

# **The Influence of Literature in Enhancing Reading Comprehension Skills amongst Nigerian Senior Secondary School Students**

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## **Abstract**

This case study investigates the influence of literature in enhancing reading comprehension levels' skills of secondary school students. The study adopted descriptive survey research design. The population comprised senior secondary school students and literature teachers in the study area, while a sample of 250 students and nine literature teachers were selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were collected using a researcher-designed instrument titled Literature and Reading Comprehension Levels' Skills Assessment Questionnaire (LRCLSAQ). The instrument was validated by experts and its reliability established using the test-retest method and Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.82. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the data. The findings reveal that literature significantly enhances students' literal reading comprehension skills by improving their ability to identify key details and main ideas in texts. The study also found that literature contributes meaningfully to the development of inferential reading skills, enabling students to interpret implied meanings and draw logical conclusions. Furthermore, literature is shown to foster critical reading skills by promoting students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and question textual content. The study concludes that literature is an effective instructional tool for enhancing reading comprehension skills at the senior secondary school level. It therefore recommends the integration of diverse literary texts and interactive instructional strategies in literature-in-English classrooms to improve students' reading comprehension achievement.

## **Introduction**

Literature is a mode of reading that involves an interactive relationship among the writer, the text, and the reader, with particular emphasis on the transactional process through which meaning is constructed. Beyond serving as a collection of stories, poems, and plays, literature functions as a vital educational tool that stimulates intellectual, emotional, and imaginative development Pressly and Afterback (2019). Within secondary education, literature is not merely an examinable subject, but also a medium through which learners acquire essential linguistic and cognitive competencies necessary for academic success and meaningful participation in society. Through sustained engagement with literary texts, students are exposed to diverse perspectives, complex language structures, and thematic depth that enhance their overall reading proficiency.

Reading comprehension is central to effective engagement with literary texts and operates across three interrelated levels: literal, inferential, and critical comprehension. Literal comprehension involves understanding explicitly stated information in a text, such as identifying key events, characters, and settings (Kalu & Adegbite, 2022). Inferential comprehension requires readers to interpret implied meanings by drawing logical conclusions from textual clues and prior knowledge, while critical comprehension enables learners to evaluate ideas, question underlying assumptions, and assess the relevance or bias of a text (Nwankwo, 2017; Adeniran & Afolabi,

2023). Together, these levels of comprehension allow students to move beyond surface understanding to deeper analytical engagement with texts, thereby promoting higher-order thinking and sustained literacy development.

In the Nigerian educational framework, senior secondary school represents a crucial stage where students aged approximately 15 to 18 consolidate foundational knowledge and prepare for higher education or vocational paths. The National Policy on Education (2013) emphasizes the development of language skills, with literature-in-English integrated into the English Language curriculum to enhance students' linguistic proficiency and intellectual capacity. Literature, through its rich tapestry of prose, poetry, and drama, offers a unique opportunity to cultivate the reading comprehension levels' skills. Works such as Chimamanda Adiche's *Purple Hibiscus*, Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*, Wole Soyinka's 'The Telephone Conversation', or Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* challenge students to not only understand plots and characters, but also interpret symbolic meanings and critique societal issues, aligning with the goals of literal, inferential, and critical reading comprehension levels' developments.

This paper, therefore, evaluates the role of literature in promoting literal, inferential, and critical reading comprehension levels' skills of senior secondary school students in Abakaliki Local Government Area, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. By examining how literature is taught, how students respond to it, and the extent to which it enhances their reading abilities, the study uncovers the opportunities and challenges inherent in the process. The study was determined to exposure to how literature in English studies could significantly improve students' reading comprehension levels' skills.

