THE STRUCTURAL COMPLEXITY OF SELECTED NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

Mrs Ugochi P. Kwekowe
Department of English Language & Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: ugochikwekowe@gmail.com
&
Dr. Chinwe R. Ezeifeka
Department of English Language & Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: cr.ezeifeka@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

The newspaper editorial is a special journalistic form. It deals with contemporary topics and is concerned with communicating and shaping the lives of the readers. In fact, the information function of the newspaper is vital for the meaningful existence of the people in their society. It is what they need so as to react appropriately to conditions and take appropriate decisions (Okunna; 2002). The theoretical framework that holds this study is the Readability Theory, according to Bailing and Grafstein (2016). A theory of readability would account for the aspects of written texts that enhance or impede comprehension and fluency. A readability theory deals with the approaches that measure readability and the theoretical bases of each approach. The approach used in this study is analytic or formula approach. It is a simple ordered steps that measure text readability based on sentence length and word length (Crossley, Allen and McNamara, 2011). The formula approach measures the readability of a text using readability formulas. Readability Formulas are mathematical techniques employed to find out how easy or difficult it is to read and comprehend a piece of writing. The readability formulas used in this study are: (a) The Flesch Reading Ease Formula which is used to assess the readability level of twenty samples of the national newspaper editorials (b) Flesch – Kincaid Grade Level Score to relate to the education level required to understand the editorials. Finally, a critical examination of the Structural Complexity of the texts was carried out go ascertain the readability of the texts. A true newspaper is seen as a paper that among other things is readable to people of ordinary literacy (Abiodun; 2004). Unfortunately, Nigerian newspapers have been accused of using "incomprehensible', 'bizarre', 'over pretentious' language and bombarding the reader with 'bombast.... It is also argued that the papers are not sensitive to the varied composition of the audience in terms of educational level, linguistic competence and level of awareness (Unoh; 1996). If the accusation against Nigerian newspaper is true, the implication would be that a good percentage of the literate readers does not benefit from the all-important information from the newspaper editorial. This paper therefore, analysed the level of readability of our national newspaper editorials by examining the structural complexity of the newspaper editorials, using Flesch Reading Ease Formula to test its readability level and Flesch – Kincaid Grade Level Score to test the level of education required to read the text. It was found out that the editorials were difficult to read to the average and low literacy readers but easy to the highly educated. It was observed that our media writers used complex structures which made the texts difficult to comprehend for the low literate readers. Suggestions for improvement of the language of the editorials were made.

Introduction

Readability has to do with the degree of comprehension with which a text is read. The readability of a text should match the reading ability of a reader. Readability can also be regarded as reading ease. It is the degree with which a given class of people find a reading material compelling and comprehensible (Harry McLaughlin; 2011). This definition stresses the interaction between the text and the class of readers. There are many factors that affect the readability of a text and they are grouped into two, namely; (a) reader factors and (b) text factors. Reading involves the reader and the text. However, this article focuses on text factors. Text factors include; physical characteristics and grammatical complexity. Physical characteristics are the print size, typeface, layout, text quality etc. The use of

heading and subheading, a good layout and pictorials can improve readability. This article focuses on text factors that affect readability.

Newspapers, generally, inform, entertain and educate the readers. The information function of our newspaper, especially the newspaper editorial which treats contemporary topics and shapes the opinion of the readers cannot be overemphasized. Information empowers and transforms the reader and without it, one is said to be deformed. Our media writers should write in plain English for easy comprehension.

Unfortunately, Nigerian newspaper writers have been accused of using complex structures in writing texts for their varied audience. This makes the newspaper editorials difficult to comprehend by the average and low literate readers. In the words of Ekwenchi (2002), newspaper writers will do well to stay away from pretentious diction. Instead of 'utilize', write 'use', 'city' rather than 'metropolis', 'help' rather than 'facilitate'. In place of foreign words such as 'deus ex mechine', 'sine qua non', newspaper writers should use simple and appropriate nouns and verbs. Experts in health literacy recommend that materials for the public be written at the 5th and 6th reading grade level (i.e. primaries 5 and 6) (Dubay; 2004).

It is worrisome that Nigerian newspapers have been accused of being insensitive to whether or not their readers understand the texts offered them or not. They offer their varied audience written texts above their readability level. This makes many of their readers not to understand the texts. They are therefore, denied the benefits of being adequately informed by the newspaper editorial [Unoh; 1986, Eberendu and Eleano; 2015]. If the accusation against Nigerian media writers is true, something should be done to bring about improvement.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to assess the newspaper editorials of our nation to find out whether or not they are readable to Nigerian literate readers using empirical processes to find out the readability level of the national newspaper editorials, to identify the structural complexity of the newspaper editorials and to find out whether they promote or lower readability.

