Readability as consideration for book selection criterion in book selection practices in some academic libraries in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Books selection is vital to librarianship. Janet Hill (1973) says it is "the essence and cornerstone of librarianship". Different criteria are used by librarians for book selection. However, investigation shows that unlike the practice in Britain and America, readability is not commonly used as a criterion for the practice in Nigeria.

Yet, it provides information on the comprehension level of readers as a measure for understanding the content of books as against consideration that bear just on physical outlook, recency of publication, etc. Studies also show that consideration for book selection criteria depend more on the discipline of the librarian.

The study investigates book selection practices of one hundred librarians in twelve (12) academic libraries in South-South Nigeria. The survey, which used questionnaire as data collection instrument, sought information from respondents on their consideration for readability and other book selection criteria. Respondents' academic backgrounds and disciplines were also sought as means to correlate respondents' educational backgrounds/discipline with interest in readability.

The result shows that only ten percent of the respondents considered readability as criterion for book selection. The result also show that only those whose academic disciplines relate to linguistics favoured readability.

Recommendations were made on the importance of reading research and its implication for language use and information gathering as vital tools for book selection practices.

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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Our age is one of communication. Electronic gadgets have today provided us with different means of communication. But in spite of this increase the printed word still lives on.   Narayanaswamy (1972) says that "despite the phenomenal advance in communication made possible today by electronics, the printed page reigns supreme even in countries like USA" He went further to say that without it (the printed word) no higher education or interchange of serious professional knowledge is possible and that to neglect reading is to neglect education.

But reading poses difficulties for many people. A UNESCO publication of 1991 states that 950 million adults are unable to read and that educators around the world hold different views on how best to teach students how to read. (Elley, 1992)

In Nigeria, policy makers on education, teachers and other stakeholders have made repeated complaints about our reading habit and its implication on the standard of education. Yoloye (1975) reports on low readability scores in a study carried out amongst students of secondary schools in Ibadan. Salami (1992)also reported low level of achievement in English language and some science subjects. Attempts have been made at workshops and at different fora where issues of reading literacy have been discussed (Ikegbunam, 1997 ; Fayose, 1995). Educational psychologist have also shown concern on questions relating to reading and retention. Edmund Huey (1968) describes very many of the intricate working of the human mind. A common opinion is that the book is text intensive and therefore calls for careful reading and analyzing before comprehension can be maximally achieved (Duchastel,1988 ; Shoki,2000). A decision to measure reading ability is inevitable to librarianship and publishing. Hence the advocacy for a consideration of readability as criterion in book selection practices.

WHAT IS READABILITY?

Readability describes the ease with which a document can be read. It is the "sum total of the entire element and their interactions that affect the success of a piece of printed material" (Wimmer and Dominick ,
2005. 331). Also, Bentley (1972) says readability is an attempt to match the reading level of written materials to the 'reading with understanding' level of the reader. Success is measured by the extent to which readers understand a text.

Readability concerns itself with how a text is readable. It has its beginning with consideration of how scientific books could be read with understanding. Comprehension is vital in reading. It is the ability to understand languages. Readability is measured in formulae. Thorndike (1973) provided a means for measuring the difficulties in words and this permeated the development of mathematical formula. It is believed that Thorndike tabulated words according to the frequency of their first meaning and later adopted other word lists as a means of measuring word difficulty. This practice assumed that words frequently read by readers proved less difficult.

Readability formulas today measure different features but not all features can be measured by readability. Important features that are commonly measured are word length and sentence length, which enable the determination of ease in reading. Others are features significant to comprehension. Readability scores are then provided to readers after being examined on understanding the text given. Other areas of a text often measured are sentence structure and organisation of ideas as could aid comprehension of text. Several formulas today have been developed to determine the readability of a text. Baskette *et al.* (1986.22) identified from readability formulas these are: The Flesch developed by Rudolph Flesch, the fog index developed by Robert Gunning, the Cloze procedure developed by Wilson Taylor and the Fry's scale developed by Edward Fry.

The Flesch formula uses 100 – word samples to measure average sentence length and number of syllables. It then multiples the average number of words in the sentence by 1.015 and the total syllable count by .846. The sentence length and syllable count are then added and subtracted from 206.835 to arrive at a readability score.

