

## Creativity in Language Teaching: Using Interactive Language Strategies to Enhance Verbal Reasoning across Ability Levels

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### ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effects of using interactive strategies – story-telling and debate on Junior Secondary School 2 students' performance in verbal reasoning across ability levels. The study adopted the quasi-experimental pre-test and posttest non equivalent group design. Two research questions guided the study while two hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance. The sample size consisted of 180 Junior Secondary School 2 students selected through simple and purposive techniques. The sample was made up of six intact classes from the area of study. Data were collected using an adopted Verbal Ability Test (VAT). Data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses. Results indicated that there was no significant effect of storytelling on high and low ability students' mean performance scores in VAT ( $P = 0.17 > 0.05$ ). The finding also showed that there was high ability students' mean performance scores with low ability level in debate strategy ( $P = 0.60 > 0.05$ ). Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that English Language teachers should use instructional packages like storytelling and debate because they appeal to all students and improve their verbal reasoning skills.

**Keywords:** Verbal reasoning, story-telling, debate, ability levels.

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#### Aims Research Journal Reference Format:

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Basically, language proficiency and competence which are important variables for students' academic performance are crucial in fostering interpretation and comprehension. Most knowledge gained in schools require some verbal reasoning because it is generally developed through oral or written instruction. Verbal reasoning is therefore a crucial component of language learning which enhances comprehension skills. In corroborating these views, Gambari, Kutigi and Fagbemi (2014) explain that verbal reasoning encompasses the skills needed for language comprehension and expression which is profoundly linked to oral language (listening and speaking). Verbal reasoning is therefore aimed at evaluating a learner's ability to think constructively with words. Donges (2014) asserts that verbal reasoning gives information, going beyond that information to a better understanding and applying verbal skills to a new learning. All language skills especially listening therefore involve verbal reasoning (Adeyinka, Adedeji, Adik & Majekodunmi, 2008).

Ijiga (2014) is also of the view that since ability to comprehend written or oral text requires some measures of verbal competence students need to be exposed to varied interactive language instructions to increase their capacity to comprehend both oral and written texts. Ahua (2016) explains that verbal reasoning generally refers to one's ability to put ideas into words either orally or written. The author goes further to note that this involves possessing strong working vocabulary and having the ability to choose the right words to convey meaning. Verbal reasoning also involves a person's ability to organize words in coherent ways. Cooijmas (2006) asserts that verbal ability has to do with the application of pattern recognition and reasoning in the field of language. The concept of verbal reasoning is a basic relevance to comprehension skills for effective communication. Morrison (2007) explains that verbal reasoning requires learners to comprehend the content of a written or spoken passage, evaluate the information in the passage and apply it to new information. Each of these tasks demands certain verbal skills.

Logsdan (2014) summaries that verbal reasoning include analysis of information given by using language based reasoning through such skills as;

- a. The ability to listen and recall spoken information,
- b. Understanding the meaning of written or spoken information,
- c. Solving language based problems between language concepts and performing language analogies, and
- d. The ability to perform complex language based analysis.

The ability of second language learners to analyse spoken and written texts is critically linked to diverse interactive language strategies or activities. Ijiga (2014) explains that students need to be exposed to diverse interactive language activities to increase verbal reasoning which could aid comprehension and expression. Idoga (2011) and Ijiga (2014) report that exposing students to interactive reading strategies makes them perform better in verbal reasoning than those exposed to the conventional method of teaching reading. Since there is increased communication demand place on language learners, Kennedy (2007) suggests that there is need to integrate meaningful language activities across the curriculum that increase learners' proficiency and competence. Some of these interactive language strategies and activities include mock interview, conversation, drama, turn-taking, story-telling and debate. Thus, this study focused on employing storytelling and debate in English language interactive language strategies to enhance verbal reasoning of students across ability levels.

