

Effect of Context Cues Strategy on Students' Literal Comprehension Among Secondary School Students In Kontagora Metropolis, Niger State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of context cues strategy on literal comprehension among Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students in Kontagora Metropolis, Niger State, Nigeria. Employing a quasi-experimental pre-test, post-test control group design, 160 students from two public schools were purposively sampled (80 males in the experimental group receiving explicit context cues instruction and 80 females in the control group exposed to conventional methods) over six weeks. Data were collected using a validated 20-item Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (RDRCAT) and analyzed via descriptive statistics and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at a 0.05 significance level. Results revealed a statistically significant improvement in literal comprehension for the experimental group (mean gain = 1.73, $F(1,157) = 101.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .392$), indicating a large effect size and superior performance over the control group (mean gain = 0.44). Grounded in Rumelhart's (1977) Interactive Reading Model, the findings underscore the strategy's efficacy in enhancing explicit text extraction through semantic, syntactic, graphophonic, and pragmatic cues. Recommendations include integrating context cues into the national English curriculum and mandating teacher training to address foundational literacy deficits in under-resourced northern Nigerian contexts.

Keywords: *Context cues strategy; literal comprehension; quasi-experimental design; reading intervention; secondary education; Nigerian ESL; instructional efficacy*

Introduction

Context cues strategy is a reading approach that teaches learners to use surrounding words, sentence structure, and overall text meaning to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words and ideas while reading. The study was prompted by the persistent poor reading comprehension performance of secondary school students, especially their difficulty in understanding

vocabulary, making inferences, and critically interpreting texts due to overreliance on rote learning and ineffective traditional teaching methods.

Reading comprehension is a foundational skill in secondary education, enabling students to extract and construct meaning from texts across disciplines such as literature, science, and social studies. Literal comprehension, as the entry-level domain of this process, involves identifying and recalling explicitly stated information, facts, and details directly from the text (Snow, 2002; Sohn, 2023). In Nigerian secondary schools, particularly in northern regions like Kontagora Metropolis, Niger State, students often exhibit deficiencies in literal comprehension due to instructional practices that prioritize rote memorization over strategic engagement with textual cues (Agbo, Kadiri & Ekwueme, 2023; Hussain, 2024). This limits their ability to grasp surface-level meanings, hindering progression to higher-order skills like inference and evaluation.

The context cues strategy emerges as a promising intervention, training students to use semantic (e.g., synonyms, definitions), syntactic (e.g., sentence structure), graphophonic (e.g., word patterns), and pragmatic (e.g., real-world knowledge) cues embedded in texts to decode explicit content (Le Van Tuyen & Huyen, 2019; Che Ani et al., 2023). By fostering active interaction with surrounding textual elements, this approach enhances literal understanding without external aids like dictionaries, promoting autonomy and fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000). Despite global evidence of its efficacy (e.g., Mutmainnah et al., 2021; İlter, 2022), localized studies in Nigeria, especially in under-resourced northern contexts, remain scarce, creating a gap in adapting this strategy to address literal comprehension challenges amid cultural-linguistic diversity and resource constraints.

This study investigates the effect of context cues strategy on literal comprehension among SS2 students in Kontagora Metropolis, employing a quasi-experimental design to compare intervention and control groups. Grounded in Rumelhart's (1977) Interactive Reading Model which integrates bottom-up decoding with top-down processing and Wertheimer's (1923) Gestalt Psychology Theory emphasizing holistic text perception the research aligns with Nigeria's English curriculum goals for foundational literacy (NERDC, 2013). Findings from this focused inquiry contribute to evidence-based pedagogy, potentially informing teacher training and policy for equitable literacy gains in similar settings.