This study will be an eye-opener to media writers about the language level of their audience. This will enable them to make their texts readable to their audience. If the writers for the public apply these suggestions in this article, their texts will be clear and straight-forward that would carry all literate readers along. The media writers would learn to make the content of the text simple and comprehensible to the highly literate, the average literate and the low literate readers. The scope of this study centers on extracts of the editorials from five national newspapers; The Guardian, Daily Champion, The Nation, Daily Sun and Vanguard.

The grammatical complexity and semantic difficulty of the editorials were assessed and the Flesch Reading Ease Score and Flesch - Kincaid Grade Level Score were calculated using appropriate formulae and the data derived were used for the study.

Structural Complexity

Complexity is the state of being complicated and difficult to understand. When a thing is complex it is not simple to deal with. Complex structures show complications and they affect readability.

Under structural complexity we have vocabulary complexity and sentence complexity. Many readability formulae revealed that readability is assessed through the formulae that combine estimate of word length and sentence length (Rudolph; 2011). According to Unoh (1986), the factors that determine the structural complexity of a text are; (a) average word length, (b) average sentence length, (c) the vocabulary load, (d) the structure and (e) the amount of idiomatic expressions with special connotations. According to him, the assumptions behind the statement above appear to be that:

a) The longer the words frequently used are, the more difficult the text as a whole
b) The longer the sentences are the more complex the thoughts are likely to be, and the more difficult it is to read and comprehend the text.
c) The greater the vocabulary load is, or the more unfamiliar the words used are, the more difficult the piece is

d) The more complex and illogical the structure is, the more difficult the selection, and

e) The greater the frequency of idiomatic expressions and of the words with special connotations, the more difficult the text.

It is obvious that long and complicated sentences are difficult to read and comprehend and only short sentences make the text monotonous to read. So, it is important to vary sentence length. However, for newspapers and other papers for the public, short sentences should be the rule with fewer long sentences. This is important since sentence length is the most important variable which determines the difficulty level of a passage. Some complex sentences have pile-up of phrases and clauses and such sentences affect readability and comprehension. Apart from the number of phrases and clauses in a sentence, having many modifiers and distancing the modifier can affect readability. For instance, 'the fair tall bald-headed old man'. Modifier distancing occurs when words that modify a word are far from the word they modify instead of being very close to the words they modify.

In this work, we are concerned with grammatical complexity which include; vocabulary complexity and sentence complexity. It is obvious that the length and complexity of words and sentences affect readability. Brandle asserts; "Writers generally acknowledge that our primary aim is to be understood. We recognise that it is not the reader's responsibility to understand. Our responsibility is to be clear." (Brandle, 2011). Achieving clarity implies controlling some aspects of the communication, like; choice of words, number of clauses in a sentence, making the text easy to read. The language level of the audience must be put into consideration. According to Joe and Dowin (2013), many experts through much research, 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 language; 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. Grammatical complexity has to do with the semantic and syntactic complexity. Semantic complexity is usually measured by word length and vocabulary load (unfamiliar / difficult words). Generally, sentence complexity is determined by the sentence length.

Schema and readability theories make up the theoretical framework of the study. The schema theory proposed by Bartlett stresses the importance of background knowledge in the understanding of a text (Anderson, 2015). Assessing prior knowledge makes comprehension ability much easier than it would have been without prior knowledge or motivation to read [Okeke; 2013, Travis; 2017, Kimberly; 2014]. According to Steward Alistair (2015), design elements of the text can be manipulated to ensure that existing knowledge in the reader can be activated so that new knowledge presented in the text in a structured and organised way can be assimilated in a manner facilitative of reading comprehension. This implies that it is important for media writers to bear the reading level of the audience in mind while writing for them.

Readability formula is another theory that forms the theoretical framework of this study. Readability theory has to do with the approaches that measure readability and the theoretical basis of each approach. A theory of readability would account for the aspects of written texts that enhance or impede comprehension or fluency (Bailn and Grafstein; 2016). The formula approach measures readability of text using readability formulas and the aspects measured are usually the sentence length and the word length (Crossley, Allen and McNamara; 2011). The message of each formula is that long sentences and long words (polysyllabic words) make a text difficult to read.
The result of all the empirical studies show that almost all the texts given to the public were written in a language too high for most people to understand. The story is the same for daily newspapers, newspaper editorials, forms for patients and even online text. Results of the research articles assessed showed the same result in Nigeria and other countries including the countries that own the English language. (Ezeoma; 2011, Akhil, Griffith and Johnson; 2017, Eberendu and Eleano; 2015, Unoh; 1986)

Methodology

The design integrated empirical assessment of newspaper text using Flesch Reading Ease Formula Flesch – Kincaid Grade Level Score and a critical examination of the structural complexity of the texts. Twenty editorials of five national newspapers were used. The newspapers were: Daily Sun, The Nation, Daily Champion, The Guardian and Vanguard.

