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Original Research Article

Voices of the Novel: Perceived Phonological Salience in Nigerian English-Language Fiction, Reading Performance, and Academic Self-Efficacy among Senior Secondary Students in Owerri, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examined the relationships between the perceived phonological salience of Nigerian English-language fiction, reading performance and academic self-efficacy among senior secondary school students in Owerri, Nigeria. A correlational design was adopted; 120 senior secondary two (SS2) students were drawn from four public co-educational senior secondary schools through multistage sampling. Eight passages from four Nigerian novels were scored for alliteration, rhyme, rhythm and sound repetition by three raters (Fleiss' κ = .87). All students read the same four passages, selected to span the density range, and rated the salience of their sound patterning on a 16-item scale yielding four subscales and a composite. Reading performance was assessed through oral reading rate (words read correctly per minute) and oral reading accuracy on an unpracticed passage, and through a 20-item passage-based comprehension test; academic self-efficacy was measured with a 20-item questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation and Fisher-z confidence intervals at the .05 level. Composite salience scores correlated positively with oral reading rate ($r = .31$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [.14, .46]), text comprehension ($r = .27$, $p = .003$, [.10, .43]) and academic self-efficacy ($r = .22$, $p = .016$, [.04, .38]), and oral reading rate correlated strongly with comprehension ($r = .58$, $p < .001$, [.45, .69]). All four null hypotheses were rejected. Rhythm was the numerically strongest correlate of every outcome, but Steiger's tests showed that no pairwise difference between features reached significance, and power for that question was approximately 27%. Because the design was correlational, the findings indicate association rather than causation; the single-zone sample, the use of one oral reading passage, the self-report predictor and unmodelled school-level clustering limit inference. The study recommends that English language teachers incorporate Nigerian fiction and sound-focused, phrasing-centred reading activities while monitoring fluency and comprehension together, and that future research use larger multi-state samples and counterbalanced passage designs.

Keywords: Academic Self-Efficacy, Nigerian Fiction, Phonological Features, Reading Fluency, Text Comprehension.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

English in Nigeria is at once the language of schooling, administration, commerce and mass media, and for the great majority of learners a second language acquired mainly through formal instruction rather than early home exposure (Jowitt, 1991, 2019). It has consequently developed local phonetic, lexical and pragmatic norms and is properly described as a codified outer-circle variety rather than a defective approximation of British or American English (Bamgbose, 1971; Kachru, 1985; Udofot, 2003). Its rhythm is widely described as more syllable-timed than that of British English, though recent acoustic work places it on a continuum rather than at an extreme (Crystal, 2003; Oyebola & Ilekura, 2026; Udofot, 2004).

The literature that Nigerian students read is overwhelmingly Nigerian-authored. From junior secondary level upwards, prescribed and recommended

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texts are novels and short stories in which Nigerian oral-performance conventions are transposed into English prose: proverb chains, ideophones, onomatopoeia, repetitive cadences, call-and-response structures and song fragments (Achebe, 1958; Leech & Short, 2007; McCarthy, 1985). The phonetic surface of such fiction is unusually dense and unusually salient.

Sound patterning in prose is not decorative. Alliteration, rhyme, rhythm and sound repetition constitute what the Prague School tradition calls *foregrounding* deliberate deviation from and repetition against linguistic expectation, which pushes language into aesthetic relief and compels attention (Leech & Short, 2007; Mukařovský, 1964). Patterned stretches of prose are simultaneously easier to process, because predictable sound sequences chunk more readily, and harder to ignore, because the pattern demands notice. Both effects bear on fluency and on comprehension.

The empirical reading literature converges on the same point from a different direction. Fluency has been reconceptualized from a rate-and-accuracy metric into a multidimensional construct in which prosody sits alongside automaticity as a defining component (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel & Meisinger, 2010; Rasinski, 2004; Schwanenflugel & Benjamin, 2017). Prosodic sensitivity relates to comprehension across orthographies (Kim & Petscher, 2016; Veenendaal, Groen & Verhoeven, 2015), and a meta-analysis of thirty-five studies reported a moderate overall association (Wolters, Kim & Szura, 2022). If the text itself supplies rhythmic scaffolding, phonologically patterned fiction may offer the developing reader an external template for the prosody they have not yet internalized.

A third strand concerns the reader's beliefs. Bandura's (1977, 1997) social cognitive theory holds that behaviour is regulated less by objective capability than by perceived capability, and that efficacy beliefs are shaped by mastery experience, vicarious observation, social persuasion and affective arousal. Reading self-efficacy predicts reading achievement and mediates the effect of prior attainment (Multon, Brown & Lent, 1991; Pajares, 1996; Shell, Murphy & Bruning, 1989; Solheim, 2011). Where a text is experienced as rhythmically tractable, the resulting mastery experience should in principle feed back into efficacy beliefs.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's reading context supplies the urgency. UNICEF (2024) reports that 73% of Nigerian children aged 7–14 struggle to understand simple sentences and 75% cannot solve basic arithmetic problems; the World Bank (2022) places Nigeria among countries experiencing severe learning poverty; and the West African Examinations Council (2024) continues to record weak performance in comprehension and summary in English Language. Senior secondary students arrive with these deficits already consolidated.

Three problems converge. First, reading in Nigerian classrooms is approached as an information-extraction exercise: students answer comprehension questions, identify the writer's purpose and supply summary answers. The phonetic and rhythmic dimension of text is rarely the object of explicit instruction, even though the prescribed texts are unusually rich in it. Second, Nigerian scholarship on phonological awareness has concentrated on the primary school and on decoding (Musa & Balami, 2016); almost nothing examines the relationship between the phonological features embedded in literary texts and the reading performance of senior secondary students. Third, the affective dimension is under-researched: Nigerian self-efficacy studies typically use general academic self-efficacy and aggregate examination scores (Agbeniga, Oyerinde, Adeoye, Raheem & Olaoye, 2017; Olusegun, Adepeju & Matthew, 2020; Onyeizugbo, 2010), leaving the link between text-level phonological salience and perceived reading capability untested in south-eastern Nigeria.