Story-telling is viewed as a language activity that can be used to teach communicative skills. Language researchers on verbal reasoning in Second Language (L2) have often been focused on reading, writing skills and grammar but hardly on listening comprehension. Many language educators have long come to accept that storytelling can contribute to learners' language proficiency and competence as well as improve literacy (Khadeja, 2010; Kurita, 2012). Khadeja (2010) defines storytelling as a narrative account of a real or imagined event that has a structure with a specific style and set of characters. Marisa (2010) observes that telling stories as part of language learning could enhance students' listening ability, expose them to vocabulary, and increase their language base and sentence structure. Storytelling involves listening activities in which children try to recall what they listen to. Campell and Hluseter (2015) notes that activities built on storytelling can provide practice in listening skills. Naziratta – Ala (2012) also asserts that integrating storytelling into language arts could encourage linguistic skills especially listening comprehension. The indices of effective listening during storytelling activity include, responding, questioning, predicting, drawing inferences, clarifying, retelling the main gist and evaluating. All these indices involve verbal reasoning which requires a lot of cognitive abilities to achieve effective communication. In relation to this assertion, Gambari, Kutigi and Fagbami (2014) emphasize that verbal reasoning encompasses the skills needed for language comprehension which is profoundly linked to oral English (listening and speaking). Ahua (2016), reports in a study that there was an average positive correlation between verbal reasoning and students' performance in reading comprehension. Idikwu (2015) equally found in a study that there was improvement in students' achievement in verbal reasoning who were exposed to metacognitive reading strategies.

Another interactive listening language strategy that could improve verbal reasoning is debate. Debate is a typical listening activity that could propel students to practice the skills of verbal reasoning. Kennedy (2007) notes that debate, if well utilized in a language class, could lead to a wide variety of instruction strategies that promote active listening engagement, thus result in effective verbal skill. Debate is defined by Krieger (2005) as a formal discussion between two opposing groups that follow a set of pre-agreed rules to exchange different points of views on a topical issue. Darby (2009) shows the link between debate and verbal reasoning by explaining that it is an excellent language activity that engages students in a variety cognitive reasoning through verbal expression. When students are engaged in debate, they are required to put up both their reasoning ability and their background knowledge to arrive at the meaning of what they had listened to. Debate therefore requires higher critical thinking skills. Fahim and Sa'eapour (2011) report that students exposed to debate instruction achieve higher than those exposed to the conventional strategy in critical thinking and reading comprehension.

Success and competence in language learning is closely linked to intelligence and ability level. Fakeye (2010) observes that many researchers on ability level of L2 students have often been carried out on grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing but hardly in listening and verbal reasoning. Verbal reasoning skills could be anchored on students' academic ability because it involves active cognitive skills. Ability is the recorded level of accomplishment an individual learner attains. According to Adegbile and Folarnmi (2007), ability grouping is the practice of placing students of similar academic ability within the same class. Ijiga (2014) observes that it is a typical and common feature of Nigerian classroom settings to find students of mixed abilities lumped together and give some instruction as if they have everything in common. There are levels of abilities low, medium and high. Ijiga (2014) further asserts that students with high reasoning ability are likely to do well in reading comprehension than low reasoning ability students. The researcher had studied the effect of interactive reading strategy on students' ability levels and found that there was a significant effect between high and low ability students in favour of the high ability students in reading comprehension.

In a similar study, Fakeye (2010) found that there was significant difference in the performance of high and low ability in favour of the high ability students in English academic ability test. The objective of this study therefore was to examine the performance of students exposed to interactive listening strategies of storytelling and debate on verbal ability test across ability levels.

### 1.1 Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What is the effect of storytelling strategy on high and low ability students' main performance scores in verbal ability?
2. What is the effect of debate strategy on high and low ability students' mean performance scores in verbal ability?

