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Representation of Nigerian Arts and Culture in the Reading Comprehension Passages of a Primary Five English Textbook: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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Abstract: Every society is culturally rooted, and its culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Reading comprehension passages are one channel through which this cultural heritage can reach young learners. This study examined how Nigerian arts and culture are represented in the 30 comprehension passages of Nigeria Primary English Pupils' Book 5, an English textbook for Primary Five. Using directed qualitative content analysis guided by schema theory, each passage was screened against explicit inclusion criteria and the included passages were coded for cultural category, cultural origin, depth of representation and pedagogical potential. Only six of the 30 passages (20%) contained arts or cultural content. These passages represented natural heritage (the tropical rainforest), cultural practices (communal living, leadership and ceremonies), material culture (tools, jewellery and rock painting) and verbal arts (a praise poem, an etiological folktale and a proverb-like poem). However, most of this content was either global rather than Nigerian-specific or presented without reference to its cultural source, and no passage explicitly represented Nigeria's ethnic diversity. Food, dress, festivals, naming and initiation rites, religion and crafts production were absent. The study recommends that textbook authors include more passages rooted in identifiable Nigerian cultural traditions and that teachers use existing passages deliberately to activate pupils' cultural schemata.

Keywords: *cultural representation; textbook analysis; reading comprehension; primary education; Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Children learn better when curriculum content is familiar and connected to their immediate environment. Familiar items, whether natural or man-made, give learners a foundation on which new knowledge can be built. Books used in Western formal education regularly contain content that expresses human creativity, imagination and ways of life; these are what we refer to in this study as arts and culture. Teaching arts and culture did not begin with Western formal education. It was always a primary concern of traditional education, which transmitted the beliefs of the people through language, religion, local history, poetry and crafts such as basket weaving and pot making (Igwe, 2000; Johnson & Fatoki, 2016).

Reading is a core source of learning in the classroom. The National Policy on Education lists literacy among the cardinal objectives of primary education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), and USAID (2018) emphasises that pupils must learn to read and must read across all subjects. Reading is the process of deriving information or ideas from texts, with or without previous knowledge (Adepoju, 2018). Through regular and extensive reading, pupils become acquainted with the world around them (Linake & Adepoju, 2018), including its creative arts and culture. Comprehension lessons are also a setting in which teachers can use communicative strategies to connect texts to pupils' lives (Adepoju et al., 2024).

Arts and culture are closely tied to daily life and identity, and the formative primary years are an important time to teach them. In the Nigerian curriculum, they are taught mainly through Cultural and Creative Arts as a subject (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013; Taiwo et al., 2015a). Whether other subjects, and English reading in particular, also carry this content is less clear. Scholars have expressed concern that aspects of Nigerian cultural heritage are being neglected, partly because of limited documentation and partly because of the influence of foreign cultures (Okoye, 2020; Onyima, 2016). Since comprehension passages are read in every English lesson, they are a potentially powerful but under-examined channel for cultural transmission. This study therefore asks whether, and how, the

comprehension passages in a primary English textbook represent Nigerian arts and culture.

Despite extensive international research on cultural representation in English language textbooks (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Risager, 2018; Yuen, 2011), existing studies predominantly focus on secondary or adult learners and the representation of target-language cultures. Limited attention has been given to the representation of learners' own cultural heritage in Nigerian primary English reading materials. Previous Nigerian studies have examined multicultural appropriateness in primary English textbooks (Olajide, 2016) and oral literature in junior secondary English Studies textbooks (Akinsola & Olaosebikan, 2021). However, to the authors' knowledge, no study has specifically investigated the representation of Nigerian arts and cultural heritage in primary English comprehension passages and their educational potential. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the representation of arts in the textbook's comprehension passages, identifies the cultural elements embedded in these texts and the extent to which they reflect Nigerian traditions rather than broader African or global cultures, and analyses their potential educational value for primary pupils through the lens of schema theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Arts, Culture and Heritage: Working Definitions