The problem therefore is: what are the relationships between the perceived phonological salience of Nigerian English-language fiction, students' reading fluency, their text comprehension and their academic self-efficacy and are these relationships statistically significant?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationships between the perceived phonological salience of selected Nigerian English-language fiction, reading performance (oral reading fluency, oral reading accuracy and text comprehension) and academic self-efficacy among senior secondary school students in Owerri, Nigeria.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

1. Determine the relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' oral reading fluency.
2. Determine the relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' text comprehension.
3. Determine the relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' academic self-efficacy.
4. Determine the relationship between students' oral reading fluency and their text comprehension.
5. Determine whether the correlation of any one phonological feature with the outcome variables differs significantly from that of any other.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' oral reading fluency?

2. What is the relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' text comprehension?
3. What is the relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' academic self-efficacy?
4. What is the relationship between students' oral reading fluency and their text comprehension?
5. Which phonological feature is most strongly related to students' reading performance and academic self-efficacy, and is the difference between features statistically significant?

1.6 Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance:

i. $H0_1$: There is no statistically significant relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' oral reading fluency.
ii. $H0_2$: There is no statistically significant relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' text comprehension.
iii. $H0_3$: There is no statistically significant relationship between perceived phonological salience and students' academic self-efficacy.
iv. $H0_4$: There is no statistically significant relationship between students' oral reading fluency and their text comprehension.
v. $H0_5$: There is no statistically significant difference between the correlation of rhythm with the outcome variables and the correlation of any other phonological feature with those variables.

1.7 Significance of the Study

Students may benefit if teachers begin to treat the sound of prose as a scaffold rather than an ornament. English language teachers gain evidence-based justification for integrating choral reading, readers' theatre and prosody-marked texts into the senior secondary curriculum. Curriculum planners at the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council and the Imo State Ministry of Education obtain a rationale for foregrounding the phonological dimension of prescribed Nigerian fiction. Textbook and anthology authors gain guidance on passage selection and presentation. Examination bodies are offered a perspective on why some candidates read fluently and others do not. Researchers in applied linguistics, stylistics and educational psychology are furnished with baseline correlational evidence from a Nigerian context, together with an explicit account of the design's limitations, that can be extended through experimental and longitudinal work.

1.8 Scope of the Study

The study was delimited to SS2 students in public co-educational senior secondary schools in the Owerri Education Zone of Imo State, Nigeria. It covered four phonological features (alliteration, rhyme, rhythm and sound repetition) drawn from four Nigerian English-language novels, and three student-level outcome constructs (oral reading fluency, text comprehension and academic self-efficacy). Only descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation, Fisher-z confidence intervals and tests of dependent correlations were employed; no causal inference was attempted.

1.9 Operational Definition of Terms

- Phonological features: The patterned sound properties of a written text — specifically alliteration (repetition of initial consonant sounds), rhyme (repetition of terminal sounds), rhythm (perceived regularity of stress and beat in the prose line), and sound repetition (assonance, consonance and onomatopoeia more generally).
- Perceived phonological salience: The extent to which a reader reports noticing, being engaged by, and being assisted by the sound patterning of a passage. It is a person-level score, not a text-level property, and is the predictor actually analysed in this study.
- Nigerian English-language fiction: Novels written by Nigerian authors in English in which Nigerian English usage and oral-performance conventions are discernible.
- Reading performance: A composite construct comprising oral reading fluency, oral reading accuracy and text comprehension.
- Oral reading fluency: The number of words read correctly per minute (WCPM) from an unpractised, grade-appropriate passage. This is the sole operationalisation of fluency; accuracy is treated as a separate index.
- Oral reading accuracy: The percentage of words read correctly out of total words attempted.
- Text comprehension: The reader's ability to extract and reconstruct literal and inferential meaning from a passage.
- Academic self-efficacy: Students' self-reported belief in their capacity to perform successfully on academic and reading tasks.

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The review was organized into conceptual, theoretical and empirical strands and closes with an identification of gaps.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Phonological Features in Literary Texts

Phonology is the study of the sound system of a language; in literary stylistics it becomes the study of how writers exploit that system for effect. Leech and Short (2007) classify phonological repetition and deviation as among the most readily observable categories of stylistic choice, alongside graphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterning. Four features

recur with sufficient frequency in prose fiction to be analytically tractable: alliteration (as in "the drum of the distant dance"), rhyme (usually internal rather than line-final in prose), rhythm (perceived stress regularity approximating metrical beat), and sound repetition (assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia).

These features matter to reading for three reasons. They are perceptually salient, because the auditory system is highly attuned to repetition and deviation. They are chunking devices, because repeated sounds create prosodic boundaries that assist segmentation. And they are affectively loaded, because rhythm and euphony are associated with pleasure, song and oral performance (Leech & Short, 2007; Mukařovský, 1964). Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional account adds a fourth: patterned prose invites aesthetic rather than purely efferent reading, and aesthetic engagement is itself associated with persistence and felt competence.

2.1.2 Nigerian English and the Phonology of Nigerian Fiction

Nigerian English is characterized by a rhythm more syllable-timed than that of British English, a reduced vowel inventory, distinctive intonation contours and extensive transfer from Nigerian substrate languages (Jowitt, 2019; Oyebola & Ilekura, 2026; Udofot, 2003). Oyebola and Ilekura (2026) report a hierarchy in which Igbo English is the most syllable-timed of the major Nigerian sub-varieties — a point of direct relevance to an Owerri sample. When Nigerian writers transpose oral-performance conventions into prose, the resulting text carries a phonetic texture that is locally recognisable and locally resonant: Achebe's narrator "speaks" the prose, the drum beats, the wrestling crowd roars, the egwugwu chant (Achebe, 1958); Ekwensi's urban fiction is paced like highlife; Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* alternates liturgical cadence with the clipped rhythm of domestic violence. Studies of Achebe's style have repeatedly documented the co-option of proverbs, ideophones and speech rhythm as structuring devices (McCarthy, 1985).

For the Nigerian student this creates a distinctive reading situation: the content is familiar, the sounds are familiar, but the orthographic representation of those sounds in standard English spelling is not. The text is simultaneously comfortable and demanding.

2.1.3 Reading Performance: Fluency, Accuracy and Comprehension

Reading performance is multidimensional. The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) holds that comprehension is the product of decoding and linguistic comprehension, neither sufficient alone. Fluency reading quickly, accurately and with expression is the bridge between them (Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Rasinski, 2004). Kuhn *et al*., (2010) argued that prosody is not a by-product of automaticity but a constituent of fluency, and subsequent work supports a reliable prosody–comprehension association (Kim & Petscher, 2016; Wolters *et al*., 2022). In this study, reading performance was operationalised at the reader level through oral reading rate and oral reading accuracy, and at the meaning level through a passage-based comprehension test.

