

# Self-Efficacy and Gender as Correlates of Senior Secondary School Students' Academic Achievement in English Reading Comprehension in Ondo State, Nigeria

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## Abstract:

This study examined self-efficacy and gender as correlates of senior secondary school students' academic achievement in English reading comprehension in Ondo State, Nigeria. Employing a descriptive correlational design, data were collected from Senior Secondary 2 (SS2) students using a self-efficacy questionnaire and a standardised reading comprehension achievement test. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, the state was divided into three strata based on its senatorial districts. In the second stage, one local government area was randomly selected from each stratum. At the third stage, one public secondary school was purposively selected from each of the identified local government areas,

resulting in a total of three schools. At the end of the selection, 76 students—38 males and 38 females—participated in the study. Analysis through SPSS software included t-tests analysis to assess the impact of self-efficacy on reading comprehension and to explore gender differences in performance. Findings show a significant relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement. Additionally, while female students scored slightly higher than their male counterparts, the difference was not statistically significant. These findings emphasize the importance of self-efficacy in student achievement. Consequently, it is recommended that teachers incorporate strategies to enhance students' self-efficacy, such as positive reinforcement, setting achievable goals, and creating opportunities for

mastery experiences to support better academic achievement.

**Keywords:** Academic achievement, gender, reading comprehension, secondary school students, self-efficacy

## Introduction

Reading comprehension is a crucial skill for academic success, particularly in the context of secondary education, where proficiency in English is essential for accessing the curriculum across various subjects. This skill not only affects students' performance in language subjects but also has a significant impact on their understanding and engagement in other disciplines, such as science and social studies (Afolabi, 2023). In Nigeria, where English serves as the official language of instruction, students' reading comprehension abilities are essential in shaping their overall academic performance and educational outcomes (Ogunyemi, 2022). Proficient reading skills enable students to decode complex texts, synthesise information, and critically analyse content, which are essential competencies for success in higher education and future careers.

However, many secondary school students in Ondo State and across Nigeria struggle with reading comprehension. Reports indicate that students often face difficulties in understanding academic texts, leading to poor performance in assessments and a lack of confidence in their reading abilities (Ojo & Owoye, 2023). Factors contributing to these challenges are multifaceted, including limited

exposure to reading materials, inadequate instructional strategies, and socio-economic influences that affect students' motivation and engagement (Umar, 2021).

The need to explore these factors is stressed by the alarming rates of poor reading comprehension skills among secondary school students, which can have long-term consequences on their academic trajectories and life opportunities (Adeyemi, 2023). Investigating the interplay between self-efficacy, gender, and reading comprehension is crucial for understanding how these elements affect students' learning experiences in Ondo State.

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific tasks, plays a pivotal role in educational outcomes. Bandura (1997) posits that self-efficacy influences motivation, learning strategies, and persistence, ultimately affecting academic performance. Research has demonstrated that students with higher self-efficacy tend to achieve better academic outcomes, including in reading comprehension (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). In the context of Nigerian secondary schools, understanding the relationship between self-efficacy and reading comprehension is vital, as it may inform strategies to enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes.

Gender differences in education have been extensively documented, revealing distinct patterns in learning outcome and approaches to studying. Studies indicate that boys and girls may approach

reading and comprehension tasks differently, often influenced by societal expectations and gender norms (Miller & Brickman, 2004). For instance, girls tend to exhibit higher levels of motivation and engagement in reading activities, which may contribute to their superior performance in reading comprehension assessments (Eagly & Carli, 2004). In Nigeria, gender differences in education persist, and understanding how gender interacts with self-efficacy to affect academic achievement in reading comprehension is essential for developing targeted interventions that promote equitable learning opportunities (Adeyemi, 2021).

Despite the significance of these factors, there is a paucity of research focusing on the interplay between self-efficacy, gender, and reading comprehension outcome within the Nigerian context, particularly in Ondo State. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how self-efficacy and gender correlate with secondary school students' academic achievement in English reading comprehension.

### Research Questions

1. To what extent does self-efficacy correlate with secondary school students' academic achievement in English reading comprehension in Ondo State, Nigeria?
2. Is there a significant difference in English reading comprehension outcome between male and female secondary school students in Ondo State, Nigeria?

### The Construction-Integration Theory

The Construction-Integration (C-I) theory, proposed by Kintsch (1988), provides a cognitive framework for understanding the processes involved in reading comprehension. This theory posits that reading comprehension involves two main phases: construction and integration, which are crucial for the effective understanding of text. The C-I theory emphasises how readers construct mental representations of the text and how these representations are integrated with their existing knowledge, thus playing a significant role in enhancing reading comprehension skills.

