

SENIOR SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF DIFFICULTY LEVELS OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES SYLLABUS AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS IN ILORIN, KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

¹OKUNLOYE, ROTIMI WILLIAM, Ph.D
Department of Arts & Social Sciences Education
Faculty of Education,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

&

²AWOWALE, ABOSEDE, AYODEJI, PGDE, M.Ed
Chapel Secondary School,
Ilorin, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The study examined students perceived difficulty levels of the Senior School Certificate Examinations Christian Religious Studies (SSCE CRS) syllabus topics and associated factors in Ilorin, Nigeria. The study employed a descriptive survey design involving 392 purposively selected senior school three students of intact classes drawn from 15 randomly selected schools in Ilorin South Local Government Area of Kwara State. A researcher-designed questionnaire known as Students' Perceived Difficulty Levels of Subject Curriculum (CRS) (SPEDILOSC) ($r = 0.60$) was administered to the sample to answer three research questions for the study. The results of data analysis using percentage statistic showed that: the syllabus perceived have three difficulty levels ranging from very difficult to not difficult; A greater proportion of the syllabus, predominately from New Testament themes were perceived to be simple or not difficult, while a smaller proportion, majorly from Old Testament, Acts of Apostles and Pauline Epistles themes were perceived to be very difficult or difficult; and the perceived difficulty levels were associated with the subject-related, student-related, instructional material-related and teacher-related factors. Recommendations focusing on effective syllabus coverage and teacher-induced learnability of difficult CRS topics were suggested.

Keywords: *Perceived Difficulty Levels; CRS Syllabus, Associated Factors.*

Introduction

The School Curriculum at different levels of education in Nigeria have been designed to produce some intended cognitive, affective and psychomotor-based objectives in the learner in order to ensure that the five prong goals of the Nigerian educational system are achieved. These include the building of: 'a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; a united, strong and self-reliant nation; a great and dynamic economy and a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens' (FRN, 2004: 5).

Specifically the National Policy on Education (NPE) (FRN, 2004) emphasized positive

attitude cultivation and character moulding focus of the Nigerian educational system for the survival of every Nigerian citizen and the society. Christian Religious Studies (CRS) and Islamic Religious Studies are two major subjects in the basic and senior school curriculum for the realization of these goals. Both are part of alternative core curriculum at the basic school level. They are also alternative electives in the Senior School Curriculum.

Students' academic performance in any school subject is an important index for measuring the effectiveness of teaching/learning and the extent to which the intended objectives of the subjects are being achieved. Rising failure rate observed in CRS

in Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) over the years has got to a peak in 2003 (Awowale, 2004; Chief Examiner's Report, 2000 & 2003). According to Okunloye (2004), students' performance in SSCE CRS from 2000 – 2003 degenerated to a worrisome dimension. About ¼ of all the candidates that sat for the examinations within the period recorded grade (F9). Also a combination of D7, E8 and F9 scorers accounted for between 59.5% - 70.8% of candidates that wrote the examinations. More details about these performance trends are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Trends of CRS Students' Performance in SSCE in CRS May/June 2000-2003

Year of SSCE	% of Passes A1-C6 levels	% of Passes D7-E8 levels	% of Passes F9 level	% of D7-F9 levels
2000	30.9%	18.7%	40.3%	59.5%
2001	29.2%	23.5%	47.3%	70.8%
2002	40.7%	29.1%	30.2%	59.3%
2003	30.2%	39.8%	30.0%	69.8%

Source: WAEC

Studies on self efficacy and perception (Fehintola & Falaye, 2011; Okunloye, 2001) have shown that students' perceptions of things around them (including school subjects) become their frame of reference and remotely control their behavior. Therefore, subjects or topics in subjects which students perceive to be difficult or unlearnable may end up being difficult even when they are simple. Accordingly, the investigation of whether CRS or component parts are difficult or simple from students' perceptual frame and associated factors may be desirable to identify their learning difficulties in the subject as a fundamental step in addressing the rising failure rate. Much more importantly, performance grades or scores have become important indices of teaching/learning effectiveness as well as yardsticks for ascertaining the degree of realization of school curriculum objectives and ultimately the goals of an educational system. Accordingly, if the well intended goals of CRS are to be achieved in the Nigerian Senior School children, their learning difficulties need to be tackled urgently. This study is a step in this direction.