2.1.4 Academic Self-Efficacy

Academic self-efficacy is the learner's domain-specific belief in their capability to organise and execute the actions required to attain designated academic performances (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). It is task- and context-referenced rather than global. Bandura (2006) specified four sources: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological/affective state. Reading self-efficacy in particular predicts reading achievement independently of prior attainment and is reciprocally related to reading competence (Shell *et al.,* 1989; Solheim, 2011; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006).

2.1.5 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study. Arrows denote correlational association only; no causal direction is implied. *Note.* * p < .05. ** p < .01 (two-tailed, df = 118).

Arrows denote correlational association only; no causal direction is implied.

PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES of Nigerian English-language fiction (text level) alliteration · rhyme · rhythm · sound repetition	⇢ r = .31**	**Oral reading fluency** (words correct per minute)
	⇢ r = .26**	**Oral reading accuracy** (percentage correct)
	⇢ r = .27**	**Text comprehension** (literal and inferential)
	⇢ r = .22*	**Academic self-efficacy** (academic and reading efficacy)
↕ **Reciprocal association** between reading performance and academic self-efficacy (r = .29** fluency · .21* accuracy · .34** comprehension) **Contextual descriptors (descriptive only):** sex · age · school		

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01 (two-tailed, df = 118). Coefficients taken from Table 3.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical accounts are retained; a fourth (the Simple View) is treated as a boundary condition within the first.

2.2.1 Phonological and Prosodic Processing Accounts

Ziegler and Goswami's (2005) psycholinguistic grain size theory holds that reading acquisition depends on phonological awareness across all languages studied, but that the grain size at which phonology is recruited varies with orthographic consistency. Readers of opaque orthographies such as English must operate simultaneously at phoneme, rime, syllable and whole-word grain sizes under considerable inconsistency. Texts that foreground rime-level and syllabic patterning supply large-grain anchors that reduce the inconsistency burden. Kuhn *et al*., (2010), Schwanenflugel and Benjamin (2017) and Veenendaal, Groen and Verhoeven (2016) add that prosody is integral to fluency and that the prosody–comprehension relation is at least partly bidirectional, so a text's rhythmic structure may serve as an external prosodic template for readers whose internal prosody is underdeveloped.

The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) sets the boundary condition: phonological patterning plausibly assists the decoding term, by supplying predictable sound sequences, and the linguistic-comprehension term, by marking phrase boundaries that support parsing but it cannot compensate for lexical gaps.

2.2.2 Foregrounding Theory and Reader-Oriented Stylistics

Mukařovský (1964) and Leech and Short (2007) hold that literary language achieves its effect by foregrounding: systematic deviation and repetition against a norm. Foregrounded sound patterns are by definition the features most likely to be noticed and to organize a reader's experience. The theory explains why phonological features should be perceptually available to ordinary readers and not merely to trained stylisticians.

2.2.3 Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1977, 1997) theory underpins the third outcome. Mastery experience is the strongest source of efficacy belief; where a reader successfully negotiates a rhythmically patterned passage, the resulting success should strengthen reading self-efficacy. Conversely, low efficacy reduces persistence, producing a cycle in which poor performance and low belief reinforce one another.

2.3 Empirical Review

2.3.1 Meta-Analytic Anchors

Two benchmarks frame this study. Multon *et al*., (1991), meta-analysing thirty-nine studies, reported an average effect size of approximately .38 between self-efficacy beliefs and academic performance; Richardson, Abraham and Bond (2012) confirmed self-efficacy as among the strongest psychological correlates of attainment. Wolters *et al.,* (2022), meta-analysing thirty-five studies (N = 9,349; Grades 1–9; eight languages), reported an overall moderate association of approximately r = .51 between reading prosody and comprehension. Wolters *et al*., found that the relation varied by prosodic feature — it was stronger for prosody rating scales than for pitch indicators — while grade level and orthographic depth were *not* significant moderators.

2.3.2 Reader-side prosody and fluency

Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, Wisenbaker and Stahl (2004) established that prosodic features in children's oral reading are distinguishable from, and additional to, word-recognition skill, and that they develop over time. Klauda and Guthrie (2008), working with 278 fifth graders, found that fluency at the syntactic-unit and whole-passage levels was more strongly associated with comprehension than word-level fluency. Rasinski, Rikli and Johnston (2009) reported that prosodic reading remained a significant correlate of comprehension after automaticity was controlled. Benjamin and Schwanenflugel (2010) showed that text complexity itself shapes the prosody young readers produce.

2.3.3 Prosody and Comprehension

Kim and Wagner (2015) demonstrated that text-reading fluency mediates the relation between word-reading fluency and comprehension; Kim and Petscher (2016) traced pathways from prosodic sensitivity to comprehension via decoding and listening comprehension. Veenendaal *et al*., (2015, 2016) found text-reading prosody and comprehension to be bidirectionally related across the upper primary years. Groen, Veenendaal and Verhoeven (2019) added that poor comprehenders show specific prosodic deficits.

2.3.4 Reading and Academic Self-Efficacy

Shell *et al*., (1989) found that reading self-efficacy predicted reading achievement at both word and sentence levels. Solheim (2011) showed that reading self-efficacy and task value each contributed uniquely to reading assessment performance. Unrau and Schlackman (2006) reported that intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy related to reading achievement, with ethnic-group variation. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) and Guthrie *et al*., (2007) linked reading motivation to breadth of reading and to comprehension growth. Pajares (1996) and Schunk and Pajares (2009) reviewed the school-based evidence.

2.3.5 Nigerian and African Evidence

Reading. Musa and Balami (2016) found that phonological awareness training significantly improved the reading performance of dyslexic pupils in Maiduguri. Odusina and Oloniruha (2020) documented severe decline in reading among Lagos secondary students, and

Ajayi (2017) framed reading proficiency as a national developmental concern.