The poor results of students in WAEC, NECO, JAMB indicates a great problem of inability to read with comprehension. The students have no reading skills which could have led them to success in their examinations. Many senior students in secondary school students tend to be much slower readers than they ought to be.. The inability to be good readers springs, fundamentally, from lack of flexibility in their approach to the range of reading materials that they encounter. This means the inability of the students to condition their reading efficiency to the areas such as literal, inferential, and critical comprehension levels skills. According to Anderson (2018) this is exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, where schools may lack libraries, conducive learning environments, and necessary facilities to support reading-focused activities. Furthermore, many educators may not possess the necessary pedagogical knowledge and strategies to teach reading comprehension effectively, leading to a lack of systematic instruction and appropriate guidance for students. The curriculum's focus on examination-oriented approaches often prioritizes rote memorization over the development of critical thinking and analytical skills required for proficient reading comprehension. This results in a narrow approach to learning that fails to foster a deep understanding of texts Adeniran & Afolabi (2023).

The senior secondary schools in Abakaliki Local Government Area of Ebonyi State face numerous challenges that hinder the delivery of quality education. These challenges have a significant impact on students' reading skills, making it difficult for them to access literature texts and materials. Addressing these challenges is essential to improving the quality of education and promoting a culture of reading among students in the area Anderson (2018). The lack of reading skills in literature can also have a negative impact on students' self-esteem and motivation, leading to a decrease in their overall academic performance and a lack of engagement in reading activities.

Furthermore, students who struggle with reading literature texts may experience anxiety and frustration, which can lead to a range of emotional and behavioral problems.

On the other hand, inadequate reading skills restrict students' access to the rich cultural heritage and diverse perspectives embedded in literary texts, thereby reinforcing cycles of cultural and intellectual deprivation Kirsch et al. (2013). Such limitations have broad implications for learners' academic development and for societal advancement in generally. In response to this concern, this present study examined whether sustained exposure to a wide range of literary texts in English studies can enhance students' reading comprehension skills' literal, inferential, and critical - with the aim of improving overall reading achievement.

## **Literature Review**

### **Reading Skills**

According to Cline, Johnstone, and King (2006), reading is decoding and understanding of written text. Here, the students will get a text from the teacher and they will read the text and try to understand what the text is all about. Reading is decoding and understanding text for particular reader purposes Nunan (2022). Readers decode written text by translating text to speech, and translating directly to meaning. To understand written text, readers engage in constructive processes to make text meaningful, which is the end goal or product. When we read, we look at written symbols (letters, punctuation, spaces) and use our brains to convert them into words and sentences that have meaning to us. We can read silently (in our heads) or read aloud - speaking every word that we read (Ruddel & Unrau, 2006).

Reading skills contribute to a child's reading ability - in other words, how well they can read and understand what they are reading. There is a wide variety of reading skills that children develop and work on throughout their primary education and beyond. These skills can be placed into four main categories: decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and understanding sentences. These main reading skills make up the bulk of a child's reading ability. Overall, they aim to arm children with the skills to be able to understand the meaning of what they read. This is not only essential for their English lessons and their other school subjects, but also for all areas of life beyond their education.

### **Literal Reading Comprehension Level Skill**

The literal level skill is the most fundamental part of reading. It covers both recognizing words on a page and connecting these words to their meaning. It is sometimes known as reading on the lines, because we only pay attention to exactly what is written down in front of us. The literal level is just as important for understanding spoken language, recognizing sounds as words and connecting them to meanings. It involves recognizing the central idea or theme of a text, recognizing the meaning of individual words and phrases, understanding the order of events or ideas presented in a text, recognizing and recalling specific details or facts presented in a text, and drawing conclusions based on explicit information presented in a text Broek (2000). Literal reading skill is a foundational skill that is necessary for more advanced reading skills, such as inferential and critical reading. Literature review entails critical presentation of what scholars have done in the field, not your personal views (Anderson 2018).

Strong literal reading skill is essential for academic success, as they enable students to understand and complete assignments, read and comprehend texts, and perform well on tests and quizzes.