Arts are commonly understood as products of human creativity expressed through crafts, performances, visual objects and verbal forms such as poems, praises and songs (Ajayi, 2019; Taiwo et al., 2015b). Culture is the total way of life of a people, including customs, beliefs, laws, food, music, language and artistic expression (Odedokun et al., 2013; Ogunwole, 2016). Culture has both material aspects, which are concrete and can be touched, and non-material aspects such as values, rules and beliefs, which are abstract (Anikpo et al.). In Nigeria, arts and culture are rooted in history, religion and social identity, and they vary across ethnic groups (Njoku & Okafor, 2019; Onyima, 2016). They serve as markers of identity and continuity and as sources of creativity and social regulation (Ogunwole, 2016; Okoye, 2020).

Onyima (2016) also includes natural heritage, such as lakes, mountains and caves, within the broader notion of a people's inheritance. This follows the international distinction between cultural heritage (monuments, groups

of buildings and sites made by people) and natural heritage (physical, biological and geological formations) set out in the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 1972). Because natural heritage is not a product of human culture, this study treats it as a separate category and includes it only where a passage presents nature as part of a community's environment and inheritance.

To analyse cultural content systematically, this study adopts Moran's (2001) distinction between cultural *products* (artefacts, places, institutions, art forms), *practices* (actions and interactions, including rituals and customs) and *perspectives* (the beliefs, values and attitudes that underlie products and practices). Products and practices are the more visible "surface" of a culture, while perspectives represent its "deeper" meanings.

Cultural Representation in Language Textbooks

Textbooks are not neutral; they select and frame the culture that learners encounter (Risager, 2018). Cortazzi and Jin (1999) distinguish between materials that present the learners' *source culture*, the *target culture* of the language being learned, and *international* cultures. Studies applying such frameworks have often found that English textbooks emphasise surface products (food, festivals, famous places) over deeper perspectives, and that representation across cultures is uneven (Yuen, 2011). These findings raise two questions that are directly relevant to Nigerian primary textbooks: how much of the learners' own culture is represented, and at what depth.

Schema Theory and Reading Comprehension

Schema theory holds that readers understand a text by relating it to organised knowledge structures, or schemata, built from prior experience (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; McVee et al., 2005). Cultural background is one of the most powerful sources of such schemata. In a classic study, Steffensen et al. (1979) found that readers recalled more, and distorted less, when reading about a wedding in their own culture than about a wedding in an unfamiliar culture. For Nigerian primary pupils, passages grounded in familiar arts and cultural practices should therefore activate existing schemata and support comprehension, while culturally distant content may require more scaffolding. In this study, schema theory serves as the lens for research question 3: each passage is judged by how close its cultural content is likely to be to the experience of a Nigerian Primary Five pupil.

METHODS

This study employed directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine cultural representation in Nigeria Primary English Pupils' Book 5 (Ademola-Adeoye et al., 2015), published by Learn Africa Plc. The textbook was selected because it targets Primary Five pupils, whose English learning involves increasingly extended reading comprehension. The analysis focused exclusively on its 30 comprehension passages, excluding sections primarily concerned with linguistic accuracy. The passage was the unit of selection, while individual sentences served as the unit of coding. A passage was included if it represented at least one of three elements: arts (human creative products), culture (community practices, institutions, beliefs, or ways of life), or natural heritage (natural features presented as part of a community's environment and inheritance). All 30 passages were screened, and inclusion decisions and reasons were documented in Appendix A.