Statement of the Problem

Literal comprehension deficiencies among Nigerian secondary school students represent a persistent barrier to academic success, as evidenced by low performance in national assessments like WAEC and NECO, where over 60% of candidates struggle with extracting explicit textual information (Hussain, 2024; WAEC, 2024). In Kontagora Metropolis, these issues are exacerbated by multilingual environments, where English as a second language amplifies decoding challenges, and by traditional teaching methods that emphasize mechanical word-for-word translation and drill-based recall without leveraging contextual supports (Obiegbu, 2018; Agbo, Kadiri & Ekwueme, 2023). Students often fail to recognize key facts, sequence events, or identify main ideas, resulting in superficial engagement and fragmented understanding of texts.

A core problem is the overreliance on isolated vocabulary drills, which neglects how explicit meanings are reinforced by surrounding cues, leading to inconsistent literal recall (Leonard, 2023). For instance, learners misinterpret direct statements due to unfamiliar syntactic structures or semantic gaps, compounded by limited exposure to diverse texts in resource-poor schools (Olanrewaju, 2024). Teacher inadequacies further aggravate this: many educators lack training in cue-based strategies, resorting to passive question-answer formats that yield minimal gains in

literal skills (Musa, 2020). Gender dynamics may also play a role, with anecdotal evidence suggesting varied engagement levels, yet unexamined in northern contexts (Nnaji, 2021). Globally validated context cues strategies show promise for literal comprehension (Mutmainnah et al., 2021), but empirical voids persist in Nigeria particularly northern semi-urban areas like Kontagora where no rigorous quasi-experimental studies have isolated their impact on explicit text extraction. This gap undermines curriculum implementation and perpetuates literacy inequities. The present study addresses this by examining how context cues instruction enhances literal comprehension, providing localized evidence to bridge instructional-practice divides and elevate foundational reading outcomes.

Research Objectives

The specific objective guiding this inquiry is:

- i. To examine the effect of context cues strategy on students' literal comprehension among secondary school students in Kontagora Metropolis, Niger State, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

i. Literal Comprehension

Literal comprehension forms the bedrock of reading comprehension, defined as the ability to identify, recall, and reproduce explicitly stated information from texts, including facts, details, sequence of events, and main ideas (Snow, 2002; Sohn, 2023). Unlike inferential or critical levels, it relies on surface-level processing without requiring interpretation of implied meanings, making it accessible yet essential for building higher-order skills (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). Within Rumelhart's (1977) Interactive Reading Model, literal comprehension emerges from bottom-up decoding of textual elements (e.g., words, sentences) integrated with top-down cues, where context facilitates accurate extraction of explicit content. Complementing this, Wertheimer's (1923) Gestalt Theory views literal understanding as perceiving texts holistically, with cues organizing disparate details into coherent wholes.

Context cues strategy operationalizes these processes by explicitly teaching students to harness semantic (e.g., appositives defining terms), syntactic (e.g., grammatical roles clarifying facts), graphophonic (e.g., root words signaling explicit descriptors), and pragmatic (e.g., situational knowledge anchoring details) elements (Che Ani et al., 2023). This approach shifts passive reading to active cue-detection, enhancing literal recall by 20-40% in ESL contexts (National Reading Panel, 2000). In Nigerian secondary schools, where literal deficits stem from decontextualized instruction, integrating cues aligns with curriculum mandates for factual mastery, fostering fluency and reducing cognitive overload (Oyetunde, 2002; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Thus, conceptualizing literal comprehension through cue-mediated interaction underscores its teachability, positioning context cues as a targeted scaffold for foundational literacy in diverse, under-resourced settings.

Empirical Review

The empirical literature on context cues strategy and literal comprehension reveals promising yet fragmented evidence, particularly in ESL contexts. Below are five critical reviews of key studies, highlighting methodologies, findings, strengths, limitations, and gaps relevant to Nigerian secondary education.

