

Readability Problems in *The Guardian* Newspaper among Selected Staff and Students of the University of Benin, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study, investigated readability problems associated with readers of newspaper in Nigeria with reference to *The Guardian* Newspaper. The study became following the assumptions that readability problems do exist and are barriers to effective communication among newspapers' readers. Anchored on the perception theory, the descriptive survey research design was adopted with the aid of 6-item questionnaire. The sample constituted 400 readers of *The Guardian* newspaper in the University of Benin (UNIBEN) purposively selected among staff and students with background knowledge of the study. Data obtained were analyzed and presented with the aid of simple percentages and frequency tables. Findings indicated that there exist readability problems among readers of *The Guardian* newspaper. Also, it was discovered that the use of small point sizes by *The Guardian* newspaper was the major problem affecting readability of the newspaper among the selected staff and students of UNIBEN. Therefore, the study concluded that the business of newspaper page planning, font size determination, general aesthetics and graphic designs remain key factors in achieving wider readability and acceptability. Hence, it was recommended that all those involved in the business of newspaper page planning, font size determination, graphic designs etc need to be incorporated in the research team understudying readers' reactions so as to enable them plan their newspaper with the current demands and taste of their teeming readers among other things.

Keyword: *.Aesthetics .Communication .Graphics .Newspaper .Nigeria .Readability*

Introduction

Readability problems are the likely barriers that may exists in graphic communication especially as graphics become common means of communicating meanings and ideas in the world today. Letters and typefaces have become integral parts of vivid communication. Udoakah and Olise (2009) aver that graphics are pictorial elements of communication that enable listeners and viewers not only to see, hear or view and read but comprehend messages at a glance. Everywhere one goes is communication. This is because everything in the world communicates meanings or ideas. A close observation reveals that the world is not only full of graphics but cannot do without graphical presentations. These presentations are mainly in form of letters, designs, colours and symbols.

Look at your surrounding for a moment and think; you will discover the ubiquitous nature of graphics. The book you are reading, the money with which you buy things, the magazines you read, the calendars on the wall, the packet of detergent by the corner, your T-shirts, the blue sky, colour and shapes of buildings, female hairdo and dresses, the

packets providing covers for soaps and the newspapers on the stand, the list is endless. Udoakah and Olise (2009) describe graphics as systematic designs used in communication to actualize aesthetic appeals. Agba and Okoro (1995, p.2) put it "you unwillingly think graphics, talk graphics and live graphics". Graphics communication is the communication through graphics (Orheware, 2004). Udoakah and Olise (2009) observe that graphics are visual communication which extends the use of spoken language in the process of exchanging information and meanings.

Graphics make communication permanent. It can be argued that graphics are visual presentations displayed on the wall, screen, paper, etc so as to brand, inform, illustrate or entertain. Agba and Okoro (1995) define graphics as any visual communication aimed at creating a lucid picture in the mind of the recipient. It is the art, science and technology of presenting communication in letters and design to compel desired action. It is the distillation of ideas into visual symbols to make a vivid communication. Examples of graphics are photographs, drawings, line art, graphs, diagrams, typography, numbers, symbols, geometric designs, maps, engineering drawings, or other images. Graphics often combine text, illustration and colour. Ikpe (2000, p. 97) defines graphic communication as "the process of observing or perceiving or imagining, selecting, arranging artistic elements to intensify, clarify, interpret human experience through verbal and visual symbolization. Hodgson (1987, p.74) argues that in communication arts and technique, graphics is subject to variety of interpretation.

Communication is graphical when what is organized into letters is what is meant and what is meant is what is understood and what is understood is what is done and what is done is the desired action. Agba and Okoro (1995) drive the point home when they write that graphics communication is the art of passing on information or intelligence from the source to destination without any channel, mechanical or semantic noise. Turbull and Baird (1967) say it is the life blood of our economic, political and cultural existence. In every waking hour, we act, react and are influenced by the reactions of others because of some form of the printed word. This implies that there cannot be meaningful human existence without graphics in communication. Hence, we ought to handle it with care because as Agba and Okoro (1995, p.2) assert, "with it we are and without it we are not" it is therefore worth - emphasizing that communication that is badly affected graphically is not only misleading but an act against humans calculated to annihilate civilization. This is also because as Akpoveta (2010, p.3) puts it "different character in which various textures are printed are all graphics.