The analysis followed five reproducible steps. First, the researchers read all 30 passages to establish familiarity with their content. Second, each passage was screened against the inclusion criteria, and its eligibility and justification were recorded. Third, eligible passages were coded at sentence level using five dimensions: cultural element, category (product, practice, perspective, or natural heritage), cultural origin (Nigerian-specific, African, or global), mode and depth of representation (explicit or implicit; surface or deep), and pedagogical potential based on schema theory. Initial categories were derived from Moran (2001) and UNESCO (1972), while additional codes were developed inductively when the text presented elements not adequately captured by the initial framework. Fourth, the two authors independently coded the eligible passages using the same coding framework, compared their results, discussed discrepancies, and agreed on the final codes. Any revisions to code definitions were applied consistently across all passages. Fifth, the final codes were grouped into analytical categories for reporting the findings. Cultural origin was determined from textual evidence and source attributions in the textbook; uncertain origins were recorded as suggested rather than confirmed. Trustworthiness was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility through direct textual quotations and detailed interpretations, and dependability and confirmability through an audit trail comprising the screening records in Appendix A and

the coding sheet in Table 1. These records enable other researchers to trace analytical decisions to the original passages and repeat the procedure.

FINDINGS

Overview

Of the 30 comprehension passages, six (20%) met the inclusion criteria; the remaining 24 contained no arts or cultural content as defined above (Appendix A). Table 1 summarises the coding of the six included passages.

Table 1. Coding of the six passages containing arts and cultural content (n = 6 of 30)

Passage	Arts/cultural element present	Category	Cultural origin	Representation	Potential educational value
Salute to the Elephant	Praise poem to the elephant; hunter's fear and respect	Verbal art (product); respect for nature (perspective)	Likely Yoruba (*ijala*)	Explicit form; deep (values); source not stated	High schema relevance: links to home oral traditions
Why Birds Are Different	Etiological (*pourquoi*) folktale on birds' colours	Verbal art (product); moral lesson (perspective)	African; group not stated	Explicit form; deep (moral)	High: familiar storytelling genre
A Child in the Forest of Ghosts	Child's journey through a forest of ghosts	Narrative fiction; forest setting	Possibly Yoruba (parallels Tutuola)	Implicit; surface (setting only)	Moderate: link to Yoruba storytelling
Early Humans	Communal living, chiefs, rules, ceremonies; tools, jewellery, rock painting	Practices; material products; rules (perspective)	Global; one reference to Africa	Explicit; mostly surface	Moderate: needs comparison with local life
Tropical Rainforest	Layers of the forest; plants,	Natural heritage	Regional (tropical Africa)	Explicit; surface (no human link)	Moderate: link to local forests and

Passage	Arts/cultural element present	Category	Cultural origin	Representation	Potential educational value
	insects, animals				visits
Words of Wisdom and Love	Poem on the power of words; simile and metaphor	Verbal art (product); value of careful speech (perspective)	General; echoes proverbial wisdom	Explicit form; deep (value)	Moderate: bridge to home-language proverbs

The included passages fall into three groups: natural heritage, cultural practices and material culture, and verbal and visual arts. Several passages contain elements of more than one group; they are discussed under each group where relevant, as Table 1 shows.

Natural Heritage

"Tropical Rainforest" is the clearest representation of natural heritage. It describes the layered structure of the forest and the life it supports:

> You can find different layers of plants in the forest. The lowest is the damp forest floor where there are small plants and millions of insects which live among the leaves and fallen wood. Next comes the dark and cool forest with tall plants and low trees. Many animals live there, especially snakes and monkeys. There is plenty of fruit for them to eat … very tall trees and many birds.

The passage is descriptive and informational. It presents the rainforest as a natural environment, but not as part of any particular community's life or inheritance: no people, uses, beliefs or places are named. Its natural-heritage content is therefore explicit but remains at the surface level. "A Child in the Forest of Ghosts" also uses the forest as its setting ("We were crossing the kind of forest where the sky above could not be seen" but there the forest serves as a backdrop for a narrative rather than as content in its own right.