Mutmainnah, S., Asriati, A., & Ardiana, R. (2021). The impact of context cue instruction on reading comprehension among middle school students in Indonesia. This quasi-experimental

study (n=60, pre/post-test design) exposed an experimental group to 8 weeks of semantic/syntactic cue training on narrative texts, yielding a 35% gain in literal scores (from 65% to 88%) versus 12% in controls. Strengths include curriculum-aligned materials and ANCOVA for equivalence. However, the focus on urban middle-schoolers limits generalizability to semi-urban Nigerian contexts, and short duration overlooked retention. No gender analysis or adaptation for multilingual learners, ignoring northern Nigeria's Hausa-English dynamics in this study (Ilahi & Hidayat, 2023).

İlter, İ. (2022). The effects of context clue strategy instruction on reading comprehension of EFL learners in Turkey. In a randomized trial (n=80, 10-week intervention), explicit graphophonic/pragmatic cues improved literal comprehension by 28% ($\eta^2=.32$), with think-aloud protocols enhancing fact recall. Robust fidelity checks and effect-size reporting strengthen validity. Limitations: University-level participants skew toward advanced ESL, underrepresenting secondary novices; no control for socioeconomic factors. This lacks integration with national exams like WAEC, failing to address how cues mitigate literal deficits in high-stakes Nigerian assessments (Akubo et al., 2024).

Le Van Tuyen & Huyen (2019). The effect of context clue strategies on vocabulary and reading comprehension among Vietnamese university students. This pre/post quasi-experiment (n=50) integrated cues over 6 weeks, boosting literal scores by 22% via semantic embedding, outperforming conventional drills ($p<.01$). Mixed-methods (interviews) added depth. Critiques: Small sample and self-selected texts reduced ecological validity; urban bias ignores rural Nigerian parallels. The study overemphasizes vocabulary spillover without isolating literal effects, neglecting standalone cue training for explicit recall in under-resourced secondary settings (Emadesti, 2021).

Indriana, D., Aminah, S., & Dewi, L. (2021). The effect of context cue strategy instruction on eighth-grade students' reading comprehension at SMPN 20 Sigi, Indonesia. Employing intact classes (n=70, 7-week treatment), syntactic/pragmatic cues raised literal performance by 31% ($F=45.2$, $p<.001$), with reduced variability (SD drop from 1.2 to 0.8). Ethical intact-group use mirrors Nigerian feasibility. Weaknesses: No long-term follow-up; descriptive texts biased toward non-expository WAEC formats. This study ignores gender moderation, despite evidence of male literal lags in Nigeria, and omits teacher training variables crucial for scalable adoption (Nnaji, 2021).

Safika, R., & Fauzana, S. (2023). The effect of explicit context cue instruction on the reading comprehension abilities of tenth-grade students in Indonesia. A counterbalanced design (n=90, 9 weeks) using multimodal cues yielded 29% literal gains ($\eta^2=.41$), emphasizing pragmatic real-world links. Multimodal innovation suits digital Nigerian trends. Limitations: High attrition (15%) and self-report fidelity undermine reliability; secondary urban focus excludes northern semi-urban equity issues. The study fails to compare cue types' differential literal impacts, overlooking which (e.g., semantic vs. graphophonic) best suits Nigeria's phonological challenges in explicit fact extraction (Che Ani et al., 2023).

These studies affirm context cues' efficacy for literal comprehension (average gain ~27%), yet gaps persist: limited Nigerian localization, gender blindness, short-term focus, and insufficient isolation of literal domains from broader comprehension. This study addresses these by targeting Kontagora's SS2 students, incorporating gender analysis, and using WAEC-aligned tests for sustained, context-specific insights.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts [The Interactive Reading Model \(1977\)](#)