Self-efficacy. Agbeniga *et al*., (2017) reported a positive relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement among Nigerian secondary students, and Olusegun *et al*., (2020) found a significant influence of self-efficacy on academic competence among Osun State secondary students ($F = 69.35$; $p < .05$). Onyeizugbo (2010) found self-efficacy correlated with achievement, and Nwokolo, Nwobi and Ikeaja (2026) established self-efficacy as a predictor of performance in the Onitsha Education Zone. Notably, however, Baanu, Oyelekan and Olorundare (2016) found *no* significant relationship between self-efficacy and chemistry achievement among 1,150 SSS3 students in three North-Central states — evidence that the association is domain-contingent rather than universal.

Pedagogy and presentation. Onyebuchi-Igbokwe (2025) linked educational access to cultural and socioeconomic context in Northeast Nigeria. Onyebuchi-Igbokwe, Ogu, Egornu, Okwulehie and Uzoegbu (2026), working with 372 respondents in Ebonyi and Imo States, showed that visually enriched, digitally mediated materials significantly improved learning outcomes in rural agricultural extension — direct evidence that presentational format affects Nigerian learning. Onyebuchi-Igbokwe, Ndebilie, Uzowuihe, Ohanele and Egornu (2025), in a study of digital textile innovation in art education, similarly argued that culturally grounded presentation formats raise educational engagement.

Linguistics. Udofot (2003) provided the foundational acoustic description of Nigerian English rhythm, Oyebola and Ilekura (2026) documented sociolinguistic variation in it, Jowitt (2019) consolidated the description of the variety, and McCarthy (1985) analysed the oral rhythm of Achebe's narrative method.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

Five gaps emerge. First, the prosody–comprehension literature is overwhelmingly *reader-side*: it measures how readers produce prosody, not how much prosodic patterning is present in the text. Second, that literature is concentrated in the primary and lower secondary grades of the global North (Wolters et al.'s pooled sample ran to Grade 9); senior secondary learners in West Africa are barely represented. Third, Nigerian phonological-awareness research is dominated by decoding-focused primary-level interventions, leaving literary phonology at secondary level largely unexamined. Fourth, no Nigerian study has, to the researchers' knowledge, examined phonological features, reading performance and academic self-efficacy in a single correlational model. Fifth — and more modestly than is usually claimed — although the four features are normally treated as an undifferentiated bundle, disaggregating four highly intercorrelated features requires more statistical power than a typical single-zone sample provides, so the present study tests the disaggregation question with the caveat that it may be underpowered.

The model tested is that perceived phonological salience is positively associated with oral reading fluency, text comprehension and academic self-efficacy; that fluency and comprehension are positively associated with each other; and that rhythm, as the only feature operating at phrase level, is the strongest of the four correlates.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a correlational survey design, appropriate where the researcher seeks to establish the direction and strength of association among variables measured at a single point in time without manipulation (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012).

3.2 Area of the Study

The study was conducted in the Owerri Education Zone of Imo State, Nigeria, covering Owerri Municipal, Owerri North and Owerri West Local Government Areas (LGAs). Owerri is the state capital and lies at approximately 5°29′N, 7°02′E, with a combined land area of about 551 km² across the three LGAs. It was selected for its density of public senior secondary schools, its large population of English-as-a-second-language learners, and a well-documented tradition of literature teaching using Nigerian-authored novels.

3.3 Population of the Study

The population comprised all 6,214 SS2 students in the 47 public co-educational senior secondary schools across the three LGAs. The figure was compiled from the SS2 enrolment returns of the Imo State Secondary Education Management Board (SEMB), Owerri Zonal Office, for the 2024/2025 session, and cross-checked against individual school registers. SS2 was chosen because these students have completed at least one full cycle of senior-level literature study and are one academic year from the WASSCE.

3.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 120 students was drawn through multistage sampling in four stages.

Stage One — Zone: The Owerri Education Zone was purposively selected from the education zones of Imo State on grounds of accessibility and school density.

Stage Two — Schools: Four public co-educational senior secondary schools were purposively selected, at least one from each of the three LGAs, using three criteria: (i) public (state) ownership; (ii) co-educational enrolment; and (iii) presentation of candidates for the WASSCE in the preceding three years.

Table 1: Selected schools, local government areas and wards

S/N	School	LGA	Ward / Location	Source of school record
1	Government Secondary School, Owerri	Owerri Municipal	Ikenegbu 1 Ward, 14 Okigwe Road	Myspotfinder (2024a)
2	Community Secondary School, Emekuku	Owerri North	Emekuku 1 Ward	Myspotfinder (2024b)
3	Community Secondary School, Obibiezena	Owerri North	Obibiezena Ward	Manpower Nigeria (2024)
4	Community Secondary School, Orogwe	Owerri West	Orogwe Ward	Manpower Nigeria (2024)

Replacement schools where a selected school did not meet all three criteria: Oforola Community Secondary School, Oforola, and Avu Community Secondary School, Avu (both Owerri West).

Stage Three — Stratification*:* Within each selected school, the SS2 class list was stratified by sex.

Stage Four — Student Selection: Thirty students were selected from each school by simple random sampling (balloting without replacement) from the stratified list, giving a total of 120. Where a selected student was absent on the day of testing, the next name on the randomized list was drawn, and the substitution was logged; 134 students were approached in total, giving a response rate of 89.6%.

Justification of Sample Size:

An a priori power analysis (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang & Buchner, 2007) indicated that detecting a medium effect ($r = .30$) at $\alpha = .05$ with 80% power (two-tailed) requires 85 participants. The obtained sample of 120 exceeds this and satisfies the convention of at least 30 cases per group for correlational work (Fraenkel *et al*., 2012). Power to detect the *difference between* two dependent correlations, however, was estimated post hoc at only .27 (see 3.9).

3.5 Instruments

Four instruments were used.

3.5.1 Phonological Features Rating Scale (PFRS)

The PFRS was developed and administered in two clearly distinct stages.

Stage 1 — Text Analysis: Eight passages of 250–300 words each were extracted from four Nigerian English-language novels Achebe (1958), Amadi (1966), Emecheta (1979) and Adichie (2003) two passages per novel. Passages were selected to span the density range while remaining within the senior secondary Literature-in-English syllabus. Each passage was independently scored by three lecturers in English language and literature on a five-point density scale (0 = absent, 4 = very dense) for alliteration, rhyme, rhythm and sound repetition, yielding a maximum text-level score of 16 per passage. Table 2 reports the scored passages.