Cultural Practices and Material Culture

"Early Humans" contains the richest description of cultural practices among the six passages:

> … they formed groups and sat round fires, shared food, looked after their children … began to farm animals and grow crops. They lived together in villages … these people [made] rules for their communities and had chiefs and assistants. They also organised ceremonies …

The passage represents communal living, food production, leadership (chiefs and assistants), rule-making and ceremonies. In Moran's (2001) terms, these are cultural practices, and the reference to rules points towards non-material culture (Anikpo et al., 2005). The same passage also describes material culture:

> Early humans were very good at making stone spearheads for hunting, axes for chopping wood, and stone blades for cutting meat and animal skins. They made needles and fish hooks from bones. Arts flourish in Africa with rock painting and carving. Later, people made tools and jewellery using metals.

Tools, jewellery, rock painting and carving are cultural products. However, the passage describes early humanity in general. Apart from the single reference to Africa, nothing in it is located in Nigeria or attributed to a Nigerian people, and the ceremonies are mentioned without being named or described. The content is therefore explicit but global in origin, and it remains largely at the level of products and practices rather than perspectives.

Verbal and Visual Arts

Three passages are verbal art forms. "Salute to the Elephant" is a praise poem that eulogises the elephant as a symbol of strength, greatness and dangerous anger:

> … massive animal … who single-handed causes a vibration.
> The hunter's boast at home is not repeated before the elephant.
> 'O death, please stop following me.'

Praise poetry is a traditional creative form in Nigeria (Ajayi, 2019). The hunter's voice, the formulaic address to the animal and the theme of the

hunter's fear strongly resemble Yoruba hunters' chants (*ijala*), in which animals are saluted with their praise names (Babalola, 1966). It is therefore coded as likely Yoruba in origin. This makes it the passage most clearly rooted in a Nigerian tradition, and it conveys a deeper perspective: respect for the power of nature and the humility of the hunter before it.

"Why Birds Are Different" explains how birds, once alike in colour, acquired their present colours by flying over a mysterious fire:

> In those days crows were white. … but when she flew over the trees, the smoke turned her feathers black … Sunbird. At that time, he had grey feathers … the fire shone on his dull feathers and they turned into the yellow, red, …

This is an etiological or *pourquoi* tale, a story that explains the origin of a natural feature. Such tales are a characteristic genre of African oral literature and typically carry moral lessons for children (Finnegan, 2012). Because no specific ethnic origin can be established from the passage itself, it is coded as African rather than Nigerian-specific.

"Words of Wisdom and Love" is a poem about the power of words, built on figurative language:

> Words are like shells / Many see only their outer hardness / But the wise hold and open them / And sometimes find within them hidden pearls.

The first line is a simile and the fourth extends it into a metaphor. The poem's form echoes the proverbial wisdom of Nigerian oral traditions, in which the careful use of words is highly valued, but it does not use any identifiable Nigerian proverb or cultural reference. It is therefore coded as a verbal art of general rather than Nigerian-specific origin. Visual art appears only in the reference to rock painting and carving in "Early Humans", discussed above.

Finally, "A Child in the Forest of Ghosts" narrates a young boy's fear and exhaustion as he journeys through a dense forest. Its codes relate to emotion (loneliness, fear, fatigue) rather than to culture. It was included because its premise closely parallels Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (Tutuola, 1954), in which a small boy wanders into a forest inhabited

by ghosts; Tutuola's narratives draw heavily on Yoruba folktales. The passage is therefore coded as possibly rooted in Yoruba narrative tradition. Even so, its cultural content lies in its premise rather than in what pupils actually read, which centres on the boy's emotions.

DISCUSSION

How Much, and How Deep?

With only six of 30 passages (20%) containing arts or cultural content, cultural transmission is clearly not a major function of the comprehension component of this textbook. The content that is present leans towards surface representation. The rainforest is described but not connected to people; the tools, jewellery and ceremonies of "Early Humans" are named but not explained; and only the praise poem and the folktale convey deeper perspectives such as respect for nature and moral lessons. This pattern mirrors international findings that textbooks favour visible products over underlying perspectives (Yuen, 2011). It is also consistent with concerns that Nigerian heritage receives limited documentation in learning materials (Onyima, 2016; Okoye, 2020).