### **Inferential Reading Comprehension Level Skill**

The inferential level is also known as reading between the lines, and it is all about understanding the meaning that is not obvious in the definitions of each individual words in the text Hirsch (2003). The word inferential may look long and complicated, but it is just talking about what we infer from a text. It is the ability to understand what a text implies or suggests, rather than just what it directly states. For example, if a character leaves his umbrella at home and arrives soaked, you can infer it was raining Beers (2013). Inferential reading allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of a text. It encourages readers to analyze and interpret information, which is a crucial skill for academic and professional success. Understanding implied meanings is essential for clear and effective communication. Making an inference is often referred to as reading between the lines. It is the process of making a guess about something you do not know for sure, based on the information Beers (2013).

This ability is commonly evaluated through items that ask about the main topic, cause-effect relations, and conclusion making in standardized reading tests (Hamouda & Tarlochan (2015). Inferential reading is the ability to realize the hidden concepts and the unstated relationship between the lines in a text. This ability is commonly evaluated through items that ask about the main topic, cause-effect relations, and conclusion making in standardized reading tests (Hamouda & Tarlochan, 2015). Jang (2009) states that “items measuring the inferencing skill proved to be more cognitively demanding and required test-takers to use multiple skills simultaneously” (p. 225). These skills include the ability to comprehend difficult vocabulary and structures and synthesize background knowledge to create meaning (Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994; McKoon & Ratcliff, 1992; Van Den Broek, Young, Tzeng, & Linderholm, 1999; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Jang indicates that items targeting inferencing skills provide significant information about learners’ overall reading comprehension skills.

Scheiter, Gerjets, Vollmann, and Catrambone (2009) indicate that students with higher levels of background knowledge use deeper processing strategies in reading comprehension because the background knowledge helps them with information selection and, consequently, reduces their cognitive load during reading comprehension.

### **Critical Reading Comprehension Levels Skill**

Critical reading skills entail analyzing, evaluating, and questioning a text’s content, structure, or assumptions. Hikida et al. (2019) describe critical reading as a higher-order skill that enables students to assess credibility, identify biases, and relate texts to broader issues, for example, critiquing gender roles in the text, ‘The Joys of Motherhood’. Ramírez-Montoya and Valenzuela (2019) argue that critical skills develop through interactive pedagogies, such as discussion, which are often absent in resource-limited environments.

In the Nigerian context, studies have shown that the development of critical reading skills is often constrained by examination-oriented curricula and predominantly passive instructional practices (Adeniji & Omale, 2020). These challenges may be more pronounced in educationally disadvantaged areas such as Abakaliki, where limited resources further affect instructional quality.

Similarly, Crawford et al. (2025) report that foundational literacy deficits common in low-income communities significantly impede students' ability to engage in critical comprehension. Against this backdrop, the present study examines whether the use of literature as an instructional tool can foster critical reading skills among senior secondary school students in Abakaliki, taking into account the prevailing cultural and educational conditions.

### **Theoretical Review/Framework**

This study engaged the Louise Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory (1938), which posits that reading is a transactional process between the reader and the text, where meaning emerges from interaction rather than residing solely in the text itself. Rosenblatt (2019, reissue), emphasizes that readers bring their experiences, emotions, and cultural backgrounds to the act of reading, actively constructing meaning in a dynamic exchange with the literary work. This theory distinguishes between two reading stances: the efferent stance, where readers focus on extracting factual information (akin to literal comprehension), and the aesthetic stance, where readers engage with the text's emotional and interpretive layers (linked to inferential and critical skills).

The theory directly relates to this study by framing literature as a catalyst for reading levels skills development through active reader-text interaction. Ramirez-Montoya and Valenzuela (2019), echo Rosenblatt's view that socio-cultural factors shape reading experiences, suggesting that Abakaliki resource scarcity and bilingualism influence how students respond to literature. This study uses the theory to explore how these interactions promote or hinder reading skills.