Flesch Readability Formulae were used because of their potential effectiveness and efficiency of syllable count and sentence length when applied to reading material (Unoh, 1986).

Flesch Reading Ease Formula was based on:

- Systematic selection of one hundred (100) word sample from the text (selected from beginning, middle and end).
- Determining the number of syllables per one hundred (100) words which is referred to as word length (WL).
- 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.
- Calculating the prescribed equation
  where
  RE = Reading Ease Score
  WL = Word Length in syllables
  SL = Average Sentence Length in words

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)

In analysing the data, Flesch Reading Ease Formula and Flesch – Kincaid Grade Level Score were used. Flesch Reading Ease Formula was used to calculate the readability level of the editorials while the Flesch – Kincaid Grade Level was used to calculate the level of education required to understand a text. The grade level for Flesch – Kincaid Grade Level Score was calculated with the following formula:

F-KRL = (0.39 x ASL) + (11.8 X ASW) – 15.59
$$\text{OR}$$
$$0.39\left(\frac{total\ words}{total\ sentence}\right) + 11.8\left(\frac{total\ syllable}{total\ words}\right) - 15.59$$

The result was a number that corresponds with a grade level required to read each of the newspaper editorials.

The formula for Flesch Reading Ease Formula:
206.835 – (1.015 x ASL) – (84.6 x ASW)
Finally, a critical examination of the structural complexity was done to ascertain the average word length, the vocabulary load and the average sentence length, since these affect the readability of a text.

Table 3: A Summary of the Reading Ease and Grade Level of All the Editorials Used

Paper	Average no of Syllable per Word (ASW) Word Length	Average Sentence Length (ASL)	Flesch Reading Ease (RE)	Flesch – Kincaid Reading Grade Level (RGL)
Daily Champion	1.6	30	38.3	15
The Guardian	1.71	27.5	34.7	15.9
Vanguard	1.67	24	43.4	13.1
The Nation	1.68	24.8	39.5	14
Daily Sun	1.76	22	35.9	14.23
Total	1.68	25.7	38.4	14.45

From the above analysis, the twenty samples taken from the editorials of five national newspapers are difficult to read. The outcome agrees with the linguists' assertion that Nigerian newspaper are difficult and that the writers are insensitive towards their readers' ability to comprehend the text offered them. The average RE (reading ease) of Flesch Reading Ease Formula was 38.4 and the average Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level Score (RGL) was 14.45. The interpretation chart indicates that 38.4 is a difficult text and suitable for university undergraduates. Flesch – Kincaid Grade Level has an average of 14.45 which is approximately 14. This is also suitable for university undergraduates (200 level / second year).

Structural Complexity in Nigerian Newspaper Editorials
The two factors taken into consideration in this paper are: vocabulary complexity (semantic complexity) and sentence complexity (syntactic complexity). Semantic complexity is usually measured by:
(a) Word length (b) vocabulary load (unfamiliar/difficult words)

Word Length
Table 4: Investigating Word Length of some Words in the Selected Newspaper Editorials

S/N	Polysyllabic Words	No of Syllables	No of Letters
1.	Exemplification	6	15
2.	Interdisciplinary	7	17
3.	Confidentiality	6	15
4.	Deregulation	5	12
5.	Etymologically	7	14
6.	Unmitigated	5	11
7.	Constitutionally	6	15
8.	Criminality	5	11
9.	Encapsulated	4	12
10.	Deterioration	5	13
11.	Durability	5	10
12.	Impoverishment	4	14
13.	modus operandi	6	13
14.	Corroborating	5	13
15	Implementation	5	14

Vocabulary Load (*Unfamiliar /Difficult Words*)
Table 5: Investigating Choice of Diction in the Selected Newspaper Editorials