During the construction phase, readers actively create a mental model of the text by extracting and generating information from the written material. This involves understanding the literal meaning of the words and sentences, as well as inferring implied meanings, themes, and relationships between ideas (Kintsch, 1998). Readers draw upon their prior knowledge and experiences to make connections with the new information presented in the text, facilitating a deeper understanding. For instance, a student reading a story may relate the characters' experiences to their own life, enriching their interpretation and engagement with the text. This active engagement is essential for constructing a coherent mental representation of the narrative or informational content.

Following the construction of mental representations, the integration phase occurs,

wherein the reader connects the newly constructed knowledge with their existing cognitive structures. This phase is critical for synthesising information and forming a comprehensive understanding of the text. Integration involves organising the constructed information into a cohesive framework, which helps in retaining and retrieving the knowledge later (Kintsch, 1998). Effective integration is facilitated by the reader's ability to recognise relationships among various pieces of information and to integrate them into a coherent whole.

The Construction-Integration theory has important implications for teaching reading comprehension. It highlights the necessity of promoting both construction and integration processes in students to enhance their reading skills. For example, educators can encourage students to engage in pre-reading activities that activate prior knowledge and help them make predictions about the text. Additionally, post-reading discussions and summarisation activities can reinforce integration by encouraging students to articulate connections between the text and their prior knowledge, thereby enhancing retention and comprehension.

Furthermore, the theory suggests that individual differences, such as prior knowledge and cognitive abilities, can significantly influence the effectiveness of the construction and integration processes. Students with strong prior knowledge may find it easier to construct meaningful mental representations and integrate new information, leading to improved reading comprehension outcomes (Bruscia et al., 2022). Conversely,

students with limited background knowledge may struggle with both construction and integration, highlighting the need for differentiated instructional strategies that address diverse learner needs.

### **The Concept of Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and make meaning from written texts. It is a complex cognitive process that involves decoding written words and constructing coherent meaning from them (Snow, 2002). Reading comprehension is not limited to understanding the surface meaning of words and sentences; it also involves grasping the deeper implications, inferences, and ideas embedded within a text. According to Kintsch and Rawson (2005) it is a skill that is foundational to academic achievement and literacy development, as it supports learning in various subject areas beyond language studies, including science, history, and mathematics.

### **Components of Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension can be broken down into several interrelated components:

1. **Decoding:** This is the ability to recognise and process the written symbols (letters and words) that represent sounds in a language. Decoding is a basic skill that must be mastered to advance in reading comprehension, as it is the first step in understanding a text (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). However, decoding alone is

insufficient for comprehension, as understanding involves integrating these symbols into meaningful concepts and ideas.

2. **Vocabulary Knowledge:** A strong vocabulary is essential for effective reading comprehension. Readers who know the meanings of a wide range of words are better able to understand texts because they can grasp the meanings of sentences and paragraphs more easily (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, readers may struggle to make sense of what they are reading, which can lead to gaps in understanding.
3. **Background Knowledge:** The reader's prior knowledge about the topic of a text significantly influences comprehension. Readers use their background knowledge to make connections between what they already know and new information presented in the text. This helps them to generate inferences, fill in gaps in understanding, and critically evaluate the text (Kintsch, 1998).
4. **Inferencing:** Inferencing refers to the ability to "read between the lines" and derive meaning that is not explicitly stated in the text. It requires readers to use their prior knowledge, context, and cues from the text to deduce meaning. Inferencing is crucial for understanding nuanced information,

implications, and abstract ideas in a text (Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2004).

5. **Comprehension Monitoring:** Effective readers actively monitor their understanding of a text while reading. They are aware of when they understand something and when they do not, and they can employ strategies such as rereading, summarising, or questioning the text to clarify their comprehension (Baker, 2002). This self-regulation process is key to improving reading comprehension and ensuring that readers do not passively absorb information without understanding it.
6. **Summarising and Synthesising:** Summarising involves condensing the main ideas of a text into a brief form, while synthesising refers to combining different ideas to form a new understanding. Both of these skills are essential for deep comprehension, as they require the reader to identify key points, filter out irrelevant information, and integrate ideas from multiple parts of a text (Dole et al., 1991).

### **The Importance of Reading Comprehension in Education**

Reading comprehension is a cornerstone of education, particularly in language learning, as it allows students to access and engage with the vast array of knowledge presented in written form. In many educational systems, such as in Nigeria, English serves as the medium of instruction, and

students' ability to comprehend English texts directly influences their academic performance across subjects (Adegbite, 2015). Reading comprehension is essential not only for passing exams but also for developing critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and independent learning (Gambrell, Block, & Pressley, 2002).