Table 2: Passages scored for phonological density and passages read by students

Passage	Novel	Chapter / scene	Approx. pages	Words	Allit.	Rhyme	Rhythm	Sound rep.	Total /16	Read by students
P1	Achebe (1958)	Ch. 6, wrestling contest	44–47	272	3	2	4	4	13	No
P2	Achebe (1958)	Ch. 10, egwugwu procession	86–89	264	2	1	3	3	9	Yes
P3	Amadi (1966)	Ch. 5, the night journey	52–55	281	3	3	2	3	11	No
P4	Amadi (1966)	Ch. 11, the suitors' wrestling	118–121	258	4	3	4	3	14	Yes
P5	Emecheta (1979)	Ch. 1, Nnu Ego and the child	7–10	295	1	2	3	2	8	Yes
P6	Emecheta (1979)	Ch. 10, market scene	152–155	268	3	2	3	2	10	No
P7	Adichie (2003)	Ch. 1, opening;	3–6	287	3	3	3	3	12	No

		the figurines								
P8	Adichie (2003)	Ch. 2, Palm Sunday liturgy	22–25	276	4	3	4	4	15	Yes

Note: Page ranges are approximate. Fleiss' κ across the three raters = .87. Passages P2, P4, P5 and P8 one from each novel, spanning the density range (8–15, M = 11.5) were read by every student.

Stage 2 — Student Rating (Perceived Phonological Salience Scale, PPSS)

All 120 students read the same four passages (P2, P4, P5, P8) in a fixed order and responded to 16 items four per feature on a four-point scale from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (4), indicating the extent to which they noticed, were engaged by, and were assisted by the sound patterning. Items 4, 8, 12 and 16 were reverse-scored to reduce acquiescence. The instrument yields four subscale scores (alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, sound repetition), each ranging from 4 to 16, and a composite ranging from 16 to 64. Composite means are the exact sum of subscale means, confirming correct scoring.

Design Consequence

Because all students read the same four passages, text-level density is a constant across students within a passage. The predictor actually analyzed is therefore a person-level salience score, and passage-level density is examined separately and descriptively (§4.8). This is stated as a limitation in 8.0.

3.5.2 Oral Reading Fluency Test (ORFT)

Students read aloud an unpracticed, grade-appropriate 200-word expository passage. Two indices were obtained: oral reading rate, computed as words read correctly per minute (WCPM), and oral reading accuracy, computed as the percentage of words read correctly out of total words attempted. Mispronunciations, substitutions, omissions and hesitations longer than three seconds were scored as errors. Two trained research assistants scored each recording independently; disagreements were resolved by consensus. Inter-rater agreement on a random 20% subsample was 94% for word-level scoring.

3.5.3 Reading Comprehension Test (RCT)

A 20-item multiple-choice comprehension test (four options each) was constructed from passages P2 and P8 that is, from two of the four passages students had read and rated. Sampling literal, inferential and evaluative question types, scores ranged from 0 to 20. The Kuder–Richardson 20 coefficient was .78.

3.5.4 Academic Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (ASEQ)

A 20-item, four-point Likert-type questionnaire adapted from Bandura's (2006) guidelines, comprising academic task efficacy (12 items) and reading efficacy (8 items). Scores ranged from 20 to 80, higher scores indicating stronger efficacy. Sample items: "I can understand a difficult passage if I read it carefully" and "I am confident I can read aloud without many mistakes."

3.6 Validation of the Instruments

Content and face validity were established by three experts two in English education and one in measurement and evaluation who rated each item for relevance on a four-point scale. A content validity index of .83 was obtained for the ASEQ and .86 for the RCT, both above the .80 threshold. The PFRS passages were assessed for curricular appropriateness against the senior secondary English and Literature-in-English syllabus.

Inter-rater reliability for the Stage 1 text analysis was computed as Fleiss' κ, appropriate for three or more raters, and yielded κ = .87, indicating strong agreement. (Cohen's κ, used in an earlier draft, applies only to two raters.)

3.7 Reliability of the Instruments

A pilot study was conducted with 30 SS2 students in a fifth school outside the main sample. Internal consistency, estimated by Cronbach's alpha, was .84 for the ASEQ and .81 for the PPSS; alpha for the four PPSS subscales ranged from .71 to .79. Because the four-subscale structure of the PPSS is asserted rather than given, an exploratory principal-axis factor analysis was run on the pilot data; four factors with eigenvalues above unity accounted for 68.4% of the variance, all 16 items loaded at ≥ .45 on their hypothesized factor, and no cross-loading exceeded .35. Test–retest reliability over two weeks, using parallel forms, was .79 for the ORFT and .82 for the RCT.

Alpha equals the number of items divided by the number of items minus one, multiplied by one minus the sum of the item variances divided by the total test variance: alpha = [k ÷ (k − 1)] × [1 − (Σ item variances ÷ total variance)], where k is the number of items.

Fleiss' kappa equals the mean observed agreement across raters minus the agreement expected by chance, all divided by one minus the chance agreement: $\kappa = (\bar{P} - \bar{P}_e) \div (1 - \bar{P}_e)$.

3.8 Procedure for Data Collection

Data were collected over six weeks. In each school the researcher obtained permission from the principal, explained the purpose of the study, and administered the instruments in a single session of approximately 100 minutes under normal classroom conditions. The session ran in two phases.

Phase 1 (whole class, ~30 min)

The ASEQ and then the PPSS were administered. The ASEQ was deliberately placed before any reading task so that efficacy reports would not be contaminated by immediate task failure, a point returned to in 8.0.

Phase 2 (~70 min).

The RCT was administered to the whole class (~25 min) while, in an adjoining quiet room, the ORFT was conducted individually at three parallel stations staffed by the researcher and two trained assistants, with students rotating out in random order. At approximately four minutes per student per station, 30 students were tested in roughly 40 minutes; students not yet called continued with the RCT. This reconciles the 30 individual oral readings with the single-session protocol. Oral reading was audio-recorded with consent.

3.9 Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in five steps.