The fog index uses a similar procedure. It adds average sentence length in word and the number of words of three or more syllables which are then multiplied by .4 to get the fog index. Baskette *et al.*(1986: 22) say that both the Flesch and Fog suggest that if passages from a story or the whole story average more than 20 words to the sentence and the number of hard words to a sample of 100 words exceeds 10%, a majority of readers will find the passages difficult to understand.

The Cloze procedure is said to have been developed from Gestalt psychology to test context of story (Baskette *et al*, 1986). Passages of between 250 and 300 words drawn from different parts of a text are made available. Every fifth word is intentionally omitted from the passage Respondents are then asked to fill in the missing words which are graded on number of words correctly filled in the spaces.

Edward Fry developed a readability formula which is reported to work very well. The Fry distinguished three rates – study reading, average reading speed and 'skimming reading' speed and comprehension (Narayanaswany,1972) Edward Fry according to Suzanne Barchers , (1998 :349, 350) designed the formula to supplement teachers' judgement of textbooks and that the formula provides a quick way to access the level of difficulty of prose. Fry also uses a graph with clarification, validity and extension to level 17 (Fry,1977: 445)

READABILITY AND BOOK SELECTION PRACTICES

The importance of readability and its relationship to Book Selection can well be appreciated. Books are packaged information. Librarians as "book persons" are concerned with the selection, organisations, retention of books (Meadows,, 1991: 77). They are facilitators of knowledge. Whereas publishers package books for consumption, librarians facilitate book use. Publishing is not complete until what is produced gets to the last consumer. This is true also of librarianship. Bingley (1970)

defined publishing as a chain of activities which take place between an idea in the mind of an author, and a book on the shelf in the library or on the table at home. Publishing and librarianship are therefore two sides of the same coin. The two disciplines are related. They are both interdisciplinary in nature. Readership, which is common to both professions is a major problem, one which has attracted research in the two disciplines. The publishers' mass production of books creates a selection problem for the librarian. Thus, recalling a normative media theory of selective interaction.

Collection development, an umbrella concept for book provision and acquisition also entails book selection (Spiller, 1991: 3). The concept simply implies that numerous products and their different varieties do exist. Like the classical economists' theory of demand and supply, book provision depends on a number of factors including the ability to pay for such demand. Cost amongst other things therefore becomes a condition for book selection. The library acquires its collection through gifts and exchange and mostly through purchase. The academic libraries even have to select to meet curriculum demands.

The science and art of book selection calls for intricacies beyond a mere policy statement and other flimsy considerations. The librarian has a responsibility to make adequate books available for library users. Janet Hill (1973) sees it as basic to librarianship. She says it is the "essence and cornerstone of librarianship". Recognizing its intricacies, she says book selection, among other things, require "a mixture of imagination, commonsense, intelligence, firmness, organizing ability, professional skills" and that "if librarians fail in this respect, they are failures indeed" (p.10)

Selection pervades different areas of librarianship. There are many areas on which selection is predicated. It precedes classification, cataloguing and indexing. In actual practice, selection has to be done amongst different texts and amongst different authors. On acquisition, books are classified and catalogued. This call for scrutiny, careful organisation and placement into appropriate disciplines and areas of knowledge. Indexing calls even for closer scrutiny as accesses to a book content are numerous. The size of the index also depends on the number of pages designed for it by the printer. The Internet calls yet for its selection since it is not all fishes that come into the net.

Librarians over the years have approached book selection from different angles. All over the world, its practice is guided by a number of factors. But a recent trend is one in which book evaluation and textual analyses predominate. We have said earlier in this paper that the difficultlies that reading imposes. English language as second language creates textual problems to readers. Most books used in African schools are published abroad. As such, do not meet comprehension level of most Africans. Nigerian cataloguers are also finding it difficult to classify textbooks. Shoki and Oyelude's (2006) paper on *Cultural and Linguistic Barriers to Information Dissemination and Retrieval Amongst Nigerian Cataloguers* is still fresh. Access to actual information content of a text goes beyond physical assessment, recency and type of publishers. There is a need for content analysis for full appreciation of a text. Natowitz and Carlo (1997) carried out a study requiring content analysis of

textbook to ascertain readability as a prior consideration to book selection in academic libraries. David Spiller (1991) says consideration for readability depends highly on the librarian's subject background. The present writer has keen interest in textbook evaluation and believes that consideration for readability will prove a useful criterion for book selection practices.

THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The importance of readability and its use can well be appreciated as described above. Librarianship stands for reading and literacy. Readership is basic to librarianship. If books kept in the library are not consulted and read, the library would have vainly invested money. But reading has proved to be a difficult exercise to different category of people. Academic reading on its own calls for devotion and dedication. Comprehension still remains a problem. An exercise on the assessment of the quality of materials put for reading use to ascertain their readability is worthwhile. Book selection practices therefore need to see it as an essential criterion.

English, as a second language in Nigeria, is not spoken or written with competence by all people. There is need to appreciate the full knowledge of its book users. Comprehension of content of a book means having actual access to it. Schools and academic libraries cannot undermine readability as a necessary measure its readers.

STUDY QUESTIONS

The following questions guided the study:
1.   What guides book selection and which selection factor is mostly adopted by school and academic librarians?
2.   To what extent is readability as a criterion for book selection consideration amongst school and academic libraries?
3.   What is the relationship between the librarian's subject background and interest for readability as criterion for book selection practice?

METHODOLOGY

1.   Subjects
100 librarians drawn from twelve colleges and university libraries in South-South Nigeria took part in the study. This comprises South-West, South-East and South-South. (The schools, their locations and number of participants are given below). The librarians were both male and females. (The study did not favour gender as consideration). Their ages range from 30 to 55. They all hold the Bachelor's Degree. Sixty-two of them hold the MLS, twenty of them hold Ph.D; eighteen hold just the Bachelors' Degree. Academic libraries in the study refer to libraries of tertiary schools. The students study for qualifications ranging from the OND (Ordinary National Diploma) and Ph.D degrees. Subjects who were made to respond to the instrument were purposefully chosen. They must have worked in the library or taught in the library

school for at least ten years. They must all hold University Degrees. Some who do not work directly in the tertiary or teach in library schools must have been attached to curriculum units of schools. Preference is given to librarians who work or had work directly in Collection, Development Units of libraries. The libraries, their location and number of respondents are given below.

2. Libraries used in the study
1. SOUTH-SOUTH

S/NO.	NAME OF LIBRARY/SCHOOL	LOCATION	Number of Respondents
i.	John Harris Library, University of Benin	Benin City	9
ii.	University of Calabar Library	Calabar	8
iii.	Delta State University Library	Abraka	10
iv.	Ambrose Alli University Library	Ekpoma	5
v.	University of Port Harcourt Library	Port Harcourt	8
vi.	University of Uyo Library	Uyo	5
vii.	River State University of Science and Technology Library	Port Harcourt	4
viii.	Niger Delta University Library	Wilberforce Island	4

2. SOUTH-WEST

i.	Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan	Ibadan	18
ii.	The Polytechnic Ibadan Library	Ibadan	12
iii.	International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) Library	Ibadan	5
iv.	University of Lagos Library	Lagos	12

3. Instrumentation

The questionnaire was the only instrument for the study. The 20-item questionnaire seeks information on demographic details of subjects, their qualification and working experience. The instrument also seeks information from respondents' preference for one of five factors for book selection. This includes readability. To ascertain content and construct validity the questions, which require respondents to choose which readability formula they were used to. They were also asked to provide reasons for their choice of readability formula. Where a subject choose a 'No' option for enquiry on whether they use readability (item 15), they were asked to further provide reasons while they do not consider it.

The questionnaire was designed by the researcher and it was tested for content validity. A reliability estimate of 0.7 was also recorded when response of initial-test run from two different locations were correlated.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

Some copies of the questionnaire were sent through e-mail and some given directly to respondents as is convenient. They were numbered 1 to 150 for easy

identification especially to help identify and correlate librarians' subject background and their interest for readability (Study Question 2). Two research assistants were also employed for collecting completed copies of the questionnaire. The distribution and collection of completed copies of the questionnaire lasted eight weeks. One hundred and fifteen copies of the questionnaire was received but only one hundred were duly completed. The analysis was based on them.