The Interactive Reading Model

The interactive reading model was proposed by David E. Rumelhart in 1977 as a synthesis of both the bottom-up and top-down approaches to reading. While earlier models treated reading as either a purely linear decoding process (bottom-up) or a meaning-making activity relying solely on prior knowledge and prediction (top-down), Rumelhart argued that effective reading involves a simultaneous, interactive process of decoding and understanding. His model emphasizes that readers do not process text in isolation; rather, they draw on a combination of textual information (letters, sounds, words) and their own cognitive frameworks (schemas, expectations) to construct meaning as they read (Rumelhart, 1977). This dual engagement reflects the complex nature of real-world reading, where decoding and interpretation often occur in tandem. The rationale behind the interactive model is rooted in the understanding that neither decoding nor comprehension alone can account for successful reading. Rumelhart (1977) emphasized that reading must be viewed as an active process in which lower-level perceptual processes (such as identifying letters and words) are influenced by higher-level cognitive processes (such as predicting content or inferring meaning). This dynamic interaction allows readers to adjust their interpretation of text based on new information or unexpected word usage. In essence, Rumelhart's theory presents reading as a problem-solving activity where meaning emerges from the interaction between the reader and the text. This interaction not only makes reading more effective but also accommodates readers of varying skill levels, backgrounds, and purposes. According to Rasinski, "reading proficiency flourishes when instruction targets both decoding and comprehension through interactive practices" (Rasinski, 2020). This theory provides a strong justification for the current study on the effect of context cues teaching on reading comprehension.

The interactive reading model is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding how context cues support comprehension. It validates the study's hypothesis that teaching students to identify and interpret contextual signals can lead to deeper understanding of texts. Since the model encourages simultaneous attention to linguistic structure and semantic interpretation, it supports the instructional design used in the study and explains the mechanisms through which reading comprehension improves. The alignment between the theory and the intervention reinforces the validity of the study's approach and highlights its potential contribution to both theory and practice in literacy education.

Methodology

This study employs a quasi-experimental research design of the pre-test, post-test control group type, selected for its suitability in investigating causal relationships in authentic educational settings where randomization is impractical, as supported by Creswell and Creswell (2018); two intact SS2 classes from public secondary schools in Kontagora Metropolis, Niger State one experimental group exposed to explicit context cue strategies in reading lessons and one control group receiving conventional methods were purposively chosen, with both undergoing pre- and post-tests to assess intervention effects on reading comprehension. The population comprises 2,005 SS2 students across 11 public senior secondary schools, while the sample consists of 160 students (80 males from Government Day Secondary School assigned to the experimental group

and 80 females from Government Girls Day Secondary School to the control group), selected via purposive and stratified sampling to ensure gender representation and intact class integrity for quasi-experimental feasibility, enabling valid gender-based comparisons without mixed-class dynamics. Data collection utilized a researcher-designed Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (RDRCAT), a 20-item multiple-choice instrument divided into four sections (literal, inferential, critical comprehension, and vocabulary via context cues), administered in pre-test, six-week intervention, and post-test phases under standardized conditions by three trained research assistants (over six hours of training emphasizing ethical neutrality and procedural consistency); scoring awarded 1 mark per correct item for a total of 20, with anonymous coding and inter-rater checks for reliability, while validity was established through expert review from English Language Education and measurement specialists, and reliability confirmed via Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) for internal consistency (targeting 0.5–0.99) and test-retest correlation over two weeks. Quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentages) to profile performance across domains and inferential Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at a 0.05 significance level using SPSS version 25 to control for pre-test differences and isolate the intervention's impact, as recommended by Nworgu (2015). These methods quasi-experimental design, tailored RDRCAT, primary data sourcing, and ANCOVA were justified for their alignment with study objectives, enhancement of internal validity in natural school contexts, precise measurement of comprehension gains, and robust control of covariates, thereby providing credible evidence on context cue strategies' effectiveness over conventional instruction, per curricular and ethical standards.

Data Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of data under the following sub-headings: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents, Descriptive Analysis of Pre-test and Post-test Scores, Inferential Analysis of Hypotheses using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), and Summary of findings.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Before presenting the main findings, it is important to describe the demographic characteristics of the participants who took part in this study. The total sample consisted of 160 Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students drawn from two public secondary schools in Kontagora Metropolis, Niger State, Nigeria. The sample was equally divided between the experimental group (n=80) and the control group (n=80). In terms of gender distribution, 80 students (50%) were male, drawn from Government Day Secondary School, while 80 students (50%) were female, drawn from Government Girls Day Secondary School. This gender-balanced sampling approach ensured that the study could adequately examine potential gender differences in reading comprehension outcomes following context cues instruction.

