regression of Comprehension on Sight Vocabulary and Oral Reading (n = 179)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*t*	*p*
Constant	1.49	0.67		2.23	.027
Sight vocabulary	0.11	0.08	.13	1.35	.180
Oral reading	0.61	0.08	.73	7.30	< .001

Note. $R^2 = .73$, adjusted $R^2 = .72$, $F(2, 176) = 233.90$, $p < .001$. Variance inflation factor = 6.40 for both predictors.

Together, sight vocabulary and oral reading explained 73% of the variance in comprehension. Oral reading was the only significant unique predictor ($\beta = .73, p < .001$); sight vocabulary did not add significantly once oral reading was taken into account ($\beta = .13$, $p = .180$). Because the two predictors were highly correlated (VIF = 6.40), their separate coefficients should be interpreted with caution.

Discussion

The findings reveal a hierarchical pattern of reading performance among JSS 3 students in Jebba: sight vocabulary was highest ($M = 19.87$), followed by oral reading ($M = 17.77$), with comprehension lowest ($M = 14.43$). All three means fall within the average band of the performance scale, but the comprehension results indicate that most students could not yet read texts of this kind independently.

The average sight vocabulary performance is broadly consistent with findings from comparable Nigerian studies (Bello, 2004; Lawal, 1994), which observed that JSS students develop a working vocabulary of high-frequency words through classroom exposure yet frequently struggle with polysyllabic and low-frequency words. Torgesen (2002) noted that weaker readers often rely on contextual guessing for unfamiliar words rather than on systematic decoding, which limits vocabulary growth. The finding that 58.1% of the students scored in the above-average range indicates some strength, but the 14.5% in the below-average range represents a group at serious risk of reading failure if unaddressed.

The average oral reading performance ($M = 17.77$) reflects the challenges of the transition from primary to secondary school reading demands. At the JSS level, students encounter increasingly complex and content-laden texts that require not only accurate word recognition but also appropriate phrasing and expression. Güneş (2013) observed that students who move to silent reading too early tend to show weaknesses in intonation and pronunciation. The lower oral reading mean relative to sight vocabulary suggests that fluency across extended texts lags behind isolated word recognition, a gap that may be widened by first-language influence on

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second-language reading (Koda, 2007).

Most significantly, the comprehension mean was markedly lower than the sight vocabulary and oral reading means, and inferential comprehension was particularly weak (35.6% correct). This dissociation between word-level and comprehension performance echoes the pattern described in the literature as specific reading comprehension difficulties, in which students demonstrate adequate word recognition but struggle to construct meaning from text (Nation, 2005; Spear-Swerling, 2019). It is also consistent with Nigerian findings that inferential and critical comprehension remain underdeveloped (Bello, 2004; Ikonta, 2010) and with evidence that inferential comprehension is a distinct and more demanding skill than literal recall (Basaraba et al., 2013). Ikonta (2010) similarly observed that without strong comprehension, reading reduces to a mechanical exercise devoid of meaning.

The IRI analysis sharpens this interpretation. On the researcher-defined performance scale, comprehension appears "average"; judged against Betts's (1946) conventional criteria, however, only 8.9% of the students comprehended the passages at the instructional level or above, and about half scored below the frustration threshold. In the broader study from which these data are drawn, the instructional level was operationalised as 4–7 marks out of 10 (40–70%); under that definition, the comprehension mean (48%) would be classified as instructional. That range, however, is considerably more lenient than the conventional criteria, so the view that these students read at the instructional level is not supported for comprehension once those criteria are applied. A more accurate conclusion is that, for many JSS 3 students in Jebba, textbook passages at the JSS 1–3 level are difficult to comprehend even when the words can be recognised and read aloud.

The regression results are consistent with the Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018) and with evidence that oral reading fluency predicts comprehension (Fuchs et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2011). Word-level skills explained a large share (73%) of the variance in comprehension, and oral reading, which requires accurate word recognition in connected text, was the stronger unique predictor. At the same time, 27% of the variance was unexplained, which leaves room for the language comprehension, background knowledge and inferencing skills that the Simple View and the RAND framework identify as necessary for comprehension (Oakhill et al., 2015; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Finally, the large gap between private- and public-school students, especially in oral reading (d = 1.05) and comprehension (d = 1.24), points to differences in learning conditions, such as access to reading materials, class size and instructional time, that merit policy attention. Because the present design did not measure these conditions, the explanation remains to be tested.

Limitations of the Study

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the design was cross-sectional, so the relationships reported cannot be interpreted causally. Second, the ADRA is a researcher-developed instrument; although it showed good test-retest reliability, it has limited prior validation evidence, and the three passages were not formally equated for difficulty. Third, the study was confined to one town (Jebba), so the findings may not generalise to other parts of Kwara State or Nigeria. Fourth, although comprehension was assessed after silent

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reading, the study did not measure silent reading rate or use curriculum-based measures, which would give a fuller picture of students' reading. Similarly, the oral reading score reflected accuracy only, not rate or prosody. Finally, the performance bands used for descriptive reporting are researcher-defined; this is why conventional IRI criteria were also applied to the comprehension scores.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study found that JSS 3 students in Jebba, Kwara State, performed at the average level in sight vocabulary, oral reading and comprehension on the researcher-defined performance scale, with comprehension the weakest dimension and inferential comprehension particularly weak. When judged against conventional IRI criteria, fewer than one in ten students comprehended the textbook passages at the instructional level. Word-level skills, especially oral reading, were strongly related to comprehension, and private-school students outperformed public-school students on all three dimensions. The gap between word recognition and comprehension was especially telling and warrants immediate instructional attention.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations were made:

i. Schools should embed regular, structured reading programmes into the timetable, with explicit instruction in sight vocabulary building, oral reading fluency (for example, repeated and assisted reading) and comprehension strategies such as predicting, summarising and, above all, inferencing.
ii. Teachers should use diagnostic reading assessments such as the ADRA at the beginning of each term to identify students at risk of reading failure and to match texts to students' instructional levels.
iii. Curriculum planners should ensure that reading comprehension, particularly inferential and critical reading, occupies a prominent place in the JSS English Language curriculum and is given adequate instructional time.
iv. Government and school administrators should prioritise level-appropriate reading materials, well-stocked libraries and regular professional development for English language teachers, with particular attention to public schools, where performance was lowest.
v. Future studies should use larger and more varied samples, equate passages for difficulty, score oral reading rate and prosody, include silent reading fluency measures, and investigate the school-level factors behind the public–private gap.

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