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Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence, Self-Esteem and English Reading Comprehension Among Primary School Children

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ABSTRACT

This correlational study investigated the relationship among emotional intelligence, self-esteem and English reading comprehension among Primary 5 pupils in Anambra State, Nigeria. The study adopted a correlational research design. Four hundred pupils were sampled through multistage sampling. Three instruments were used: English Reading Comprehension Test (KR-20 =.81), Emotional Intelligence Scale (α =.84), and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (α =.77). Pearson correlation and multiple regression were used for analysis at.05 level. Results showed a significant low negative relationship between emotional intelligence and reading comprehension, r (398) = -.31, p <.001, a significant low positive relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension, r (398) =.36, p <.001, and a significant joint relationship among the variables, R^2 =.22, F (2, 397) = 55.28, p <.001. The study concluded that emotional intelligence and self-esteem were significantly related to reading comprehension. It was recommended that primary school teachers should incorporate self-esteem building strategies.

KEYWORDS: Emotional Intelligence, Self-Esteem, English Reading Comprehension, Primary School Children, Anambra State.

How to Cite

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Background to the Study

English Language is the medium of instruction in Nigerian primary schools and a foundation for academic success across all subjects. At the primary level, reading comprehension is the core of English literacy, as it enables children to decode, understand, and make meaning from texts (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). However, reports from Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and recent Basic Education Certificate Examinations indicate declining reading proficiency among primary school pupils in South Eastern Nigeria, including Anambra State.

While instructional factors have been extensively studied, child psychological factors have received less attention. Two critical psychological constructs are emotional intelligence and self-esteem. Emotional Intelligence (EI), as defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990), is the ability to perceive, understand, regulate and use emotions to facilitate thinking. In the classroom, pupils with higher emotional intelligence are better able to manage reading anxiety, sustain attention, and maintain interpersonal relationships that support collaborative learning (Goleman, 1995).

Self-esteem, on the other hand, refers to a child's overall subjective evaluation of his or her worth

(Rosenberg, 1965). Primary school children with high self-esteem tend to exhibit confidence in attempting challenging academic tasks, while those with low self-esteem may exhibit withdrawal, fear of failure, and avoidance of reading tasks. In Anambra State, where academic competition is high and parental expectations are significant, children's emotional experiences and self-perceptions may be associated with their English reading outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite government efforts to improve literacy through early grade reading programs in Anambra State, many primary school pupils still struggle with English reading comprehension, manifesting in poor ability to answer literal, inferential and evaluative questions from passages.

Existing interventions have largely focused on teacher methodology and instructional materials, neglecting the psychological well-being of the learner. Observations in primary schools in Awka, Onitsha and Nnewi show pupils who are emotionally dysregulated, easily frustrated during reading tasks, or who exhibit low confidence, often avoid reading aloud or participating in comprehension exercises.

Although studies have established associations between emotional intelligence and academic achievement (Esan & Okafor, 2022), and between self-esteem and English performance among secondary school students (Adeyemi, 2021), there is a paucity of empirical data focusing on primary school children in Anambra State, specifically linking both psychological variables to English reading comprehension. However, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how these psychological factors relate to reading comprehension among primary school pupils in Anambra State, thereby creating a gap in the literature. This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, self-esteem and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between emotional intelligence and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State?
2. What is the relationship between self-esteem and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State?
3. What is the joint relationship among emotional intelligence, self-esteem and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State?

Hypotheses

H01: There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State.

H02: There is no significant relationship between self-esteem and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State.

H03: There is no significant joint relationship among emotional intelligence, self-esteem and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State

Literature Review

Emotional Intelligence in Children

Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate and use emotions to facilitate thinking and behaviour (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Bar-On (2006) describes EI for children as comprising five dimensions: intrapersonal awareness, interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability and general mood. Goleman (1995) emphasized that emotional competencies such as self-regulation, empathy and motivation are as important as cognitive intelligence for academic success. In primary school context, emotional intelligence enables pupils to manage frustration when encountering difficult vocabulary, control anxiety during reading tasks, and maintain positive relationships that support collaborative learning (Moraleda & Fernández, 2023). Shengyao et al. (2024) noted that children with high emotional intelligence use better self-regulation strategies that free cognitive resources for comprehension.