Statement of the Problem

Studies on students learning difficulties or factors affecting academic performance over the years focused on other school subjects apart from CRS (Adedoyin, 1998; Geography, Adegbite, 2004,

Social Studies; Ahmed, 2002; Biology, Ibrahim, 1999; Hausa, Hassan, 1999; Islamic Studies, Nageri, 1992; Integrated Science, and Salman, 1979; Mathematics). In addition, the rising failure rate in SSCE in CRS has assumed a disturbing dimension since year 2000 when within the period 2000 – 2003 majority of candidates that sat for SSCE in CRS recorded D7, E8 and F9 grades in the subject. Whereas a minority of them scored A1 – C6 grades in the subject within the same period. This is quite worrisome, considering the core curriculum status of CRS in the basic school curriculum (Oladosu, 2010; Okunloye, 2001). In the same vein, CRS is an elective in the senior school curriculum, and also a requisite subject used for admission purposes in Law, History, Religions, Sociology and teacher education degree programmes in Nigerian universities. Therefore, rising failure rate may deny prospective candidates admission into any of their desired degree programme. This problem of rising failure rate is therefore worth investigating in order to reverse the trend.

Purpose of the Study

The study examined the perceived difficulty levels of the SSCE CRS syllabus and its associated factors. Specifically, the study focuses on:

1. identifying the perceived difficult levels of all 53 topics in the SSCE CRS syllabus;
2. determining the pattern of distribution of all

the 53 CRS topics among the three major components into which the syllabus has been sub-divided; and

3. examining the factors with which the CRS students associate their perceived difficulty levels of the 53 CRS topics.

Research Questions

The research questions raised for the study include:

1. What are the perceived difficulty levels of the 53 topics in the SSCE CRS syllabus?
2. How are the perceived difficulty levels of the 53 topics distributed among the three thematic structure of the syllabus?
3. What factors are associated with the perceived difficulty levels of the SSCE CRS syllabus topics?

Methodology

The study employed descriptive design involving survey method. A research sample of purposively selected 400 senior school (SS) students drawn from SS three CRS intact classes in 15 randomly selected senior secondary schools in Ilorin South Local Government Area participated in the study. One researcher-designed instrument

(Students Perceived Difficulty Levels of Subject Curriculum (CRS) (SPEDILOSC) was used for data collection after it was validated and subjected to reliability test. Six curriculum development experts determined face and content validity of the instrument. 50 CRS students from three senior schools outside the sample participated in reliability test of the instrument with three week interval between the first and second administration of the instrument. This yielded the value of $r = 0.60$. The instrument was considered reliable.

The researcher-design instrument was administered to 400 SS three students in 15 schools within three weeks by the researcher. However, 392 completed questionnaires were collected from the sampled schools. The data obtained from the 392 completed questionnaires were analyzed using percentage statistic to answer the three research questions raised for the study.

Research Question 1

What are students' perceived difficulty levels of the 53 topics in the CRS SSCE syllabus?

Results of students' perception of the 53 CRS SSCE syllabus topics are as shown in Tables, 2, 3 and 4.

Table 2:

Distribution of Students' Perceived Difficulty Levels of SSCE CRS Syllabus Topics (Old Testament Themes)