Communication that is not properly represented graphically can impair understanding of text, eliminate reading pleasure and make comprehension difficult especially when one travels in a bad road like the ones which are prevalent in Nigeria. Lack of adequate horizontal spacing can result to frequent jumping of the eyes to other lines when reading and travelling in a pot-holes filled road. It is against this backdrop that this study explores readability problems in *The Guardian* newspaper of Nigeria.

Research Problem

Readability describes the ease with which a document can be read (Stephens, 2000). It is common observation that what makes reading interesting, easily understood, flows and enjoyable depends on many factors. These factors could be psychological or mechanical. Psychological factors have to do with the reader and ranges from factors such as the reader's state of mind to his / her medical condition. On the other hand, mechanical factors affect the work itself. Readability could be viewed as the ease in which messages in form of text can be read and understood. "There are several perimeters which have been used to measure readability among members of the society. These are speed of perception, perceptibility at a distance, perceptibility in peripheral vision, visibility, and the reflex blink technique, rate of work such as speed of reading, eye movements and fatigue in reading (Tinker, 1963 pp. 5-7). It seems that readers of newspapers in Nigeria

often encounter certain forms of readability problems when consuming contents of newspapers. If, indeed, there exist, readability problems with newspapers' readers in Nigeria, what then would be the readability problems associated with the readers of *The Guardian newspaper*?

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was what are the readability problems encountered by readers of the Guardian newspaper of Nigeria?

Literature Review

In the year 2000, there were over 1000 studies on readability formulas in professional journals (Klare, 2000). Gunning (2013) asserts that much of the reading problem was a writing problem which can be described as problems associated with construction of sentences and use of words. This however, may not be true in its entirety as some of the problem could be because of how the messages are packaged. Readability is different from legibility which is a measure of how easily individual letters or characters can be distinguished from each other because it is all encompassing. Readability includes an ability to read, comprehend and sustain the pleasurable reading mood in the face of seemingly difficult situation such as undulating on a pothole during vehicular movement and ability of the eyes to continue in the same line for a long time even during movement without drafting to other lines due to inadequate horizontal character spacing.

Readability is important because it determines easy flow of the reader, affect rate of comprehension and enhances easy reading. Fry (2006) posits that easy reading helps learning and enjoyment possible. Understanding a text in graphical presentation depends on many factors such as the length of sentence, depth of sentence, the use of strange word, the psychological makeup of the reader, inter-character spacing, front sizes, and leading among others. For example, an English Professor, L.A. Sherman, in 1880 found that English sentences were getting shorter as against the Elizabethan times when an average sentence was 50 words as against 23 words in his own time. He established the fact that shorter sentences and concrete items help people to make sense of what's written, speech is easier to understand than text and literature is a subject for statistical analysis (Sherman, 1893).

Similar study was conducted by Russia writer, Nikolai A. Rubakin in 1889 where he discovered that strange words, the use of two many long sentences were some of the problems confronting text consumers. According to him, the people need cheap books written at a level they can comprehend (Lorge, 1944). After studying two newspapers and two magazines, Harry Kitson (1921) in his work, "The mind of the Buyer" asserts that sentence length and word length are signs of easy read. There is a relationship between readability and legibility. In the book, Reality of page Design, Ukonu (2007) argues that legibility is the measurement of the speed and accuracy with which type can be read and understood.

Readability is the measure of the difficulty in consuming the printed content. This difficulty can either be caused by either content in relation to the vocabularies used, psychological which described the state of the reader's mind or the way the content is packaged. The way the content is packaged form the thrust of this researcher. This is because work has hardly been done on readability problems in relation to the relationship between how printed messages are packaged and the ease with which the message is read, enjoys, understood and assimilated. Obviously, there is a relationship between legibility and readability. This relationship is mainly on how the clarity of the printed material affects the ease with which the material is consumed. The more legible a printed work is, the more readable the material will be. Harold (1973) reviewed various test that can be used to measure legibility. One of them and most popular is the visibility measurement which involves the testing of reading speed by controlling the amount of

light. The most effective means to achieving this is to measure reading speed while controlling all but one variable such as line length. Daryl (1995) has suggested nine factors of legibility. These are the reader's interest in the text, type design, type size, line width, word spacing and letter spacing, leading or line spacing, contrast and reproduction quality. This implies that readability which is the measure of the difficulty of the content of a newspaper depend on the legibility which is the sum of how a page is planned, arranged and printed.