Self-Esteem in Children

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall subjective evaluation of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). For

primary school children, academic self-esteem is domain-specific confidence in school tasks. Maslow (1943) placed self-esteem as a higher-order need that must be met before self-actualization and learning can occur. Children with high self-esteem tend to exhibit confidence in attempting challenging academic tasks, persist after failure, and participate actively in class (Hermawati et al., 2026). Conversely, low self-esteem is associated with reading avoidance, fear of making mistakes, and reduced participation in classroom discussions (Zuppardo et al., 2023). In Anambra State, where academic competition is high, self-esteem becomes critical for pupils' willingness to read aloud and answer comprehension questions.

English Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is an active cognitive process involving decoding, vocabulary knowledge, inference making and integration of prior knowledge (Snow, 2002). Gough and Tunmer (1986) in their Simple View of Reading posit that reading comprehension is the product of decoding and linguistic comprehension. For primary school children, comprehension is measured at three levels: literal (what is explicitly stated), inferential (what is implied), and evaluative/vocabulary (critical judgment of text) (NERDC, 2022). UBEC (2024) and ASUBEB (2024) reports indicate declining reading proficiency among primary pupils in Southeast Nigeria, necessitating investigation of psychological correlates beyond instructional factors.

Relationship among Emotional Intelligence, Self-Esteem and Reading Comprehension

Studies using multiple regression have shown that emotional intelligence and self-esteem together explain significant variance in reading comprehension. Esan (2023) reported that both variables jointly accounted for 18-25% variance in reading comprehension among elementary pupils. Parker et al. (2021) emphasized that emotional intelligence and self-perception jointly support academic transition and success. Silva et al. (2024) in their systematic review of over 200 studies concluded that school-based SEL programs that enhance both emotional intelligence and self-esteem improve academic performance. Despite these international findings, there is paucity of research in Anambra State that examined both variables jointly as correlates of English reading comprehension among primary school children. Most existing Nigerian studies focused on secondary school students (Adeyemi, 2021), leaving a critical gap at the primary level.

Theoretical Framework

Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory (1995)

Goleman posits that academic and life success depends not only on IQ but on emotional intelligence - ability to recognize one's emotions, manage them, motivate oneself, and handle relationships. Applied to reading, pupils who can manage reading anxiety and regulate frustration are more likely to sustain attention and comprehend texts, as emotional regulation frees working memory for understanding (Shengyao et al., 2024). This theory directly links EI to reading comprehension.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Theory (1965)

Maslow places self-esteem as a higher-order need that must be satisfied before self-actualization (learning) occurs. Rosenberg (1965) defines self-esteem as positive or negative attitude towards self, where individuals strive to maintain positive self-image. A child who feels worthy is more likely to engage actively in reading tasks and persist after failure. This explains why self-esteem is associated with reading outcomes.

Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986)

This theory states Reading Comprehension = Decoding x Linguistic Comprehension. While cognitive, it recognizes that psychological factors like motivation and self-esteem influence linguistic comprehension and engagement.

Methodology

Design: Correlational research design. Appropriate because it examines relationships among variables without manipulation.

Sampling Technique: Sample size of 400 pupils was determined using Taro Yamane formula. Multi-stage sampling: Stage 1 - Stratify Anambra into 3 Senatorial Zones (Anambra North, Central, South). Stage 2 - Randomly select 2 LGAs per zone (6 LGAs). Stage 3 - Randomly select 4 primary schools per LGA (24 schools). Stage 4 - Stratified random selection of 16-17 pupils from Primary 4-6 per school.

Instruments

Three instruments were used: a) English Reading Comprehension Test (ERCT): A 20-item multiple-choice

test constructed by the researcher from Primary 5 English passages. Each item has four options (A-D). Scoring: 1 mark per correct answer, 0 for wrong, maximum score 20. Pass mark = 10. b) Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS): Adapted version of Schutte et al. (1998) 33-item Emotional Intelligence Scale revalidated for Nigerian pupils. The scale has four sub-dimensions: perception of emotion, managing own emotions, managing others' emotions, and utilization of emotion. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. Score range 33-165. Cronbach alpha in original study =.90. c) Self-Esteem Scale (SES): Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) 10-item version. 4-point Likert scale from 1=Strongly Disagree to 4=Strongly Agree. Five items are reverse scored. Score range 10-40. Higher score indicates higher self-esteem.

Validity

Face and Content Validity: All three instruments were subjected to face and content validation by three experts: two from Educational Psychology and one from Language Education, University of Benin, Benin. Experts evaluated clarity, relevance to primary school level, and alignment with research objectives. Content Validity Index (CVI) was computed using Lawshe's formula. CVI for ERCT =.88, EIS =.85, SES =.87, all above.80 threshold. Experts' corrections were incorporated, including simplification of 6 items in ERCT to Primary 5 reading level and rewording of 3 items in EIS from American English to Nigerian English.