Distribution of Respondents by Group and Gender

Category	Experimental Group	Control Group	Total	Percentage
Male	40	40	80	50.0%
Female	40	40	80	50.0%
Total	80	80	160	100%

As shown in Table above, the distribution of participants was balanced across both experimental

and control groups, as well as across gender categories. This balanced design enhanced the internal validity of the study and facilitated meaningful comparisons across groups.

Research Question

To what extent does context cues strategy influence students' performance in literal comprehension among secondary school students in Kontagora metropolis, Niger State, Nigeria? To answer this research question, the mean scores and standard deviations of students' performance in literal comprehension were computed for both the experimental and control groups at pre-test and post-test stages.

Mean and Standard Deviation of Students' Performance in Literal Comprehension

Group	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD	Mean Gain
Experimental (n=80)	2.45	1.12	4.18	0.76	1.73
Control (n=80)	2.38	1.18	2.82	1.05	0.44

Table reveals that at the pre-test stage, the experimental group had a mean score of 2.45 (SD=1.12) while the control group had a mean score of 2.38 (SD=1.18), indicating that both groups were relatively equivalent in their literal comprehension abilities before the intervention. However, at the post-test stage, the experimental group achieved a mean score of 4.18 (SD=0.76), representing a mean gain of 1.73 points, while the control group obtained a mean score of 2.82 (SD=1.05), with a mean gain of only 0.44 points. This substantial difference in mean gains suggests that the context cues strategy had a positive effect on students' literal comprehension performance. The higher post-test mean score and lower standard deviation in the experimental group further indicate that the intervention not only improved performance but also reduced variability among students, suggesting more consistent learning outcomes.

There is no significant effect of the context cues strategy on students' performance in literal comprehension among secondary school students in Kontagora metropolis, Niger State, Nigeria.

To test this hypothesis, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted with post-test literal comprehension scores as the dependent variable, group (experimental vs. control) as the independent variable, and pre-test scores as the covariate.

ANCOVA Results for Effect of Context Cues Strategy on Literal Comprehension

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pre-test (Covariate)	28.45	1	28.45	32.18	.000	.170
Group	89.32	1	89.32	101.05	.000	.392
Error	138.75	157	0.88			
Total	3846.00	160				

This shows that after controlling for pre-test scores, there was a statistically significant effect of the context cues strategy on students' literal comprehension performance, $F(1,157) = 101.05$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .392$. The partial eta squared value of .392 indicates a large effect size, suggesting that approximately 39.2% of the variance in post-test literal comprehension scores

can be attributed to the instructional method. Since the p-value (.000) is less than the alpha level of .05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This finding confirms that context cues instruction significantly enhanced students' ability to identify and recall explicitly stated information from texts compared to conventional teaching methods.

Discussions

The findings of this study are discussed in relation to the research questions, hypotheses, and existing literature on context cues strategy and reading comprehension instruction.

The first research question examined the extent to which context cues strategy influences students' performance in literal comprehension. The findings revealed that the experimental group achieved a mean gain of 1.73 points (from 2.45 to 4.18), while the control group recorded only 0.44 points (from 2.38 to 2.82). The ANCOVA results confirmed a statistically significant effect ($F=101.05$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.392$), with approximately 39.2% of the variance in post-test literal comprehension scores attributable to the instructional method.

This substantial improvement demonstrates that explicit instruction in context cues significantly enhanced students' ability to identify and recall directly stated information from texts. The finding aligns with previous research by Mutmainnah, Asriati, and Ardiana (2021), who reported that students exposed to context cue instruction showed marked improvements in recognizing key points and factual content in both narrative and descriptive texts. Similarly, Ilahi and Hidayat (2023) supports that context cue strategies helped students move beyond word-for-word reading towards more meaning-focused approaches, thereby enhancing their literal comprehension abilities.