S/N	Words	Transcription	Meaning
1.	Bogus	/bəugəs/	Not genuine, fake, counterfeit
2.	Glib	/glɪb/	Talking too quickly and confidently but neither sincere nor reliable
3.	Titillate	/ˈtɪtɪleɪt/	To interest or excite someone especially in a sexual way.
4.	Confectionary	/kənfekʃnərɪ/	Sweets and chocolate
5.	Bedlam	/bedləm/	Very noisy and disorderly
6.	Inexhaustible	/ɪnɪɡˈzɔːstəbl/	Unending, unlimited
7.	concomitant	/kənˈkɒmɪtənt/	Accompanying because of something else/same time
8.	Massacre	/ˈmæsəkə/	An indiscriminate killing of large number of people or animals
9.	Gruesome	/gruːsəm/	Inspiring horror or disgust repellently frightful
10.	Unassailable	/ʌnəˈseɪləbl/	Not able to be attacked/challenged or denned irrefutable
11.	Confabulate	/Kənfæbjuːleɪt/	To talk, discuss or confer
12	Indicted	/ɪndɑɪtɪd/	To be accused by law

Suffice it to say that the frequent use of unfamiliar and polysyllabic words make the meaning of the editorials difficult for the readers.

Sentence Complexity (Long Sentences)
Generally, sentence complexity is determined by sentence length. In this work, sentence length was calculated by counting the number of words in each sentence. It was observed that many sentences were very long, ranging from 20words per sentence to 100 words per sentence and above. In some cases there were seven to ten long sentences at a stretch. A particular newspaper contained the following; 1st sentence 65 words, 2nd sentence 43 words, 3rd sentence 40 words, 4th sentence 43 words and 5th sentence 53 words.

It is clear that the longer the sentence, the more complex the text is and the more difficult it is to comprehend. Writing in plain language helps your audience understand your content the first time they read your copy (Jyoti Sanyal; 2019)

A research carried out by American Press Institute with 410 newspapers shows that:
1. When average sentence length was fewer than eight words, readers understood about 100% of the story (all things being equal).
2. With nine to fourteen (9–14) words per sentence, readers understood more than 90% of the information.
3. With 43 words per sentence comprehension dropped to less than 10%.
4. Low literate readers have problem with unfamiliar words and long sentences.
5. Most of the texts for average literacy readers should be re-written for low literacy readers.
6. Long sentences should be the exception rather than the rule.

Below is their Readability Table:
USA Press Association Readability Table on Sentence Length
Readers find sentences at

8	words or less	-	very easy
11	words	-	easy
14	words	-	fairly easy
17	words	-	standard
21	words	-	fairly difficult

| 25 | words | - | difficult |
| 29 | or more words | - | very difficult |

(Cutts, M.; 2013, Jyoti Sanyal; 2019)

Conclusion
If USA Press Association Readability table on sentence length advocates the average of 17 words per sentence for native speakers of the language, texts for Nigerians should contain something less than 17 words per sentence on the average.

Cutts, M. (2013), in his Oxford Guide to Plain English said that average sentence length should be 15 to 20 words per sentence. He puts his reason in a funny way; "more people fear snakes than full stops so, they recoil when a long sentence comes hissing across the page". By this statement he confirms the fact that long lingering sentences would be too demanding on the average and low literacy readers.

Findings
The findings show that:
1. The readability level of Nigerian newspaper editorials was found to be very low to the target audience.
2. There was frequent use of polysyllabic words.
3. The newspaper editorials had many unfamiliar and polysyllabic words.
4. Many sentences were very long, ranging from 40 words to 100 words and above per sentence.
5. The editorials were written at grade level fifteenth to seventeenth (university undergraduate and graduate level) instead of eighth – ninth grade level (JSS2 to JSS3), the grade level largely considered acceptable when writing for the general public (Adult Literacy Agency; 2014, Ekwenchi; 2002, Galaa; 2018, Okunna; 2002, Shawnya; 2015, Unoh; 1986 etc).

Recommendations
This paper recommends as follows:
• Writers of newspaper editorials should use writing techniques that would make them adequately meet their audience at the different levels of readability.
• Our newspaper editorials should be written between the eighth grade level and the ninth grade level (that is, JSS2 and JSS3) students.
• Sentences should be between 17 and 20 words each.
• There should be a careful balancing of short and long sentences.
• There is the need to reduce the frequency use of polysyllabic and unfamiliar words. Simpler and more familiar words aid understanding. The content of the editorials should be easy to the highly educated, the students and the less literate (like the masons, taxi drivers, tailors, okada riders, keke drivers, the mechanics or dry cleaners) to understand. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. A true newspaper among other things is readable to the people of ordinary literacy (Aliyu, 2004).

References
Akhil, K. Johnson, S. and Griffith, R. (2017). Readability assessment of online patient education material on congestive heart failure. *Research Article*, ID9780317, 1-8. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1155/2017/9780317 on April, 2019

Alistair, S. (2015). Resources in Education. 23 (11). https://medium.com/@apsteward. on 20 April, 2019

Anderson, R. (2015, February) Schema Theory: Learning theories. http://learningtheories:schematheory.com on 5 October, 2017.