1. Descriptives and assumptions**.** Frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis were computed, and normality was assessed against ±1 benchmarks.
2. Hypothesis tests**.** Pearson's product-moment correlation was computed for $H0_1$–$H0_4$. Fisher-z 95% confidence intervals were computed for every focal coefficient, since significance testing alone conceals the imprecision of estimates at this sample size.
3. Feature comparison**.** Correlations were computed for each phonological-feature subscale separately (RQ5), and Steiger's test for dependent correlations sharing one variable (Steiger, 1980; Meng, Rosenthal & Rubin, 1992) was used to test whether the coefficient for rhythm differed significantly from that for each other feature ($H0_5$).
4. Multiplicity. Because sixteen exploratory subscale correlations were computed, Benjamini–Hochberg false-discovery-rate control (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) was applied across the sixteen subscale tests, with the four confirmatory hypotheses left uncorrected.
5. Clustering sensitivity. Because students were nested within four schools, a sensitivity analysis was run assuming a school-level intracluster correlation of $\rho = .05$, giving a design effect of $1 + (m - 1)\rho = 2.45$ and an effective sample of approximately 49 (Killip, Mahfoud & Pearce, 2004).

Formulae: $r = \Sigma(z_x \times z_y) \div (N - 1)$; $t = [r \times \sqrt{(N - 2)}] \div \sqrt{(1 - r^2)}$, with $df = N - 2 = 118$. The decision rule was to reject the null where $p < .05$. Effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) benchmarks: .10 small, .30 moderate, .50 large. Analyses were run in SPSS 27 and R 4.3.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians through a letter sent home a week before testing, and verbal assent from students on the day. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was preserved through coded identifiers, students could withdraw at any point, and all were debriefed at the end of the exercise.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by sex, age and school (N = 120)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	58	48.3
	Female	62	51.7
Age (years)	15	21	17.5
	16	47	39.2
	17	38	31.7
	18	14	11.6
School	School A	30	25.0
	School B	30	25.0
	School C	30	25.0
	School D	30	25.0

Mean age = 16.4 years; SD = 0.86. The sex distribution was near-balanced and the age range is typical of the SS2 cohort.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Table 4: Means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis of study variables (N = 120)

Variable	Possible range	Observed range	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Alliteration	4–16	5–16	12.85	2.94	−0.41	−0.28
Rhyme	4–16	5–16	12.41	3.12	−0.36	−0.44

Variable	Possible range	Observed range	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Rhythm	4–16	6–16	13.62	3.05	−0.52	−0.19
Sound repetition	4–16	5–16	12.98	2.87	−0.33	−0.37
Perceived phonological salience (composite)	16–64	32–62	51.86	9.74	−0.28	−0.61
Oral reading rate (WCPM)	—	72–168	118.42	21.63	0.17	−0.42
Oral reading accuracy (%)	—	74–99	91.35	6.48	−0.62	0.31
Text comprehension (of 20)	0–20	5–19	11.74	3.29	0.12	−0.36
Academic self-efficacy (of 80)	20–80	38–76	58.63	7.92	−0.21	0.74

All skewness values fell between −1 and +1 and all kurtosis values between −1 and +1, so the distributions approximated normality and Pearson's r was appropriate. Two features deserve comment. First, the composite mean (51.86) is the exact sum of the four subscale means, confirming correct scoring, but at 81% of the 64-point maximum it signals a ceiling, as do the negative subscale skews. Second, oral reading rate (M = 118.42 WCPM) sits below the mid-point of published Grade 11 norms (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2017, place the 50th percentile at approximately 145 WCPM), consistent with an ESL cohort; the SD of 21.63 shows wide dispersion. Accuracy is strongly compressed (74–99%) and correlates .71 with rate, so the two are not independent indices.

4.3 Inter-correlations among the Phonological Features

Table 5: Correlations among the four phonological-feature subscales (N = 120)

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Alliteration	—			
2. Rhyme	.52***	—		
3. Rhythm	.48***	.55***	—	
4. Sound repetition	.61***	.50***	.63***	—

Note. *** p < .001 (two-tailed, df = 118). Mean inter-subscale r = .55.

The subscales are substantially inter-correlated (mean r = .55), and the pattern is internally consistent with the observed composite SD of 9.74. This matters twice over: it indicates that the four features share a large common core, and it makes the comparison between features ($H0_5$) statistically demanding, since highly correlated predictors are hard to distinguish.

4.4 Inter-correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Table 6: Inter-correlation matrix of study variables (N = 120)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived phonological salience (composite)	—				
2. Oral reading rate	.31**	—			
3. Oral reading accuracy	.26**	.71**	—		
4. Text comprehension	.27**	.58**	.49**	—	
5. Academic self-efficacy	.22*	.29**	.21*	.34**	—

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01 (two-tailed, df = 118).

4.5 Testing of Hypotheses

Table 7: Summary of hypothesis testing with 95% confidence intervals

Hypothesis	Variables correlated	r	95% CI	p	Decision	Effect size
$H0_1$	Salience × oral reading fluency	.31	[.14, .46]	.001	Rejected	Moderate
$H0_2$	Salience × text comprehension	.27	[.10, .43]	.003	Rejected	Small–moderate
$H0_3$	Salience × academic self-efficacy	.22	[.04, .38]	.016	Rejected	Small–moderate
$H0_4$	Oral reading fluency × text comprehension	.58	[.45, .69]	< .001	Rejected	Large

Hypothesis One: r = .31, p = .001, 95% CI [.14, .46]. $H0_1$ was rejected; the relationship is positive and moderate.

Hypothesis Two: r = .27, p = .003, 95% CI [.10, .43]. $H0_2$ was rejected; the relationship is positive and small-to-moderate.

Hypothesis Three: r = .22, p = .016, 95% CI [.04, .38]. $H0_3$ was rejected; the relationship is positive but small-to-moderate, and the lower confidence bound of .04 shows how imprecise the estimate is.

Hypothesis Four: r = .58, p < .001, 95% CI [.45, .69]. $H0_4$ was rejected; the relationship is positive and large.

Hypothesis Five: Tested in 4.7 and rejected in the weak sense described there.

4.6 Analysis by Phonological Feature Subscale

Table 8: Correlations of individual phonological features with outcome variables, with Benjamini–Hochberg outcomes (N = 120)

Phonological feature	Oral reading rate	Oral reading accuracy	Text comprehension	Academic self-efficacy
Alliteration	.24**	.19*	.21*	.14 [b]
Rhyme	.29**	.23*	.26**	.20*
Rhythm	.36***	.30***	.34***	.29**
Sound repetition	.27**	.22*	.24**	.18 [b]
Composite	.31	.26	.27	.22

Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (two-tailed, df = 118), uncorrected. [b] = fails Benjamini–Hochberg FDR control at q = .05 across the sixteen subscale tests.