S/N	Topics of CRS	Difficulty Levels			Key
		Very Difficult (VD) (%)	Difficult (D) (%)	Not Difficult (ND) (%)	
OLD TESTAMENT THEMES (A)					
1	The sovereignty of God	138 (35%)	140 (36%)	114 (29%)	D
2	The covenant	95 (24.2%)	90 (22.9%)	207 (52.8%)	ND
3	Leadership	33 (8.4%)	121 (30.9%)	238 (61%)	ND
4	God's care for His people	44 (11.2%)	53 (13.5%)	295 (75.2%)	ND
5	Parental responsibility	25 (6.3%)	75 (19.1%)	292 (74.5%)	ND
6	Disobedience & consequences	68 (17.3%)	37 (9.4%)	287 (73.2%)	ND
7	A man after God's own heart	58 (14.7%)	101 (25.7%)	233 (59.4%)	ND
8	Greed and its effect	90 (22.9%)	62 (15.8%)	240 (61.2%)	ND
9	Making decisions	34 (8.7%)	143 (36.4%)	215 (54.8%)	ND
10	The supremacy of God	198 (50.5%)	154 (39.2%)	40 (10.2%)	VD
11	Religious reforms	290 (73.9%)	60 (15.3%)	42 (10.7)	VD
12	Concern for one's nation	111 (28.0%)	102 (26.0%)	179 (46%)	ND
13	Faith in God	79 (20.1%)	199 (50.7%)	114 (29.1%)	D
14	The message of God	28 (7.4%)	101 (25.7%)	263 (67.0%)	ND
15	Social justice & true religion	302 (77%)	52 (13.2%)	37 (10%)	VD
16	Divine love	65 (16.5%)	198 (50.5%)	129 (33%)	D
17	Holiness and divine call	87 (22.7%)	210 (53.3%)	95 (24%)	D
18	Punishment and hope	101 (25.8%)	149 (38%)	142 (36%)	D

Table 3:
Distribution of Students' Perceived Difficulty Level of SSCE CRS Syllabus Topics (New Testament Themes)

S/N	Topics of CRS	Difficulty Levels			Key
		Very Difficult (VD) (%)	Difficult (D) (%)	Not Difficult (ND) (%)	
NEW TESTAMENT THEMES (B)					
19	Baptism and temptation of Jesus	35 (8.9%)	52 (13.3%)	305 (78%)	ND
20	Discipleship	89 (9.4%)	51 (13%)	252 (64%)	ND
21	Miracles	37 (9.4%)	66 (16.8%)	289 (74%)	ND
22	The parables	82 (20.9%)	30 (7.7%)	280 (71%)	ND
23	Sermon on the mount	88 (22%)	29 (7.4%)	275 (70.1%)	ND
24	Mission of the disciples	92 (23.5%)	44 (11.2%)	256 (65%)	ND
25	Transfiguration	70 (17.9%)	21 (5.4%)	301 (76%)	ND
26	The triumphal entry & cleansing	63 (16.1%)	28 (7.1%)	301 (76%)	ND
27	The trials & death of Christ	39 (9.9%)	98 (25%)	154 (65%)	ND
28	The resurrection and ascension of Jesus	92 (23.5%)	29 (7.4%)	270 (69%)	ND
29	Jesus teaching about himself	38 (9.7%)	36 (9.2%)	317 (81%)	ND
30	The signs of Jesus Christ	84 (21.4%)	69 (17.6%)	317 (81%)	ND
31	Love	130 (33.2%)	42 (10.7%)	220 (56%)	ND

Table 4:
Distribution of Students' Perceived Difficulty Level of SSCE CRS Syllabus (Acts of Apostles & Pauline Epistles Themes)

S/N	Topics of CRS	Difficulty Levels			Key
		Very Difficult (VD) (%)	Difficult (D) (%)	Not Difficult (ND) (%)	
THEMES FROM ACTS OF APOSTLES AND SOME SELECTED EPISTLES OF PAUL (C)					
32	Fellowship in the early church	98 (25.0%)	16 (4.1%)	278 (71%)	ND
33	The holy spirit and the mission	54 (13.8%)	107 (27.3%)	231 (59%)	ND
34	Opposition to the gospel message	63 (16.1%)	86 (21.9%)	243 (62%)	ND
35	Mission to the gentles	200 (51%)	118 (30.1%)	74 (19%)	VD
36	Justification by faith	116 (29.6%)	88 (22.4%)	188 (48%)	ND
37	Law and grace	105 (22.0%)	102 (26.0%)	184 (47%)	ND
38	New life in Christ	28 (32.7%)	21 (5.4%)	243 (62%)	ND
39	Jesus the son of God	202 (51.5%)	186 (47.4%)	43 (1.0%)	VD
40	Humility	22 (5.6%)	92 (23.5%)	278 (71%)	ND
41	Forgiveness	79 (20.2%)	195 (49.7%)	118 (30%)	D
42	Spiritual gifts	130 (33.2%)	93 (23.7%)	169 (43%)	ND
43	Christian giving	45 (11.5%)	84 (21.4%)	263 (67%)	ND
44	Civic responsibility	67 (17.1%)	70 (17.9%)	255 (65%)	ND
45	Dignity of labour	115 (29.3%)	54 (13.8%)	223 (57%)	ND
46	The family	18 (4.6%)	131 (33.4%)	243 (62%)	ND
47	The second coming	160 (40.8%)	161 (41.1%)	71 (18%)	D
48	Resurrection	89 (22.7%)	185 (47.2%)	118 (30.1%)	D
49	Faith & work	92 (23.5%)	92 (23.5%)	208 (53%)	ND