### **Implications of the theory to the study**

Reader-Response Theory is the most appropriate framework for this study due to its alignment with the research objectives and context which include:

- **Focus on Reader-Text Interaction:** The theory centers on the individual reader's engagement with literature, directly addressing how students in Abakaliki develop reading skills through texts like *Macbeth* or *The Trials of Brother Jero*. This focus is critical for evaluating literature's specific role.
- **Relevance to Reading Skill Levels:** The theory's efferent-aesthetic continuum mirrors the study's three-tiered skill framework - literal, inferential, critical, offering a nuanced lens unavailable in other theories like 'Piaget's stage-based theory/approach, which is less suited to skill-specific analysis (Clinton, 2019).
- **Contextual Sensitivity:** Rosenblatt (2019 reissue) accounts for readers' cultural and personal backgrounds, making it ideal for Abakaliki bilingual, rural students. Abu-Ubaida et al. (2020), noted that rural Nigerian students face unique reading challenges, and this theory accommodates how the Igbo heritage and English instruction shape literary responses.
- **Empirical Support:** Recent studies like Kuzmicova et al. (2019) and Mangvwat (2022) validated the theory's application to literacy development, reinforcing its suitability for a Nigerian educational study.

Reader-Response Theory's emphasis on the transactional nature of reading makes it the most fitting for analyzing how literature itself, rather than external factors alone, promotes skill development among Abakaliki students. It provides a clear, skill-oriented framework for interpreting data from students' interactions with literary texts.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of literature in enhancing the reading comprehension levels' skills of senior secondary school students in Abakaliki Local Government Area, Ebonyi State. The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent would the study of literature influence students' literal reading comprehension levels' skills in senior secondary schools in Abakaliki Local Government Area?
2. How would the use of literature influence students' inferential reading comprehension levels' skills in senior secondary schools in Abakaliki Local Government Area?
3. To what extent would the study of literature influence the development of critical reading comprehension levels' skills of senior secondary school students in Abakaliki Local Government Area?

## Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. According to Ali (2006), a descriptive survey uses a sample to document, describe, and explain the current status of a phenomenon. The author further states that in descriptive surveys, views and facts are collected through questionnaires and/or interview schedules to answer research questions. This design was suitable for the study because it allowed the use of questionnaires and/or interview schedules to gather relevant data on how literature promotes reading comprehension levels' skills - literal, inferential, and critical, among senior secondary school students in Abakaliki Local Government Area, Ebonyi State. The population of the study comprised five (5) senior secondary schools in Abakaliki Local Government Area, Ebonyi State. This population was chosen because literature teachers and students in senior secondary schools are qualified to provide accurate and reliable information on the role of literature in promoting reading comprehension levels skills - literal, inferential, and critical, among senior secondary school students in the study area.

The sample consisted of 250 students (120 males and 130 female) randomly drawn from the five senior secondary schools from the study area. The sample was distributed across the five selected schools, to accommodate variations in enrollment and infrastructure while maintaining balance. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select the sample. In the first stage, purposive sampling was used to select five secondary schools in Abakaliki LGA based on criteria such as active participation in literature-in-English curriculum, and registration for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). This ensured that the schools were relevant to the study's focus on literature's impact on reading comprehension levels' skills.

In the second stage, stratified random sampling was applied within each school to proportionately represent SS1, SS2, and SS3 students, as each class engaged with different literary texts and skill demands. Within each stratum, simple random sampling was used to select students using class registers to minimize bias. This approach aligned with studies by Owolewa (2021), who used stratified sampling to select 180 students in Ogun State to assess reading comprehension,



and Abu-Ubaida et al. (2020), who sampled rural Nigerian students to study reading challenges. The multi-stage technique was a well -focused sample to evaluate how literature promotes literal, inferential, and critical reading comprehension levels' skills.