Rhythm was the numerically strongest correlate of every outcome (r = .36 with rate, .34 with comprehension, .29 with self-efficacy). After Benjamini–Hochberg correction, fourteen of the sixteen subscale correlations survived; the two casualties were sound repetition × self-efficacy (r = .18, p = .049) and alliteration × self-efficacy (r = .14, p = .127). The descriptive ordering rhythm > rhyme ≈ sound repetition > alliteration was identical in all four outcome columns, but see §4.7.

4.7 Testing the Difference between Features ($H0_5$)

Table 9: Steiger's tests comparing the correlation of rhythm with each other feature (N = 120, df = 117)

Outcome	Contrast	r_1	r_2	t	p
Oral reading rate	Rhythm vs alliteration	.36	.24	1.37	.17
Oral reading rate	Rhythm vs rhyme	.36	.29	0.86	.39
Oral reading rate	Rhythm vs sound repetition	.36	.27	1.22	.23
Oral reading accuracy	Rhythm vs alliteration	.30	.19	1.22	.22
Text comprehension	Rhythm vs alliteration	.34	.21	1.47	.15
Academic self-efficacy	Rhythm vs alliteration	.29	.14	1.66	.10

Note. Tests use the subscale inter-correlations in Table 5 as the between-predictor correlations.

No contrast reached significance. $H0_5$ is therefore rejected only in the weak sense: the ordering is descriptively consistent but not statistically established. Post hoc power to detect the observed rhythm–alliteration difference was approximately .27, so the study is underpowered for this question.

4.8 Passage-Level Analysis

Table 10: Passage-level density scores and mean student outcomes (four passages read by all students)

Passage	Density (/16)	Mean WCPM	Mean comprehension	Mean self-efficacy
P5	8	112.4	10.8	57.1
P2	9	121.0	11.2	58.9
P4	14	118.6	12.1	58.4
P8	15	122.0	12.9	60.1

Rank correlations between passage density and mean outcome were ρ = .80 for rate and self-efficacy and ρ = 1.00 for comprehension. With only four passages, however, no rank correlation reaches the .05 threshold (the minimum attainable two-tailed p at n = 4 is .083). The passage-level pattern is therefore suggestive rather than confirmatory.

4.9 Sensitivity Analysis for Clustering

Table 11: Sensitivity analysis assuming a school-level intracluster correlation of ρ = .05

Quantity	Value
Design effect (1 + (m − 1)ρ, m = 30)	2.45
Effective sample size	≈ 49
Effective critical r at α = .05 (df = 47)	.28

Under this assumption the effective critical value rises from .18 to .28. The two smallest focal coefficients salience × self-efficacy (r = .22) and salience × comprehension (r = .27) fall at or just below that

threshold, while salience × fluency (.31) and fluency × comprehension (.58) remain comfortably above it.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Perceived Phonological Salience and Oral Reading Fluency

The moderate positive relationship (r = .31, 95% CI [.14, .46]) supports $H0_1$ and aligns with the prosodic fluency literature. Klauda and Guthrie (2008) found that fluency at syntactic and passage level carried the strongest association with reading skill, and Schwanenflugel et al. (2004) established prosodic features as a distinct component of fluent reading. Within a grain size framework (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005), large-grain phonological regularities in the text reduce processing burden. The magnitude sits below Wolters et al.'s (2022) meta-analytic r = .51 for reader-produced prosody, which is what one would expect of a predictor operating at one remove from prosody itself.

Two rival explanations deserve weight. First, general verbal ability: students with richer vocabulary and better decoding read faster *and* notice sound patterning more, which would produce the association without any scaffolding effect. Second, reverse causation: fluent readers may attend to sound more because sound is not a burden for them. Neither was controlled here.

5.2 Perceived Phonological Salience and Text Comprehension

The significant but modest relationship (r = .27, [.10, .43]) supports $H0_2$ and is consistent with the wider prosody–comprehension literature (Groen *et al*., 2019; Veenendaal *et al*., 2015; Wolters *et al*., 2022). Two mechanisms are plausible: sound repetition and rhythm function as prosodic boundary markers that assist syntactic parsing, and foregrounded patterning may promote aesthetic reading in Rosenblatt's (1994) sense, deepening semantic processing.

The coefficient is modest because comprehension in senior secondary ESL readers is powerfully determined by vocabulary breadth, background knowledge and inferencing skill, none of which was controlled. This is fully consistent with the Simple View (Gough & Tunmer, 1986): phonological features can assist decoding but contribute only indirectly to linguistic comprehension. The confidence interval [.10, .43] is wide enough that the true association could be trivial or substantial.

5.3 Perceived Phonological Salience and Academic Self-Efficacy

The weakest focal relationship (r = .22, [.04, .38]) nevertheless reached significance and constitutes the study's most novel though least certain contribution. Within Bandura's (1997) framework, negotiating a rhythmically patterned passage is a mastery experience, and mastery experience is the most powerful source of efficacy belief. Patterned prose may also lower negative affective arousal. The finding coheres with Nigerian evidence that presentational format affects learning outcomes (Onyebuchi-Igbokwe *et al*., 2026) and with the general Nigerian self-efficacy literature (Agbeniga *et al*., 2017; Olusegun *et al*., 2020; Onyeizugbo, 2010) — though note that Baanu *et al*., (2016) found no such association in chemistry, so the relationship is domain-contingent.

Three cautions apply. First, common method variance: the PPSS and ASEQ are both all-positively-worded Likert instruments administered back-to-back in the same session, so some of the .22 may be method artefact. Second, clustering: under the sensitivity analysis the coefficient falls below the effective threshold. Third, the relationship is likely reciprocal — efficacy promotes engagement with patterned text, which reinforces efficacy.

5.4 Oral Reading Fluency and Text Comprehension

The large relationship (r = .58, [.45, .69]) supports $H0_4$ and replicates a robust international finding (Kim & Wagner, 2015; Klauda & Guthrie, 2008; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). It also provides convergent validity evidence for the instruments, since the fluency and comprehension measures behaved as the literature predicts — which strengthens confidence in the focal correlations. Note that rate and accuracy correlate at .71, so "fluency" here is effectively one variable and the two indices are not independent.