Key: VD = very difficult, D = difficult, ND = not difficult From Tables 2, 3 and 4, 5 topics (or 9.4%) of the syllables were perceived to be very difficult. 8 topics (or 15.1%) were perceived to be difficult part of the syllabus, while 40 topics (or 75.5%) were perceived to be simple component of the syllabus. On the whole, 13 topics (or 24.5%) of the 53 topics in the syllabus were problematic to student as against 40 topics (or 75.5%) that were not problematic to them for learning.

Research Question 2

How are the perceived difficulty levels of the 53 topics distributed among the three thematic structure of the syllabus?

The distribution of the topics among the three major thematic components of the syllabus from the perceptual frame of the students is as shown in Table 5.

Table 5:

Thematic Distribution of Students' Perceived Difficulty levels of SSCE CRS Syllabus Topics

Syllabus Themes	Difficulty Levels			Total No. of Topics	Remarks
	Very Difficult Topics (No. & %)	Difficult Topics (No. & %)	Not Difficult Topics (No. & %)		
Old Testament	3 (16.5%)	5 (27.5%)	12 (66.0%)	18	Most difficult
New Testament	Nil (0%)	Nil (0%)	13 (100%)	13	Not difficult
Acts of Apostles & Pauline Epistles	2 (9.0%)	3 (13.6%)	17 (77.4%)	22	Difficult
Total	5 (9.4%)	8 (15.1%)	42 (75.5%)	53	

Results of the thematic distribution of students' perceived difficulty levels of the syllabus topics shown in Table 5 reveals that the Old Testament themes have 8 (or 44%) and 12 (or 66%) very difficult or difficult and not difficult topics respectively. The New Testament themes have 13 (or 100%) not difficult topics. The Acts of Apostles and Pauline Epistles themes have 5 (or 22.6%) and 17 (or 77.4%) very difficult or difficult and not difficult topics respectively. On the whole, the student perceived the Old Testament themes most difficult, while the Acts of Apostles and Pauline Epistle and New Testament theme were perceived to be difficult and not difficult respectively.

Research Question 3

What are the factors associated with the perceived difficulty levels of the SSCE CRS syllabus topics?

Table 6 presents the students' perceived associated factors with their perceived difficulty levels of the SSCE CRS syllabus topics.

Table 6:
Frequently Distribution of Students' Perceived Associated Factors with Perceived Difficulty Levels of SSCE CRS syllabus Topics

	Description of Perceiver's Factor	No. & % of Associated Factor	No. & % of Non-associated Factor	Overall Ranking of Perceived Factor
1	Abstractness of topics	344 (87.7%)	48 (12.3%)	1 st order
2	Historical topics	275 (70.2%)	117 (29.8%)	2 nd order
3	Non-use of RSU Bible	259 (66.1%)	113 (33.9%)	3 rd order
4	Biblical character	244 (62.2%)	148 (37.7%)	4 th order
5	Lack of textbooks	231 (59%)	161 (41%)	5 th order
6	Non-availability of Teaching/Learning materials	208 (53.1%)	184 (46.9%)	6 th order
7	Teaching strategies	191 (48.7%)	201 (51.3%)	7 th order
8	Personal dislike of CRS	142 (36.2%)	250 (63.8%)	8 th order
9	Personal dislike of the teacher	142 (36.2%)	250 (63.8%)	8 th order
10	Attractiveness of topics	11 (23.2%)	301 (76.8%)	9 th order