The instrument used for data collection in this study was a researcher-designed questionnaires titled the Literature and Reading Comprehension Levels' Skills Assessment Questionnaire (LRCLSAQ). The LRCLSAQ was developed to evaluate the role of literature in promoting literal, inferential, and critical reading comprehension levels' skills of senior secondary school students in Abakaliki Local Government Area. The questionnaires were structured to collect data to address the study's research questions. The questionnaires were divided into two sections. Section A: Demographic Information, which included 4 items collecting background data (e.g., class level, gender, and school) to contextualize responses, and Section B: Reading Comprehension Levels' Skills Assessment, which comprised 24 close-ended items, 8 per skill type – literal, inferential, critical, based on excerpts from WASSCE literature-in-English texts (e.g., *Things Fall Apart*, *Macbeth*). These items were multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions (e.g., "How well can you identify the main events in a story?" rated from (1= Not at all, to 5 =Very well), to quantify students' proficiency in literal (e.g., recalling details), inferential (e.g., interpreting themes), and critical (e.g., evaluating author's intent) skills. The LRCLSAQ was administered to the sample of 50 students across five public schools in Abakaliki LGA, with responses scored (in Section B) for statistical analysis. The questionnaires were designed by the researchers to be culturally relevant, using familiar texts, and simple language suitable to the students.

The instruments were subjected to face validation by three experts: one from the Measurement and Evaluation unit and two from the Arts and Humanities Education unit, all from Alex-Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo. Each expert was given a copy of the instrument to review and identify any irrelevant or ambiguous items. Their suggestions were used to improve the final version of the questionnaires.

In order to test the reliability of the Literature and Reading Comprehension Levels' Skills, Assessment Questionnaire (LRCLSAQ), the primary instrument for the study, was established to ensure its consistency in measuring literal, inferential, and critical reading comprehension levels' skills among senior secondary school students in Abakaliki Local Government Area. Reliability refers to the degree to which the instrument produces stable and consistent results under similar conditions. To assess the reliability of Section B, the test-retest reliability method was employed. The LRCLSAQ was administered to a pilot study with a group of 20 senior secondary students from a school in a neighboring local government area (Ezza South LGA) with similar socio-educational characteristics to Abakaliki, but outside the study's sample. The pilot test was conducted twice, two weeks apart, under comparable conditions. Responses to the 15 Likert-scale items (5 each for literal, inferential, and critical skills) were scored (Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1), and the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was calculated to measure consistency between the two administrations. A correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.82$  was obtained, indicating high reliability, as values above 0.70 is considered acceptable in educational research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Additionally, the Cronbach's Alpha method was used to evaluate internal consistency, yielding an alpha value of  $\alpha = 0.79$  for Section B, further confirming

the instrument's reliability across its three skill subscales (literal:  $\alpha = 0.76$ ; inferential:  $\alpha = 0.78$ ; critical:  $\alpha = 0.75$ ), indicating that the instrument was reliable.

Data was collected from the respondents with the help of three research assistants who were trained in the distribution and collection of instruments from respondents. The researcher and the assistants collected the questionnaires from the senior secondary schools where the instruments were administered. Data collected were computed using Mean and standard deviation. The Mean was used to answer the three research questions. All computations were carried out using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The boundary limits for interpreting mean scores of the questionnaires' items in order to answer the research questions were as follows;

Scaling Statement Real Limit  
 Strongly Agree (SA) = 5 points 4.00 - 5.00  
 Agree (A) = 4 points 3.50 - 4.49  
 Undecided (U) = 3 points 2.50 - 3.49  
 Disagree (D) = 2 points 1.50 - 2.49  
 Strongly Disagree (SDA) = 1 points 1.00 - 1.49

From the above real limit, a mean of 4.50 - 5.00 were accepted as Strongly Agree, 3.50 - 4.49 were accepted as Agree, 2.50 - 3.49 were accepted as Disagree and 1.50 - 2.49 were accepted as Strongly Disagree. From the above, the cut-off points for Agree were 2.50 or above. Therefore, any item that scored a mean value of 2.50 or above were accepted and were judged according to the scale response option. While any item that scored below 2.50 was rejected.