The data were analysed to measure the frequency of selection of book selection factors and the extent to which readability was considered. The relationship between subject background and consideration for readability was determined through correlation of results.

RESULTS

All respondents agree that book selection is guided by a selection policy. Academic libraries are also mindful of the curriculum of the universities and colleges, and so are further guided by it. Analysis of respondents' decision on what guides book selection and on the factor mostly considered for book selection is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: An overview of factors mostly considered by libraries in book selection

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Currency of text	27	27%
Author's popularity	12	12%
Publisher's popularity	21	21%
Print quality	30	30%
Readability	10	10%
Total	100	100%

Of the five factors identified, readability had the least consideration while print quality had the highest responses of 30.

Table 2: Consideration of Readability as criterion for Book Selection

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	10	10%
No	90	90%
Total	100	100

Table 2 has outright result on respondents' consideration for readability. 90 respondents have no consideration for readability and 10 respondents say 'Yes'.

Table 3: Readability formula commonly used

Formula	Frequency	Percentage
Cloze	8	80%
Flesch	1	10%
Fog	1	10%
Fry	0	0
Total	10	100

Table 3 measured respondents' knowledge of readability formulas and the respondents were asked to indicate the ones used. Of the four readability formulas, three were chosen by respondents. Cloze procedure was commonly used because they found the formula simpler to test readability of texts. With cloze procedure, every fifth word is simply omitted for subjects to provide suitable substitutes as explained earlier.

Table 4: Readability matched with subject background

Subject Area	Frequency	Percentage
Language and Linguistics	4	40%
Science	2	20%
Law	2	20%
History	1	10%
Geography	1	10%
Total	10	100%

The result on Table 4 shows that subject background has influence on readability as consideration for book selection. They agree with Spiller's assertion that librarians with background in linguistics are most likely to consider readability as consideration for book selection than others with different disciplines.

DISCUSSION

As noticeable from the results above only 10% of the respondents considered readability as criterion for book selection. Ninety (90%) of the respondents did not consider it a consideration for book selection. Information further gathered from open ended items on the questionnaire gave reasons why they do not use it:

a.   I am not familiar with it
b.   Its time consuming
c.   It involves mathematical calculation
d.   Readability cannot measure interest
e.   Its expensive to carry out readability tests
f.
Readability is likely to attract Librarians with subject backgrounds in Language and Linguistics. But some respondents in other field also favour it except that the proportion is low.

IMPLICATION OF THIS STUDY

The implication is that readability may not be popular amongst practicing Nigerian librarians and scholars. This is in contrast to practices in America and Britain. James Hartley (2005) in his chapter on 'Methods of evaluating a text' has readability amongst other criteria. Similarly Allen Natowitz and Carlo (1997) favour readability amongst other criterion for book selection. Their study on Evaluation Review Content for Book Selection' has the following result as in the table below:

Comparative Ranking for Mention of the Evaluative Element			
	AHR	JAH	CHOICE
Analysis	1	1	1
Unity of thesis	2	2	6
Research	3	3	2
Objectivity	4	4	5
Readability	5	5	3
Historical content	6	6	4
Editing	7	7	7

Source:, *Journal of American History* July, *1997, 322, pp. 9*

There have been results of similar studies where "analysed research and readability were the only element used in measuring suitability of texts. Their study compared the qualitative assessment provided by reviews published in Journal of America Studies where one hundred and fifty-three books in American history were selected. Copies were analysed and their readability indices serving as criterion for book selection.

Reading literacy is an urgent problem to be addressed in Africa. There are socio-economic problems. Hunger, poverty, unemployment and underemployment are perennial difficulties to tackle. Reading is seen as secondary. This poses difficulties for comprehension.

There is a need to address readership. Libraries exist because of readers. Reading research needs to be encouraged. Publishing, like librarianship also depends on reading. Careful reading and analysis of texts are necessary. A study carried out by Shoki (2000) emphasizes the need for linguistic and non-linguistic analysis as a measure for students' learning outcome. Such a study encourages detailed reading of text for maximum comprehension. The study recalls early studies by Gopinathan (1988), Jonassen (1988), Hartley (1985 & 2005) where detailed study of a text is made. Readability as a measure of comprehension will serve as determinant for linguistic competence of readers and it has an exclusive role to play in book selection practices. Publishers need to have books trials-tested to ascertain this also. They both may lead the way for literacy in our African society.