In the classroom, students who struggle with reading comprehension often face challenges in understanding textbooks, following written instructions, and completing reading assignments. This can lead to poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and decreased motivation to learn (Oakhill, Cain, & Bryant, 2003). Conversely, students who are proficient in reading comprehension are more likely to excel academically, as they can engage with a wide range of texts, analyse complex information, and apply knowledge across disciplines (Snow, 2010).

### Challenges in Reading Comprehension

While reading comprehension is an essential skill, it can be challenging for many students, especially in contexts where English is a second language, such as in Nigeria. Several factors contribute to difficulties in reading comprehension:

1. **Limited Vocabulary:** Students with a restricted vocabulary may struggle to understand texts, especially if the reading materials contain unfamiliar or complex words (Nation, 2001). Vocabulary instruction is crucial in helping students

build the word knowledge they need for effective comprehension.

2. **Lack of Motivation:** Students who are not motivated to read may not engage with texts deeply or actively. Motivation plays a critical role in reading comprehension, as it influences how much effort a student is willing to invest in understanding a text (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).
3. **Reading Strategies:** Students who lack effective reading strategies, such as summarising, questioning, and predicting, may find it difficult to make sense of challenging texts. Teaching students to use these strategies can enhance their reading comprehension (Dole et al., 1991).
4. **Text Complexity:** The level of complexity of a text, including factors such as sentence structure, vocabulary, and the organisation of ideas, can impact students' comprehension. Texts that are too complex may overwhelm readers and hinder their understanding (McNamara, 2007).

### Improving Reading Comprehension

To improve reading comprehension, teachers can adopt a variety of instructional strategies:

1. **Explicit Instruction in Reading Strategies:** Teaching students specific strategies, such as summarising, questioning, and inferencing, can help them

become more active and strategic readers (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

**2. Building Vocabulary Knowledge:**

Vocabulary instruction is essential for improving reading comprehension. Teachers can enhance students' vocabulary by providing direct instruction in word meanings, encouraging extensive reading, and teaching word-learning strategies (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013).

**3. Encouraging Active Reading:**

Active reading involves engaging with the text by asking questions, making predictions, and summarising key points. Teachers can model active reading strategies and provide opportunities for students to practice them.

**4. Using Varied and Engaging Texts:**

Providing students with a range of reading materials that match their interests and reading levels can boost motivation and improve comprehension. Engaging texts encourage students to read more and develop their comprehension skills over time (Guthrie et al., 2004).

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted process that involves decoding, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, and the use of effective reading strategies. It is essential for academic success and literacy development, particularly in contexts where English is the medium of instruction, such as in Nigerian secondary schools. Despite its importance, many students face

challenges in reading comprehension, which can affect their overall academic performance. By understanding the components and processes of reading comprehension, as well as the challenges students face, educators can implement effective strategies to support students' development in this critical skill.

## Methodology

This study uses a descriptive correlational design to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy, gender, and English reading comprehension outcome among Senior Secondary 2 (SS2) students in Ondo State, Nigeria. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, the state was divided into three strata based on its senatorial districts: Ondo South, Ondo North, and Ondo Central. In the second stage, one local government area was randomly selected from each stratum. The chosen local government areas were Okitipupa, Ondo West, and Owo. At the third stage, one public secondary school was purposively selected from each of the identified local government areas, resulting in a total of three schools. At the end of the selection, 76 students—38 males and 38 females—participated in the study. Data were collected through a self-efficacy questionnaire (adapted from Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) and a self-developed reading comprehension achievement test. The self-efficacy questionnaire uses a Likert scale to gauge students'

confidence in academic tasks, while the reading comprehension achievement test assesses understanding through multiple-choice and short-answer questions. Data analysis via SPSS includes t-tests analysis to explore self-efficacy's impact on reading outcome and to examine gender differences in reading performance.

## Results

**Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Participants**

Gender	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Male	38	50%
Female	38	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100%</b>

The table 1 above provides a breakdown of the participants in the study based on gender. It shows that there were 76 participants in total, evenly distributed between males and females. Specifically: 38 males participated, accounting for 50% of the total participants. 38 females participated, also representing 50% of the total participants.