5.5 Differential Effects by Phonological Feature

The consistent ordering rhythm > rhyme ≈ sound repetition > alliteration is theoretically meaningful. Rhythm operates at phrase and clause level and carries global structural information: it tells the reader where to breathe, where to pause, and where a unit of meaning ends. Alliteration operates at the level of the initial consonant and is therefore local. Since fluency and comprehension depend primarily on phrase-level processing, the advantage of rhythm over alliteration is what prosodic theory predicts (Kuhn *et al*., 2010).

Two qualifications are now required. First, the difference is not statistically significant: Steiger's tests returned t between 0.86 and 1.66 (all p > .09), and post hoc power was only .27. Second, the subscales inter-correlate at a mean of .55, so the features are not cleanly separable constructs in this sample. The honest summary is: *rhythm was the numerically strongest and most consistent correlate, but with N = 120 and highly correlated predictors the study cannot establish that it is reliably stronger.* The non-significant alliteration–self-efficacy association (r = .14) follows the same logic, a local sound effect is unlikely to generate a felt sense of competence.

5.6 Implications of the Findings

Three implications follow, all hedged in proportion to the effect sizes. First, if rhythm is the

leading correlate, pedagogical attention should focus on phrasing where the reader pauses and how long rather than on isolated sound effects. Second, because salience relates to both cognitive and affective outcomes, sound-focused activities may operate on two fronts at once. Third, the modest magnitudes, the wide confidence intervals and the clustering sensitivity analysis all caution against treating phonological features as a panacea; they belong inside broader instruction addressing vocabulary, background knowledge and inferencing.

5.7 A Note on the Expository/Fiction Mismatch

The ORFT used an expository passage that was never scored for phonological features, while the study's theory concerns fiction's soundscape. This mismatch should attenuate the focal correlations and probably accounts for part of the gap between r = .31 and the meta-analytic r = .51. It is a design feature worth correcting in replication.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationships between the perceived phonological salience of Nigerian English-language fiction, reading performance and academic self-efficacy among 120 senior secondary school students in Owerri, Nigeria. Salience scores correlated positively with oral reading fluency ($r = .31$, $p = .001$, [.14, .46]), text comprehension ($r = .27$, $p = .003$, [.10, .43]) and academic self-efficacy ($r = .22$, $p = .016$, [.04, .38]); fluency and comprehension were strongly related ($r = .58$, $p < .001$, [.45, .69]). All four confirmatory null hypotheses were rejected. Rhythm was the numerically strongest correlate of every outcome, but no pairwise difference between features reached significance and the study was underpowered for that question.

The study concludes that the sound architecture of Nigerian fiction covaries with how well students read and how capable they believe themselves to be an association, not a demonstrated cause, and one that survives adjustment for multiplicity but is sensitive to clustering.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. English language teachers should deliberately incorporate sound-focused reading activities choral reading, echo reading, readers' theatre, rhythm-marked passages into literature and comprehension lessons, attending to phrasing and rhythmic segmentation rather than isolated sound effects.
2. Teachers selecting passages should favour extracts with clear prosodic movement, while recognizing that the rhythm advantage is descriptive rather than statistically established.
3. Curriculum planners at the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council and state ministries of education should embed phonological and prosodic objectives in the senior secondary English and Literature-in-English syllabi.
4. Teacher education institutions should include modules on stylistic analysis of Nigerian fiction and on the pedagogical use of prosody in reading instruction.
5. Fluency and comprehension should be monitored together, using one-minute oral reading checks paired with comprehension probes, so that decoding-level and meaning-level progress are tracked simultaneously.
6. Academic self-efficacy should be cultivated through structured mastery experiences, peer modelling, specific verbal feedback and low-anxiety oral reading routines.
7. School libraries should be stocked with Nigerian-authored fiction at appropriate readability levels.
8. Examination and assessment bodies should consider the implications of prosodic features for the construction of comprehension passages.
9. Researchers should report confidence intervals and tests of dependent correlations as standard when comparing features, and should power studies for those comparisons rather than assuming that a sample adequate for main effects is adequate for contrasts.

8.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The correlational design permits no causal inference. Several limitations are more specific and more serious than is usually acknowledged.

Construct

The predictor is a person-level salience score, not an objective text measure. Because all students read the same four passages, text-level and person-level variance are confounded: the design cannot separate the contribution of the text from that of the reader. The Stage 1 rater scores were not entered into any inferential model.

Method Variance

The PPSS and ASEQ are both all-positively-worded Likert instruments administered in the same session; acquiescence and common method variance probably inflate their association. Reverse-scored items reduce but do not eliminate this.

Power

The study was underpowered for $H0_5$ (approximately .27), so the disaggregation question is not answered.

Clustering

Students were nested in four schools and clustering was not modelled. Under an assumed ICC of .05, the effective sample falls to roughly 49 and the effective critical r rises to about .28.

Measurement

Only one oral reading passage was used, so fluency estimates may reflect passage-specific rather than stable reader characteristics. Rate and accuracy

correlate at .71 and are not independent. The PFRS subscales show ceiling effects and restricted range, attenuating correlations. The ORFT used expository rather than fiction text.

Sampling

One hundred and twenty students from four schools in one education zone limit generalizability to Imo State and possibly to south-eastern Nigeria. Self-efficacy was self-reported and subject to social desirability. Vocabulary breadth, decoding skill, print exposure and home literacy environment were not controlled, and these are plausible third variables. Because the ASEQ was administered before any reading task, efficacy reports were not updated by task experience — which may attenuate the efficacy–performance link.

9.0 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Replication with a larger, multi-state sample powered specifically for feature contrasts, not merely for main effects.
2. A longitudinal design tracking salience responsiveness, fluency and efficacy over an academic year to establish temporal ordering.
3. A quasi-experimental study testing whether explicit prosody-focused instruction using Nigerian fiction improves fluency, comprehension and self-efficacy relative to conventional instruction.
4. Mediation analysis testing whether fluency mediates the path from salience to comprehension, and whether self-efficacy moderates it.
5. A counterbalanced passage design in which density varies *within* student, analyzed with a multilevel model with passages crossed with students — the design that would actually answer the title's question.
6. Acoustic analysis of students' oral reading to link textual density directly to produced prosody.
7. Comparative work on fiction versus expository text, and Nigerian versus non-Nigerian fiction, as sources of phonological support.
8. Qualitative reader-response work on how students experience the sound of Nigerian prose.
9. Cross-varietal comparison across Nigerian English accents, testing whether rhythmic distance from the reader's own accent moderates the relationship.

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