PUBLISHING MECHANISM AND LIS RESEARCH AND PUBLISHING IN NIGERIA

The future publication of a research article like this one from my country, Nigeria, is usually through journals and chapters in a book of reading. Manuscripts are either sent to editors of known journals and other academic publishers. In this case, it has been sent in response to request of 'call for papers'.

Research in library and information science is achieving attention in recent times. The University of Ibadan and other universities in the country where higher degrees are being offered have produced quite a number of Ph.Ds in the last ten years. Graduate, especially Ph.D enrolment is also increasing. A number of scholarly journals in Library and Information Science do exist but at low pace.

Research and publishing cannot be a success story yet for Africa and for Nigeria in particular. The growth rate is low when compared with advanced countries like Britain and America. In fact, Altbach (1992) says Africa has in many ways

> fallen further behind in terms of book development, and there is now a major crisis in terms of both the supply of adequate numbers of books in schools and to the society and in the development of a viable publishing industry in most countries (p. 3).

Altbach (1992) equally laments Africa's ugly state of research in publishing. He says "the publishing of books and other printed materials have never received the attention that it deserves from development specialists, government authorities, or the research community" (p. 3) (emphasis mine).

Moreso, there are no viable university presses in Nigeria in spite of its numerous universities. Efforts towards scholarly publishing are not commensurate with this growth. Universities all over the world are established to undergo teaching and research. Such research findings are to be made public for use far and wide. Gilman (1969,79) highlights the duties of a university as one which provides "advanced knowledge and to diffuse it not merely among those who can attend the daily lectures, but far and wide" . Most tertiary books used in these schools and universities are not locally published. With the knowledge explosion books need to be made available to meet the growing populace. Of course, publishing is good evidence of information explosion.

Research in librarianship and publishing, like other disciplines, is low. Self publishing is common. Lack of fund is not helping matters with the currency of modern presses while established publishers go mostly for textbooks usable only in primary and secondary schools. Ghost writing is also common while its attendant book launch commonly takes the place of book distribution. As soon as these publishers break even at this book launch ceremonies, they rest content on what they have made and seek other opportunities. That is to say that there is no dedication to the entire chain. Bookstores for instance are left out of the business.

Writing is also not encouraged. Writers cannot take good advantage of the situation as electric power supplies cannot be relied on. Access to recent information in one's field of endeavour is low. A number of writers and scholars in publishing and librarianship have lamented lack of funding and other sad stories in their research findings (Adesanoye, 1995, Nwankwo, 1992, Ikara, 2000, Uwalaka, 2000). Lack of findings and poor power supply equally explain the low pace of use of the information

and communication technologies (ICT). Most scholarly publishing has turned to electronic publication and this is still a mirage of practices in Nigeria. The Editor of the *Lagos Journal of Library and Information Science* laments this situation when comparing the situation in Nigeria to practices abroad. He said:

> Increasingly, title change will also become necessary to reflect contents and new directions as the profession tries to keep pace with technological developments. For instance – JASIS – Journal of American Society of Information Science has changed to JASIST – Journal of American Society of Information Science and Technology (Omekwu, 2003.1).

He added that the Lagos Journal cannot help but keep pace with this new innovation. Lagos Librarian, according to Omekwu has also changed title to Lagos Journal of Library and Information Science (LJIS) (Omekwu, 2003). However, growth achieved in this new direction has not been ascertained. Adesanoye (1995) identified many other problems which are responsible for this: economic problems facing Africa as a continent such as political instabilities, international debt crises, overpopulation, mismanagement of resources and low prices for African exports. He says these factors affect University presses since they, like other organizations, cannot exist in a vacuum.

Growth in academic publishing leaves a sad experience for Africa. Most African countries still do not have the adequate technology for quality book production and so depend on advanced countries for most books that have to be used in many tertiary institutions. For comparative cost, it is easier for Nigerians to depend on book importation. Publishing in Nigeria is not strong enough to cater for all areas of knowledge. The intricacies required for books on science and technology is still beyond what Nigerians can cope with. The implication of this is book importation.

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