**Table 2: t-test analysis comparing achievement test scores between students with low and high self-efficacy.**

Group	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Low Self-Efficacy	27	19.5	10.20	-5.97	3.01e-07
High Self-Efficacy	49	33.80	9.21		

The table 2 above presents a t-test analysis comparing achievement test scores between students with low and high self-efficacy. Among the 27 students with low self-efficacy, the average score is 19.5, with a standard deviation of 10.20, indicating notable variability in their scores. In contrast, the 49 students with high self-efficacy achieved a much higher average score of 33.80, with a slightly lower standard deviation of 9.21, suggesting a more consistent level of performance. The t-value of -5.97 and an extremely low p-value of  $3.01 \times 10^{-7}$  indicate that the difference in mean scores between the two groups is statistically significant. The p-value is far below the common threshold of 0.05, meaning the observed difference is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance. It thus shows that this analysis suggests a strong relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement, with students who have higher self-efficacy generally scoring much better on the test than those with lower self-efficacy. This finding underscores the role of self-efficacy as a critical factor in academic performance.

**Table 3: t-test analysis comparing achievement test scores between male and female students.**

Group	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Male	38	29.17	10.61	-1.93	0.058
Female	38	33.81	9.60		

The table 3 above presents a comparison of achievement test scores between the male and female students. The mean score for the 38 male students is 29.17, with a standard deviation of 10.61, showing moderate variability in their scores. Meanwhile, the 38 female students achieved a higher mean score of 33.81, with a standard deviation of 9.60, indicating slightly less variability. The t-test analysis yields a t-value of -1.93 and a p-value of 0.058. This p-value is just above the typical significance threshold of 0.05, suggesting that the observed difference in scores between male and female students is not statistically significant at the .05 level of significance. It thus show that although female students scored slightly higher on average than male students, the difference in scores does not have statistical significance; meaning it may not reflect a meaningful distinction in achievement based on gender in this context.

### Discussion of Findings

The findings from this analysis reveal a strong association between self-efficacy and academic achievement, aligning with established theories and previous research that underscore the pivotal role of self-efficacy in academic success. Self-efficacy, defined as one's belief in their capability to perform tasks and achieve goals, is a critical component in educational settings, as it shapes motivation,

resilience, and persistence in the face of challenges (Bandura, 1997). In this study, students with high self-efficacy scored significantly higher on achievement tests compared to those with low self-efficacy, suggesting that their confidence in their abilities may have encouraged greater effort, better engagement, and effective learning strategies in their studies. These findings are consistent with previous studies which have shown that self-efficacy positively correlates with academic performance across various subjects and grade levels (Usher & Pajares, 2008). High self-efficacy students tend to approach tasks with a greater sense of confidence, which can lead to increased persistence and more frequent use of cognitive strategies, thereby improving academic outcomes. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy often struggle with self-doubt, which may lead to reduced effort and avoidance of challenging tasks, contributing to poorer academic performance (Pajares, 2003).

The findings of this study also indicate that while female students scored slightly higher on average than male students in the achievement test, the difference was not statistically significant. This suggests that, in this context, gender may not be a substantial factor influencing academic achievement outcomes. Although female students' average scores were marginally higher, the lack of statistical significance indicates that the observed difference is likely due to random variation rather than an inherent difference in academic ability between genders. These results align with other studies that suggest gender differences in academic performance

are often minimal or context-dependent, with academic outcomes influenced more significantly by individual student factors, such as motivation, self-efficacy, and study habits, rather than by gender alone (Hyde, 2005). The absence of a meaningful gender effect in this study could also be attributed to evolving educational and societal norms, which increasingly support equal access to learning resources and encourage academic achievement across genders.

### Conclusion

This study highlights the significant impact of self-efficacy on academic achievement, indicating that students with higher self-efficacy tend to perform better academically than their peers with lower self-efficacy. This positive relationship underscores the importance of fostering students' belief in their abilities to enhance their academic outcomes. Additionally, while female students scored slightly higher on average than male students in the achievement test, the difference was not statistically significant, suggesting that gender alone may not be a determining factor in students' academic performance within this context. Thus, self-efficacy emerges as a more critical factor than gender in influencing academic success.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations were proposed. Firstly, schools and teachers are encouraged to adopt strategies aimed at enhancing students' self-efficacy. These could include providing positive feedback, setting

realistic and achievable goals, and creating opportunities for students to experience mastery. Such approaches can help students develop confidence in their abilities, potentially leading to better academic performance. Secondly, educational policymakers in Ondo State should consider designing programmes specifically aimed at improving students' self-efficacy, particularly for those who demonstrate low confidence in their academic abilities. Initiatives such as workshops, mentoring schemes, and counselling services that focus on building resilience and self-belief could significantly enhance students' learning outcomes. Lastly, since gender was not found to be a significant factor in academic performance, teachers should prioritise recognising and addressing students' individual strengths and areas for improvement, rather than using gender as a determinant of academic success. This inclusive approach can create an environment that supports the learning needs of all students.

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