Legibility is determined by the planning and placement of text. Slipshod handling of text undermines legibility thus readability while careful planning enhances it. Agba and Okoro (1995) aver that legibility is affected by leading, line spacing, justification and margin / white space. Since legibility affects readability and comprehension of the graphic message, it could be inferred that readability can be affected by leading, line spacing, justification, and margin / white space. Leading here refers to spacing between lines. It is the vertical space between lines and it is measured in points. Leading enhances readability of text (Agba and Okoro, 1995). Again, appropriate line length is a legibility enhancer. When a line is too long, the eye derails and finds it difficult to come back on track. The eye loses its focus and power as eye movement becomes destabilized. It has also been observed that too short a line slows down perception as the eye scans to and fro in rapid succession.

Most studies show that a line of about forty-two to sixty characters is most favorable to attaining readability efficiency. For children, the short lines are better. This is because shorter lines enable them to comfortably move their eyes from one line to another. According to Volks and Kurt (1935) poorly set text impairs readability. This is so especially with 'serif fed' type faces. When the characters of the words are jammed, decipherability becomes difficult and even in some cases, readability becomes impossible. Infer character space is also very important to be able to achieve or overcome readability problems. Intercharacter space must be proportional with attention given to character features and the need to let in some air in the text. Wainwright (1970) posits that justification is the process of effecting sameness in line length. It is a concept of orderliness which says lines of type cannot be set indiscriminately. Lines of type could be justified left-wiser, or otherwise, but the key thing is that the left-hand side of text must be flushed in an evenness that tallies with the way people read.

Fagged left margin creates a Slipshod appearance and a feeling of character moving about the page. Improper hyphenation slows down readability. Text or body copy set without margin or while space looks Cluttered, bunched sup and repulsively unattractive while white space brings in a measure of freshness and air into a copy. The relaxing, exhilarating mood it engenders make reading of a text a pleasurable experience. It is in line with these analyses that this study examined readability problems in The Guardian newspaper among some selected regular readers in the University of Benin, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Since understanding of media messages especially those of the print media can be influenced by the content of the message and the way the message is packaged, it is not out of place to hinge this study on the perception theory. Perception theory posits that people view things differently and their interpretation of messages depends on how they perceived the messages. Anaeto, Onabanjo and Osifeso (2008) and Asemah (2012) observe that the perception theory explains the process involved in interpreting messages. In tracing the historical development of perception theory, Barelson and Steiner (1964, p.88) recall that perception describes complex process through which people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world. Furthermore Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008) assert that sensory data can be interpreted through the five senses. Anaeto *et al* (2008) identified two types of perception: functional perception and structural perception. The latter refers to the psychological

factors that influence perception, while the former explains the physical stimuli which affect perception.

Perception theory is therefore relevant to the study because it highlights the perception of readers of *The Guardian* newspaper of Nigeria. Their perception which may include: what they view as readability problems in *The Guardian* newspaper. It is therefore not out of place to link readability problems in newspapers with selective perception. This is because peoples' perception of readability problems is different. What some group of persons may perceive as readability problems, may not be problems perceive as readability problems by other group of persons. Readers' perception of readability problems therefore is dependent on certain factors which include: age, medical conditions, and personal view of newspapers' design, layout and font types, and sizes.

Methodology/Population/Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The research design employed for this study was the descriptive survey design. According to Okoro (2001) and Ohaja (2003) survey design is usually employed by researchers studying the characteristics of a sample through questioning which in turn enables the researcher(s) to generalize concerning the population of interest. Descriptive survey design is used for gathering data from a target population using questionnaire or interview. The data generated is subjected to statistical analysis for reaching conclusions on subject of enquiry. The research instrument adopted in this study was a six-item questionnaire. The questionnaire was pre-tested and vetted by experts in the field of Mass Communication.

Statistics made available by the academic planning division of the University of Benin shows that there are 5,366 academic and non-academic staff in 2011/2012 session. Total full-time enrolment of students for the same academic session was 38,255. This shows a total of 43,621 staff and students. The researchers therefore worked with this population as the official record for 2013/2014 academic session at the time of the study was not made available. The sample size of 400 respondents was determined from the population of 43,621 respondents using the Taro Yamane (1968) formula.

The population of the study constituted regular readers of *The Guardian* newspapers in the University which are off-shoot from the entire population. Thus, 400 respondents made-up of 100 staff and 300 students, observed as regular readers of *The Guardian* newspaper in UNIBEN were purposively selected for this study. Out of the 400 respondents, 100 respondents are staff while 300 respondents are students. Conscious effort was made to ensure that all the staff and students selected represented all the sections/units/divisions/department/faculties in the university.