**Table 1: Report on Research Question 1**

S/N	Item	Category	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
1	Literature helps me identify specific details in a passage	Male	120	4.10	0.88	Agree
		Female	130	4.22	0.83	Agree
2	I understand the main idea of a text better through literature classes	Male	120	4.05	0.90	Agree
		Female	130	4.16	0.84	Agree
3	Literature enhances my ability to remember what I read	Male	120	3.98	0.87	Agree
		Female	130	4.12	0.81	Agree
4	I can easily follow the order of events when reading literary texts	Male	120	3.95	0.89	Agree
		Female	130	4.09	0.85	Agree
5	Literary texts help me understand characters, setting, and actions	Male	120	4.00	0.92	Agree
		Female	130	4.18	0.90	Agree
6	Literature teaches me how to extract key points from a passage	Male	120	3.91	0.86	Agree
		Female	130	4.08	0.88	Agree
7	I am able to identify direct facts through literature reading	Male	120	3.87	0.93	Agree
		Female	130	4.05	0.89	Agree
8	My literal understanding has improved because of literature lessons	Male	120	4.02	0.84	Agree
		Female	130	4.19	0.82	Agree



Table 1 revealed that both male and female students agreed that literature significantly enhances their literal reading skills. Across all 8 items, the mean scores ranged from 3.87 to 4.22, all of which are above the decision benchmark of 2.50, indicating positive responses. Specifically, both genders agreed that literature helps them identify specific details, understand the main idea of texts, recall information, and extract key points. For example, item 1 had mean values of 4.10 (male) and 4.22 (female), indicating strong agreement that literature aids in recognizing specific details in a passage. The standard deviations (ranging from 0.81 to 0.93) showed moderate spread, suggesting consistency in students' responses.

**Table 2: Report on Research Question 2**

S/N	Item	Category	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
9	Literature helps me understand meanings not directly stated	Male	120	3.98	0.90	Agree
		Female	130	4.20	0.81	Agree
10	I can interpret characters' actions and emotions through literature	Male	120	4.00	0.93	Agree
		Female	130	4.15	0.87	Agree
11	Literature improves my ability to guess what might happen next	Male	120	3.90	0.96	Agree
		Female	130	4.08	0.89	Agree
12	I use context clues to interpret the meaning of unfamiliar words	Male	120	3.87	0.91	Agree
		Female	130	4.02	0.85	Agree
13	Literature enables me to draw conclusions from what I read	Male	120	4.03	0.89	Agree
		Female	130	4.17	0.86	Agree
14	I understand implied meanings in stories better through literature	Male	120	3.92	0.93	Agree
		Female	130	4.11	0.90	Agree
15	Literature helps me relate past events to future outcomes in texts	Male	120	3.85	0.96	Agree
		Female	130	4.06	0.84	Agree
16	I can identify hidden messages or morals in stories through literature	Male	120	3.97	0.91	Agree
		Female	130	4.13	0.86	Agree

Table 2 revealed that students across gender perceive literature as highly effective in developing inferential reading skills. All 8 items yielded mean values of above 3.80, indicating agreement. For instance, item 9 (on understanding implied meanings) recorded mean values of 3.98 (male) and 4.20 (female). Students agreed that literature improves their ability to interpret characters' emotions, draw conclusions, use context clues, and understand hidden messages in texts. This reflects that literature classes foster students' ability to move beyond literal comprehension and develop deeper interpretative skills.