Table 6 shows that 10 factors are associated with the perceived difficulty levels of topics in ascending order of strength of association from 9th to 1st order factor. Topics characterized by high level of abstractness and historical are most difficult to understand by students. The teacher-related factors ranked very low as associated factors in their perceived difficulty levels of topics (7th and 8th order respectively). Instructional material-related factors are moderately associated

with how difficult the syllabus topics were. These ranked 3rd, 5th and 6th respectively in their perception. Accordingly, the 10 ranked factors can be classified as subject-related, student-related, instructional material-related and teacher-related factors.

Discussion of Findings

From the results of the data analysis it is evident that a greater proportion of the SSCE CRS syllabus topics are not difficult, while a smaller proportion is either very difficult or difficult. Also, topics under the Old Testament, Acts of Apostles and Pauline Epistles and New Testament themes were perceived to be most difficult, difficult and not difficult respectively. In addition, 10 factors were associated by the students with the perceived difficulty levels of 53 topics ranging from topics of high level abstractness or historical subject matters to personal dislike for CRS teacher or attractiveness of the topics. The observed failure rate SSCE CRE in the face of small proportion of the syllabus topics perceived to be difficult or very difficult by

students points to the nature of subject as a dominant factor influencing students' academic achievement as similarly observed by Okunloye (2004, 2009). Also, the small proportion of the perceived difficult topics that seems to have accounted for the observed failure rate is consistent with the position of mastery learning on the possibility of a set of topics of whatever magnitude in a sequence of other schematized topics to constitute serious problems in learning the holistic component in a given scheme of work (Hyman & Cohen, 1979).

The high ranking of the factors of abstractness and historical nature of topics as first and second order associated factors with students' perceived difficult topics also agrees with Awowale (2004) on the observed subject-related and student-related causes of learning difficulties in Junior School CRS. This prominence of student-related factor as a cause of the perceived difficulty levels is also in agreement with Olusola and Falaye (2011) who observed the significance influence of students' socio-personal factors, including self-efficacy as predictors of academic performance. Although the instructional material related factors is moderately associated to be influencing the learnability of CRS topics, the fact that the teacher is the most important human resource that determines what, when and how to use other instructional resources implicitly points to the teacher factor as a major determinants of teaching-learning effectiveness. Therefore, the ranking of the teacher-related factors as 7th and 8th order factors do not in any way undermine the potency of the teacher factor in teaching-learning effectiveness and academic achievement. Indeed, as observed by Okonkwo (2002) the subject teacher is the most important facilitator of learning who is equipped as a problem-solver in learning difficulties through the use of simplified, interest sustaining and learning motivating strategies. Therefore, the subject-related, student-related, instructional resources and teacher-related problems should be tackled to make the entire CRS syllabus to learn and enhance students' performance.

Conclusion

All topics of CRS syllabus can be made learnable through effective syllabus coverage using simplified and learning motivating strategies by CRS teachers. When these are done, students will be greatly assisted to effectively learn every topic in the syllabus and the likelihood of reversing the

prevailing trend of failure rate will be guaranteed.

Implications

All impediments to effective teaching and learning of SSCE CRS syllabus topics must be tackled in all fronts to reverse the failure rate in the subject. The components of the syllabus posing problems to the students deserve special attention by teachers through simplified and learner-centred teaching strategies.

Recommendations

In order to address the issues raised in this study regarding the difficulty levels of the SSCE CRS syllabus topics and associated factors, the following measures are suggested:

1. All topics in the syllabus should be learnable to students by the CRS teachers.
2. Teachers of CRS should pay special attention to the students' perceived areas of difficulty in the syllabus and use teaching strategies that will make them simple to learn.
3. Appropriate career counselling should be given to the CRS students to develop interest in CRS and specific CRS topics they perceived to be uninteresting.
4. Students should use the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and be assisted by CRS teacher to like the CRS teacher, and some perceived difficult topics as well as develop self-confidence in learning all topics of CRS.

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