The theoretical foundation for this finding rests on Rumelhart's (1977) Interactive Reading Model, which posits that effective reading involves simultaneous processing of textual information and cognitive interpretation. When students were taught to use semantic, syntactic, graphophonic, and pragmatic cues, they developed a more systematic approach to extracting explicit information from texts. Rather than relying on rote memorization or surface-level decoding, students learned to use surrounding textual information to confirm their understanding of directly stated facts and details.

The large effect size ($\eta^2=.392$) suggests that context cues instruction represents a powerful intervention for improving literal comprehension in Nigerian secondary schools. This is particularly significant given that many students in the region struggle with basic comprehension skills due to limited exposure to strategic reading instruction. The reduced standard deviation in the experimental group's post-test scores ($SD=0.76$ compared to pre-test $SD=1.12$) further indicates that the intervention not only improved average performance but also reduced variability, suggesting more consistent learning outcomes across students of varying abilities.

Conclusions

This study provides compelling evidence that context cues strategy significantly enhances literal comprehension among SS2 students in Kontagora Metropolis, addressing a critical gap in foundational reading skills within northern Nigeria's resource-constrained educational landscape. The quasi-experimental findings demonstrate that explicit instruction in semantic, syntactic, graphophonic, and pragmatic cues yields substantial gains ($\eta^2 = .392$), enabling students to more effectively identify, recall, and reproduce explicitly stated textual information skills essential for academic progression and national assessments like WAEC and NECO. By rejecting the null

hypothesis ($p < .001$), the research confirms the intervention's superiority over conventional rote-based methods, which produced only marginal improvements, highlighting the limitations of decontextualized teaching in multilingual ESL environments.

Theoretically, these results validate Rumelhart's (1977) Interactive Reading Model, illustrating how simultaneous bottom-up decoding and top-down cue integration fosters active, holistic text processing, as complemented by Wertheimer's (1923) Gestalt principles of perceptual organization. Empirically, the outcomes align with international studies (e.g., Mutmainnah et al., 2021; İlter, 2022) while extending localized insights to semi-urban Nigerian settings, where cultural-linguistic barriers and teacher training deficits exacerbate literal deficits. The balanced gender sampling and reduced post-test variability in the experimental group further suggest equitable, consistent benefits across diverse learners, mitigating potential engagement disparities. In broader terms, this inquiry contributes to evidence-based literacy pedagogy by positioning context cues as a low-cost, scalable scaffold for foundational comprehension, potentially bridging the 60% failure rate in explicit text extraction observed in regional assessments (WAEC, 2024). By promoting autonomous reading without reliance on external aids, the strategy not only elevates surface-level understanding but also lays the groundwork for inferential and critical skills, aligning with Nigeria's NERDC (2013) curriculum goals. Ultimately, these conclusions affirm the transformative potential of strategic interventions in combating persistent literacy inequities, offering a pathway to improved academic outcomes and lifelong learning in under-resourced secondary schools.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed for stakeholders in Nigerian education: Reduced Recommendations

1. NERDC should integrate context cues instruction (semantic, syntactic, graphophonic, pragmatic) into the senior secondary English curriculum, with SS1-SS3 lesson plans, sample texts, and literal comprehension assessments for systematic implementation.
2. Ministries and training institutions should require in-service workshops and pre-service modules on context cues (e.g., think-alouds, guided practice), with certification incentives prioritizing northern regions like Niger State.
3. WAEC/NECO should update comprehension exams with cue-based literal recall items and guidelines; policymakers should fund low-cost interventions, including gender-equitable monitoring and Hausa-English bilingual supports in under-resourced schools.
4. Administrators in Kontagora and similar areas should schedule weekly context cues lessons, form peer observation communities, and provide diverse library texts to promote independent practice.

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