Aliyu, J. S. (2004) Literacy Communication and Learning in Yoruba Newspaper. *Literacy and Reading in Nigeria*, 10 (1). Zaria. Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN)

Bailin, A. and Grafstein, A. (2016) *Towards a theory of readability* [Palgrave Version]. 177-204 Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.10579781137388773_6. on 3 May, 2018.

Bartlett, F. (2013) *The Schema Theory*. Retrieved from www.sus.edu on 30 Jan., 2014.

Brandle, B. (2011) *Managing the complexity of sentence*. Retrieved from www.brandle.com on October 10, 2015.

Carozzi, B. (1973). *The measure of readability: theory and research in the measurement of the difficulty level of reading material.* Masters' Coursework Thesis, University of Melbourne, Department of Education. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/IB43/42539. on 19 September, 2018.

Cutts, M. (2013). *Oxford guide to plain English.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dubay H. W. (2004) *Structural Complexity*. Retrieved from http://www.structuralcomplexity.com on 25 August, 2014.

Eberendu, C. A. (2019). Readability Analysis of Nigerian National Daily Newspaper. *Research Gate,* 7(2) 306-315. Retrieved from http//www.resarchgate.net/publication/334548403, on 15 October, 2019

Edgar D. and Challs, J. (2014). *The principles of readability*. Retrieved from https://wikipedia.org/readability on 6 July, 2015

Ekwenchi, Ogechukwu (2002). Writing for the mass media:. *Awka Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 1, 72.

Ezeome E.R., Chuke, P. I. and Ezeome, V. I. (2011) Contents and readability of currently used consentforms in Nigerian tertiary health institutions. *Journal of Clinical Practice,* 14(3), 311-317. Retrieved from www.njcponline.com www.ncbi.nim.nih.gov/pubmed/22037176 on 3 November, 2018.

Flesch, R. (1949) *The art of readable writing.* Archived from original. on 5 February 2016. University of Canterbury.

Fountlas, I. (2012) *Readability*. Retrieved from http://wikipedia.org/wikreading on 25August, 2013

Galaa, E. (2019) *Readability of the National Newspaper Editorials.* Amazon: LAP AND LAMBERT Academic Publishing.

Jyoti, Sanyal. (2019) Improve the Readability of Your Writing. Horsham: Readability Added Bytes Ltd

Maclaghlin, H. (2011) *Readability*. Retrieved from http://www.smogreadability on Oct. 7. 2015.

National Adult Literacy Agency (2014) *Please – no more jargon, small print or goobledygook*

Nduka, D. M. (2013) Developing Effective Reading Habits. *In* I. J. Ogbazi, N. N. Osakwe and D. C. Ekpunobi (Eds), *English for Communicative Competence.* Enugu: John Cocab's Classic Publisher, 124-140

Obiora, F. C. (2016) Textbook assessment: matching the reader with the reading text. *Research Gate.* 11(1) Retrieved from doi:10.4314/ijah.v511.17 on 20 November, 2018

Okeke, N. E. (2013). *Effective exposure to figurative Language on senior secondary school students' achievement in English reading comprehension*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Department of Arts Education, Facilty of Education. University of Nigeria, Nsukka. xvi+ 920

Okunna, C. (Ed.), (2002) *Teaching mass communication. A multi- dimensional approach*. Enugu: New Generation Ventures Ltd.

Oyetunde, T. O. and Umolu, J. J. (1991). The current view of the reading process and its implications for reading instruction in Nigeria: An afterword. *Literacy and reading in Nigeria*. 5, 437-444

Rosenburg and Abbedu (2015) Sentence Complexity Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu. on 25 July, 2016.

Travis D. (2017). Schema theory. *Teaching Resources.* Retrieved from https://www.thematiceducation.com on 27 September, 2019

Umar, M. S. and Natrah, S. (2015) Readability assessment of Nigerian Company Income Tax Act 2007 (CITA 2007). *Pengurusan*, 14 (3) 25-33. Retrieved from doi:10.17576/pengurusan on Jan. 2020.

Umolu J. J. and Oyetunde T. O. (1989). The teaching of reading and writing in junior secondary schools: an appraisal. *International Journal of Modern Education and Computer Science* 4(9).

Unoh, O. Solomon (Ed.) (1986). *Use of English in Communication: The Nigerian Experience*. Ibadan: Spectrum Book Ltd.

Yoloye, E. A. (1975) Readability indices in the evaluation of curriculum materials. *Journal of Curriculum Studies,* 7(1), 321-336. Retrieved from Doi.org/10. 00220277500701 on 10 July, 2018