**Table 3: Report on Research Question 3**

S/N	Item	Category	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
17	Literature helps me question the author's purpose and intention	Male	120	4.05	0.88	Agree
		Female	130	4.18	0.84	Agree
18	I analyze the way characters are presented in stories	Male	120	3.90	0.95	Agree
		Female	130	4.07	0.87	Agree
19		Male	120	3.95	0.89	Agree

	I compare multiple points of view through literary texts	Female	130	4.11	0.86	Agree
20	Literature teaches me how to evaluate arguments in texts	Male	120	3.88	0.94	Agree
		Female	130	4.05	0.82	Agree
21	I critically assess the values and beliefs presented in literature	Male	120	3.92	0.93	Agree
		Female	130	4.10	0.89	Agree
22	Literature helps me make judgments about characters' decisions	Male	120	3.96	0.88	Agree
		Female	130	4.12	0.84	Agree
23	I can evaluate the relevance of literary themes to real life	Male	120	4.00	0.86	Agree
		Female	130	4.16	0.80	Agree
24	Literature enables me to defend my opinions about a text logically	Male	120	3.91	0.92	Agree
		Female	130	4.09	0.85	Agree

Table 3 revealed that literature plays a significant role in enhancing critical reading abilities. Mean values ranged from 3.88 to 4.18, with both male and female students agreeing on all items. They acknowledged that literature encourages them to question the author's purpose, analyze characters, evaluate arguments, and form logical opinions. For example, item 17 recorded high mean scores of 4.05 (male) and 4.18 (female), indicating that students actively engage in critical thinking processes during literature lessons. This aligns with the broader goal of literature education to promote evaluative and reflective thinking.

### Discussion of Findings

This study investigated the influence of literature in enhancing literal, inferential, and critical reading skills of senior secondary school students in Abakaliki Local Government Area of Ebonyi State. The primary aim was to investigate how the use of literature contributes to the development of key reading comprehension levels' skills - specifically literal, inferential, and critical reading. Three research questions guided the study. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The sample consisted of 250 students randomly selected from senior secondary schools in the study area.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing 24 items, segmented into three sections based on the three reading skill domains. The analysis involved the computation of means and standard deviations. The findings revealed that literature plays a significant role in promoting students' ability to identify explicit information (literal), derive meanings and make inferences (inferential), and assess, evaluate, or question textual content (critical). The results showed high mean ratings across all items, with no statistically significant difference between male and female students' responses. The study revealed that literature significantly enhances literal reading skills among senior secondary school students in Abakaliki Local Government Area. Both male and female students agreed that literature helps them identify specific details, understand the main idea of texts, remember content, and follow the sequence of events. The high mean scores across all items related to literal reading demonstrate that literary texts serve as effective tools in helping students decode surface-level information and comprehend factual content in reading passages.

Findings also indicated that literature contributes meaningfully to the development of inferential reading skills. Students acknowledged that through literature, they could better interpret character motivations, predict events, and derive meanings not directly stated in texts. This showed that literature encourages students to read between the lines, make educated guesses, and connect ideas using contextual clues - skills that are essential for higher-order thinking and academic achievement. Moreover, the study found that literature fosters critical reading skills, allowing students to question the author's purpose, assess the values presented in texts, and compare multiple perspectives. Both male and female students rated literature highly as a means of cultivating analytical thinking and personal judgment.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that literature significantly enhances reading comprehension skills in senior secondary school students. Literature facilitates literal comprehension by helping students identify key facts, ideas, and sequence of events. It supports inferential comprehension by enabling students to draw conclusions, interpret characters, and understand implied meanings. Furthermore, it fosters critical reading by equipping students with the skills to evaluate themes, assess arguments, and question the author's intentions. Importantly, the role of literature is not gender-biased; both male and female students benefit equally from literature-based instruction in improving their reading comprehension skills.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations were made to support this study:

- Literature should be incorporated into various genres (drama, prose, poetry) lessons to target literal, inferential, and critical reading skills simultaneously.
- Continuous professional development programs should be organized to equip teachers with modern strategies for literature instruction.
- Textbooks and teaching materials should be selected based on their potential to stimulate all the three levels of reading comprehension levels' skills.
- Gender-inclusive approaches should be maintained, ensuring both male and female students receive equal opportunities to explore and benefit from literature.
- School administrators should support reading clubs and interactive literary sessions to promote voluntary reading and critical discussions among students.

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