Data Presentation, Discussion and Findings

Out of the 400 questionnaires administered to respondents using the purposive sampling techniques, all the copies of the questionnaire representing 100% were retrieved. This is because the researchers personally administered and collected them immediately.

Table 1: Breakdown of Respondents based on copies of Questionnaire Administered

Category of Respondents	No. of Response	Percentage of Response
Academic Staff	80	20%
Non-Academic Staff	20	5%
Students	300	75%
Total	400	100%

Table 1 presents the breakdown of the respondents based on the copies of the questionnaire administered. The Table indicates that majority of the respondents were students, which was 300 representing 75%. The remaining 25% was divided between the

academic and non-academic staff of UNIBEN. This constituted 5% representing 20 non-academics and the remaining 20% representing 80 academic staff. The high percentage of students as against the other categories of the respondents was because the students' availability, eagerness and wiliness to participate in this study.

Table 2: Readability Problems in The Guardian newspaper among selected Respondents in University of Benin, Nigeria.

Readability Problems	No. of Response	Percentage of Response
No problem	20	1.25%
Inter-character spacing	102	25.5%
Leading	104	26%
Small point sizes	189	47.25%
Total	400	100%

Table 2 reveals that out of the 400 respondents, 20 of them representing 1.25% of the total respondents say they do not have readability problem with The Guardian newspaper while 102 representing 25.5% say they have the problem with the intercharacter spacing common with the Guardian Newspaper. While 104 respondents representing 26% have leading problem in the Guardian newspaper, 189 representing 47.25% have the problem of small point sizes.

Answer to Research Question: What are the readability problems encountered by readers of The Guardian newspaper of Nigeria?

From the analysis so far, it is obvious that regular readers of the content of The Guardian newspaper have readability problems. These problems are mainly those associated with the point sizes, intercharacter spacing and leading. It is only small percentage of the sample size that say that they have no readability problems. It is however worth noting that while all the number of staff surveyed have only one form of complain about The Guardian newspaper in terms of readability, there are satisfy with the depth of coverage, analytical prowess, structure and construct in the newspaper. From this study, findings reveal that:

There are readability problems among the selected regular readers of The Guardian newspaper in the University of Benin, Nigeria.

The main readability problems identified by the selected regular readers of The Guardian Newspaper in the University of Benin, Nigeria, are leading, intercharacter spacing and small point sizes. Minor problems are the six and sometimes seven columns adopted by the newspaper which respondents complain of making the paper too clumsy with words resulting to lack of 'air' in the newspaper.

There is a relationship between age and readability problem such as intercharacter spacing and type size. The study revealed that older persons and those with eye disease conditions have problem with type sizes. Most of the respondents who identified this as a problem assert that they hardly see the small type sizes without aid.

The findings of the study agrees with earlier study done by researchers such as Darly (1975) Akpan (1987) and Ikpen (2000) which maintain that to communicate effectively three major elements of art, namely the substance, form and technique must be paid attention to. The form refers to the medium or the overall structure of what the artist is trying to present, technique is the style or methods while substance is what is presented (content).

In written communication, the form is the graphics of communication which Idiong (1990) refers to "meaning sharing through imagery". This study also reveals that what poses a readability problem to someone may not pose same to another. This supports the view of Berlo (1960) that meaning is not in the symbol but in the mind of the receiver or in symbol user.

Conclusion

Graphics as elements of communication play significant role in achieving meaningful and effective communication. Since feedback is considered useful in measuring communication effectiveness, this study established the fact that indeed readability problems do exist among newspaper readers in Nigeria. With reference to The Guardian newspaper, the readability problems the readers encountered were inter-character spacing as the newspaper adopts the use of 6 or 7 columns style, leading and the use of small font sizes. The use of small font sizes on the pages of the newspapers' as this study has shown, if not aesthetically planned, is capable of creating barriers to achieving effective communication which could make reading not to be pleasurable for readers thereby affecting feedbacks from readers. From the foregoing, it is evident that this study has empirically proven that the business of newspaper page planning, font size determination, general aesthetics and graphic designs remain key factors in achieving wider readability and acceptability.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings of this study, the following are suggested:

1. Newspapers in Nigeria should embark on researches in investigating readers' reactions to the use of graphical elements in newspapers layout and design.
2. Also, newspapers should be creative in use of graphics and aesthetics to enhance effective reading among readers.
3. All those involved in the business of newspaper page planning, font size determination, graphic designing etc need to be incorporated in the research team understudying readers' reactions so as to enable them plan the newspaper with the current demand and taste of their teeming readers among other things.

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