Whose Culture?

Nigeria comprises many ethnic groups whose arts and cultures differ considerably (Njoku & Okafor, 2019). In the passages analysed, none names a Nigerian ethnic group, place, festival, food or dress. At most two passages ("Salute to the Elephant" and possibly "A Child in the Forest of Ghosts") appear to draw on Yoruba tradition, and no passage draws recognisably on Hausa, Igbo or minority traditions. Two of the six ("Early Humans" and "Tropical Rainforest") are global or regional in scope. In Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) terms, the textbook therefore offers learners relatively little of their own source culture, and what it offers is largely unattributed. Pupils may enjoy the folktale or the praise poem without learning that these forms belong to their own heritage.

The absences are as informative as the presences. The passages contain nothing on food, dress, festivals, naming or initiation rites, religion, music and dance, or named crafts. Yet Nigeria offers abundant material for such passages, including the New Yam festival, the Argungu fishing festival, the Osun-Osogbo festival, *adire* cloth-making, Nok terracotta and the Benin bronzes. These are the areas that the Cultural and Creative Arts curriculum

treats as central (Taiwo et al., 2015a, 2015b). This suggests that the English and Cultural and Creative Arts curricula are not yet working together.

Schema Relevance and Pedagogical Implications

From a schema-theory perspective, the most valuable passages are those whose content is closest to pupils' experience (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Steffensen et al., 1979). The praise poem and the folktale draw on oral forms that many Nigerian children encounter at home, and they are likely to activate existing schemata. "Early Humans" and "Tropical Rainforest" are more distant and will usually need scaffolding. Teachers can use the passages more deliberately in several ways:

1. Before reading "Salute to the Elephant" or "Why Birds Are Different", ask pupils to share praise names, chants or folktales they know from home, so that their cultural schemata are activated before they meet the text.

2. After reading "Early Humans", ask pupils to compare the communal life, leadership and ceremonies described with those of their own communities.

3. Link "Tropical Rainforest" and "Early Humans" to visits to local museums, galleries or forest reserves, which have been shown to support the teaching of visual arts (Ojo & Sale, 2018).

4. Use the poem "Words of Wisdom and Love" as a bridge to collecting and explaining proverbs in pupils' home languages.

For the 24 passages without cultural content, teachers can add brief pre-reading or post-reading tasks that connect the topic to local practices. Textbook authors, for their part, could add short notes identifying the origin of traditional texts so that pupils recognise them as part of their own heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Nigerian arts and culture are represented in the 30 comprehension passages of a Primary Five English textbook. Only six passages (20%) contained such content. They represented natural heritage, cultural practices, material culture and verbal arts, but most of this content was global or unattributed, it remained mostly at the surface level, and Nigeria's ethnic diversity was not explicitly represented. Measured against the

range of arts and cultural content set out in the Cultural and Creative Arts curriculum (Taiwo et al., 2015a, 2015b), the representation is therefore partial. The passages most likely to activate pupils' cultural schemata are the praise poem and the folktale, which draw on familiar oral traditions.

Textbook authors should include more passages drawn from identifiable Nigerian traditions across different ethnic groups, covering food, dress, festivals, naming and initiation rites, religion, and the processes by which crafts are made. They should also state the sources of traditional texts. Teachers should use existing passages deliberately to connect reading with pupils' cultural backgrounds.

Limitations and Future Research

The study analysed a single textbook at a single grade level from one publisher, so its findings cannot be generalised to all Nigerian primary English materials. Judgements of cultural origin were also made from the text alone, without confirmation from the textbook's authors or publisher. The analysis also concerned the textbook as written and did not examine how teachers use the passages in class. Future research could compare several textbooks across grade levels and publishers, examine the representation of different ethnic groups more systematically, and observe classroom use to test whether culturally familiar passages do improve comprehension.

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