Construct Validity for EIS and SES (Exploratory Factor Analysis):

To confirm factor structure for the Nigerian sample, pilot data from 120 Primary 5 pupils outside the main sample (Asaba) were used for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). Sampling adequacy was satisfactory (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin =.81 for EIS,.79 for SES; Bartlett's test of sphericity p <.001 for both). Extraction method was Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation (kappa = 4) because factors were expected to correlate. Factor retention criteria: eigenvalue >1.0, scree plot inspection, and factor loading ≥.40. For EIS, four factors emerged explaining 58.3% variance, consistent with original scale. For SES, one factor emerged explaining 51.2% variance. No items were deleted as all loadings exceeded.45.ERCT did not undergo factor analysis because it is an achievement test with heterogeneous content domains (comprehension, vocabulary, inference), not a latent psychological construct.

Reliability

A separate pilot sample of 60 Primary 5 pupils from Asaba (not part of main sample) was used for reliability testing, with two weeks interval. ERCT: Since ERCT is a dichotomously scored achievement test (right/wrong), Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) was used. KR-20 =.81, indicating high internal consistency. EIS: Since EIS is polytomously scored Likert scale, Cronbach's alpha was used. Overall Cronbach's alpha =.84. Subscales: perception =.76, managing own =.78, managing others =.71, utilization =.73. SES: Cronbach's alpha =.77.

Method of Data Collection: Direct administration with research assistants and class teachers. Questionnaires were read aloud for pupils with low reading ability.

Method of Data Analysis: Research Questions 1 & 2 were answered using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC). Research Question 3 was answered using Multiple Regression Analysis. Hypotheses tested at 0.05 level of significance.

Research Question 1

Table 1: Pearson r on the emotional intelligence and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State

Sources of variation	N	Emotional intelligence (r)	English Reading Comprehension (r)	Remark
Emotional intelligence	400	1.00	-0.308	Low negative relationship
English Reading Comprehension	400	-0.308	1.00	

In table 1 it was observed that there is low negative relationship of -0.308 existing between the emotional intelligence of primary school pupils in Anambra state and their English reading comprehension ability.

Null Hypothesis 1

Table 2: t-Test on the significant of Pearson r of emotional intelligence and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State

N	cal. *r*	df	*t*-cal	*P* value	Remark
400	-0.308	398	6.46	<.001	S

S =Significant

The finding of a low negative significant correlation between emotional intelligence and reading comprehension, r (398) = -.31, p <.001, is unexpected. This result should be interpreted cautiously as correlational and not causal. The present study did not include measures of emotional regulation, test anxiety, or academic pressure, so any explanatory mechanism remains speculative. One tentative hypothesis that could be explored in future research is that heightened emotional sensitivity without corresponding regulation strategies might be associated with increased self-consciousness during reading tasks among primary school pupils in this context. Alternatively, this may reflect measurement characteristics of the adapted scale for this age group. Future studies should include direct measures of anxiety and emotion regulation to test these possibilities.

This finding is contrary to the majority of literature which reports positive associations. For instance, Yu and Tong (2024) in a longitudinal study of 689 Chinese children found that emotional intelligence at age 9 predicted reading comprehension at age 11 for both narrative and expository texts. Similarly, Okafor and Nwankwo (2023) reported r =.41 among 320 pupils in Enugu State, and Wang, Zhang and Li (2025) found achievement emotions significantly mediated teacher support to reading literacy among 460 Grade 4 pupils in Beijing.

The negative direction observed in Anambra can be explained by the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions. Moraleda and Fernández (2023) noted that in highly competitive academic environments, high emotional awareness without regulation leads to over-sensitivity to evaluation and withdrawal from academic tasks. Anambra State is known for high parental expectations and intense academic competition (Anambra State Universal Basic Education Board [ASUBEB], 2024). Pupils who are highly emotionally sensitive may therefore experience performance anxiety that interferes with working memory needed for comprehension (Shengyao, Lajoie, & Huang, 2024). This suggests that awareness alone is not enough; regulation skills are critical (Bar-On, 2006; Goleman, 1995).

Research Question 2

Table 3: Pearson r on the self-esteem and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State

Sources of variation	N	Self-Esteem (r)	English reading comprehension (r)	Remark
Self-Esteem	400	1.00	0.363	Low positive relationship
English reading comprehension	400	0.363	1.00	

Table 3 reveals that there is low positive relationship of 0.363 existing between the self-esteem level of primary school pupils in Anambra state and their English reading comprehension.