### 1.2 Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant effect of story-telling strategy on low and high ability students' mean achievement scores in verbal ability test.
2. There is no significant effect of debate strategy on low and high ability students' mean scores in verbal ability test.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed the pre-test, posttest quasi experimental design non-equivalents control group design. Two intact classes from two schools were used for the study. One group was assigned the storytelling treatment while the other was assigned the debate strategy. The sample size comprised 180 Junior Secondary School 2 students located across the Education Zone 'B' of Benue State through simple random and purposive sampling techniques. The zone is made up of Buruku, Gboko, Guma, Gwer-East, Gwer-West, Makurdi, and Tarka Local Government Areas of the state. The storytelling group consisted of 105 students while the debate group was made up of 75 students. The instrument for data collection was a standardized 40- item multiple choice verbal aptitude test with five options per item. This was adopted from Odiaka (2012) for Basic National Examination. The Verbal Ability Test (VAT) was divided into four parts: (i) word relationships (10 items) (ii) word patterns (10 items) (iii) word formation (10 items) and, (iv) word arrangement and meaning (10 items). This was recorded on a tape recorder for students to listen attentively to and write the correct option in each item.

Before the treatment, both groups were exposed to a pre-test on verbal ability test. Treatment of story-telling and debate lasted for six weeks. Students who scored 21 to 40 were categorized as high ability while those who scored below 0 – 20 were grouped as low ability in VAT. At the end of the six weeks treatment, both experimental groups were exposed to the same verbal ability test (VAT) as post test except that the items were re-shuffled. Scores from the two groups were collected based on their ability, compared and analysed. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation while the null hypotheses were tested using the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 level of significance.

## 3. RESULTS

### Research question 1

What is the effect of storytelling on high and low ability students' mean performance scores in verbal ability test? The result is as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Mean and standard deviation scores in verbal ability test for low and high ability students in storytelling strategy class**

Group	N	Pre Test		Post Test		Mean Gain
		Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	
High ability	52	26.58	3.33	30.92	3.45	4.34
Low ability	53	13.89	3.80	21.77	9.60	7.88
Mean difference		12.69		9.15		-3.54

Table 1 presents mean and standard deviation scores in verbal ability test for low and high ability students in story telling strategy class. The table reveals the mean gain of high ability students as 4.34 and the mean gain of low ability students as 7.88. The difference in their mean gain is shown as -3.54. The result obtained shows that both high and low ability students benefited from storytelling strategy in VAT.

**Hypothesis 1**

There is no significant effect of storytelling on low and high ability students' mean performance scores in verbal ability test. The result is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: ANCOVA tests of effects of story-telling strategy on low and high ability students' performance in verbal ability**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3509.16	2	1754.58	44.13	0.00
Intercept	117.92	1	117.92	2.97	0.09
Pre-VAT	1311.89	1	1311.89	33.00	0.00
Ability	77.25	1	77.25	1.94	0.17
Error	4055.09	102	39.76		
Total	80218.00	105			
Corrected Total	7564.25	104			

Table 2 presents a one-way ANCOVA for the effect of storytelling strategy on students' performance in verbal ability. The result reveals that  $F_{1, 102} = 1.94$  and  $p=0.17$  for ability level. Since the significant value (p) is greater than the set significant ( $p>0.05$ ), the null hypothesis that there is no significant effect of storytelling on low and high ability students' mean performance scores in verbal ability test was not rejected. The conclusion drawn was that students with high ability mean performance gains in VAT from storytelling class was statistically the same as students with low ability level.

**Research question 2**

What is the effect of debate strategy on high and low ability students' mean achievement scores in verbal ability test? The result is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Mean and standard deviation scores in verbal ability test for low and high ability students in debate strategy class**

Group	N	Pre Test		Post Test		Mean Gain
		Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	
High ability	32	25.33	3.32	30.31	4.65	4.98
Low ability	43	11.05	5.35	20.21	7.20	9.16
Mean difference		14.28		10.10		-4.18

Table 3 presents mean and standard deviation scores in verbal ability test for low and high ability students in debate strategy class. The table reveals the mean gained by high ability students as 4.98 and that of by low ability students as 9.16. The difference in their mean gain is shown as -4.18.