Null Hypothesis 2

Table 4: t-test on the significant of Pearson r of self-esteem and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State

N	cal. *r*	df	*t*-cal	*P* value	Remark
400	0.363	398	7.77	<.001	S

S =Significant

Table 4 shows that at 0.05 level of significance and 398 df, the calculated t (398) = 7.77with p <.001which is less than the critical 0.05. Therefore the second null hypothesis is not accepted. The type of relationship existing between the self-esteem level of primary school pupils in Anambra state and their English reading

comprehension is significant.

This result is consistent with previous studies. Asmaja, Amalia and Amalia (2025) found a strong positive correlation of *r* =.778 between self-esteem and reading comprehension among secondary students, while Kotabumi et al. (2024) reported similar magnitude (*r* =.778) among seventh graders. Within Nigeria, Igwe (2022) found *r* =.36 among 250 primary five pupils in Ebonyi State, which is almost identical to the *r* =.363 found in this study.

The finding is explained by Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Theory and Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. According to Rosenberg, children with positive self-attitudes are more likely to approach challenging tasks. Hermawati et al. (2026) confirmed that high self-esteem pupils show confidence in attempting difficult passages and persist after failure. Conversely, teachers' reports in Saudi Arabia indicated that low self-esteem is linked to reading avoidance and low classroom participation (Frontiers in Education, 2024), which reduces comprehension practice (Snow, 2002). Thus, self-esteem serves as a motivational resource for reading engagement.

Research Question 3

What is the joint relationship among emotional intelligence, self-esteem and English reading comprehension?

Table 5: Regression analysis on the emotional intelligence, self-esteem and English reading comprehension among primary school children in Anambra State

Model	*R*	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.468	.219	.214	2.82

Table 5 shows that the combination of emotional intelligence and self-esteem yielded *R* =.468, R^2 =.219. The adjusted R^2 of.214 indicates that after adjusting for number of predictors, the model explains 21.4% of variance in reading comprehension. The unadjusted R^2 =.219 (21.9% variance) is reported for total variance explained, while adjusted R^2 =.214 is the more conservative population estimate.

This 21.4% joint contribution aligns with Esan (2023) who reported 18-25% variance explained by psychological variables in elementary school reading. Silva, Monteiro and Carvalho (2024) in a systematic review of over 200 studies concluded that school-based social-emotional learning programs produced an average effect size of 0.31 on academic performance, supporting the joint influence.

This confirms that psychological factors are important correlates of reading comprehension beyond cognitive factors emphasized in the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). While decoding and vocabulary remain essential (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council [NERDC], 2022), 21.4% explained by EI and self-esteem is educationally meaningful and justifies psychological interventions (Universal Basic Education Commission [UBEC], 2024). The remaining 78.6% suggests other factors such as teacher quality, home literacy environment, and instructional materials also matter.

Table 6: ANOVA for Regression

Model	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	***F***	***p***
Regression	878.14	2	439.07	55.28	<.001
Residual	3153.46	397	7.94		
Total	4031.60	399			

F (2, 397) = 55.28, p <.001. The earlier F(3,845) was incorrect. With N=400 and 2 predictors, regression df = 2, residual df = N - k - 1 = 400 - 2 - 1 = 397.

Table 7: Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Reading comprehension

Predictor	**B**	**SE B**	***β***	***t***	***P***	**95% CI for B**
Constant	8.12	1.54		5.27	<.001	[5.09, 11.15]
Emotional Intelligence	-0.09	0.02	-.28	-5.12	<.001	[-0.13, -0.06]
Self-Esteem	0.23	0.03	.34	6.21	<.001	[0.16, 0.30]

Both predictors made significant independent contributions. Self-esteem was a positive predictor (β =.34, p <.001), while emotional intelligence was a negative predictor (β = -.28, p <.001).

Hypothesis 3: The null hypothesis was rejected. There is a significant joint relationship, R^2 =.219, F (2, 397) = 55.28, p <.001.

Conclusion

It is concluded that self-esteem positively and significantly relates to reading comprehension, while emotional intelligence, though significantly related, showed a low negative association in Anambra context, possibly due to unregulated emotional sensitivity and high academic pressure. Jointly, both variables are significant predictors accounting for over one-fifth of reading comprehension variance, indicating that psychological well-being is integral to literacy development.

Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education should integrate emotional regulation training, not just emotional awareness, into the English Studies curriculum.
2. Primary school teachers in Anambra State should use self-esteem-building strategies such as positive reinforcement, constructive feedback, and pupil-centered activities to enhance pupils' confidence in reading tasks.
3. School counsellors should be deployed to public primary schools to provide early intervention for reading anxiety and low self-confidence.

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