**Hypothesis 2**

There is no significant effect of debate on low and high ability students' mean performance scores in verbal ability test. The result is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: ANCOVA test of effect of debate on low and high ability students' performance in verbal ability test**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2810.54	2	1405.27	53.02	0.00
Intercept	526.11	1	526.11	19.85	0.00
Pre-VAT	937.81	1	937.81	35.39	0.00
Ability	7.39	1	7.39	0.28	0.60
Error	1908.19	72	26.50		
Total	49811.00	75			
Corrected Total	4718.72	74			

Table 4 presents a one-way ANCOVA for the effect of debate strategy on students' performance in verbal ability. It reveals that  $F_{1, 72} = 0.28$  and  $p = 0.60$  for ability level. Since the significant value ( $p$ ) is less than the set significant value ( $p > 0.05$ ), the null hypothesis that there is no significant effect of debate on low and high ability students' mean achievement scores in verbal ability test was not rejected. The conclusion drawn is that high ability student's mean achievement score in VAT did not statistically differ from those with low ability level in debate strategy class.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The first finding of this study showed that there was no significant effect of storytelling on low and high ability students' mean performance scores in verbal ability test. This implied that students with high ability mean achievement gains in VAT from storytelling groups was statistically the same as students with low ability level. The result turned out so because both high and low ability students benefitted from the storytelling strategy. This means that during the storytelling treatment, all students irrespective of their ability levels were able to make use of their active cognitive skills. Besides, both low and high ability students improved in their posttest scores after treatment. This finding agrees with the finding of Idikwu (2015) who found no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of high and low verbal ability students in reading comprehension. In line with this finding, Longsdan (2014) explains that listening tasks require verbal reading skills which involve analysis, synthesis and evaluation of spoken texts. As students listen to stories, they were able to evaluate the information received and applied them to new information which are typical of verbal reasoning skills. However, the finding of this study contradicts that of Idoga (2011) and Ijiga (2015) who both established in their studies that high ability students significantly attained higher scores in reading comprehension than the low ability students when exposed to interactive reading strategies.

Another finding of this study indicated that there was no significant effect of debate strategy on low and high ability students' mean achievement scores in Verbal Ability Test (VAT). This again confirmed that both low and high ability students benefitted from the debate strategy as their posttest scores improved after treatment. The implication is that debate strategy afforded the learners opportunities to be actively involved in a variety of cognitive ways which subsequently improved their verbal reasoning skills. This according to Vargo (2012) views, shows that debate communicative competence. This study however contradicts that of Gambari, Kutigi and Fagbemi (2014) who found in a study that high ability students significantly achieved higher than low ability students in Oral English Achievement Test. The findings of the present study also disagrees with that of Fakeye (2010) who found in a study that there was a significant difference between students' academic ability and performance in favour of the high ability students.

The implications of the findings of this study is that using achieve interactive language strategies like storytelling and debate can improve students verbal reasoning skills and significantly close the gap between high and low ability students achievement/performance. It is therefore imperative for language teachers to create more interactive and collaborative language strategies to improve learner's listening skills as well as verbal reasoning. This is because, such language strategies often give room for all levels of ability students to be actively involved in leaning.

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has established that fostering interpretation and comprehension of oral text in language learning are crucial in closing the gap between low and high performance of students in verbal reasoning skills. This is because the two strategies – storytelling and debate allowed students to put their verbal reasoning skills to use. Verbal reasoning which usually involves receiving information and interpreting such information for knowledge purpose can be effectively achieved through interactive listening language strategies like storytelling and debate. Besides, the two strategies which are capable of propelling students' participation can actually close the gap between different ability levels.

Based on the findings and the conclusion, the study recommended that English language teachers should use instructional packages that appeal to and meet the learning needs of learners irrespective of their ability levels. This is because both high and low ability students benefited from the study. Textbook publishers especially at the basic level of education should incorporate story-telling debate and other interactive language activities that will develop and enhance students' verbal reasoning across ability levels.



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