

ASSESSMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEIVED DIFFICULT CONCEPTS IN ECONOMICS IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study identified some of the secondary school Economics concepts perceived by the students as difficult concepts. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A total of 900 Senior Secondary School (SSIII) students randomly drawn from 20 schools in two of three education zones (Abia and Umuahia) of Abia State using multistage technique, constituted the sample of the study. A 16-item questionnaire titled Students' Perceived Difficult Concepts in Economics Questionnaire (SPDCEQ) was used to collect data on the perceived difficult concepts in Economics from the sampled schools. The responses obtained from the students were subjected to mean and standard deviation to answer the four research questions while z-test statistics was used to test the two hypotheses posed for the study. The result of the study showed that students perceived five out of eleven major concepts in Economics to be difficult. It further showed that there was no significant difference in the mean perception of students on the difficult concepts in Economics based on gender and school locations. It was recommended among others, that government should organize workshops for Economics teachers on how best to teach identified difficult concepts in Economics.

Keywords; Assessment, Perceived, Difficult, Economics.

Economic is one of the elective subjects offered at the senior secondary school level of education. It's curriculum contains twenty-six (26) topics which were structured into thirty-four (34) teaching units distributed over the three year period of senior secondary school (Sangoleye, 2011). Yusuf (2009) went further to state that the structure of Economics curriculum content was also based on the spiral spread which made it possible for topics to be learnt in its basic form in Senior Secondary one (SS1) to its complex form in the Senior Secondary three (SSIII).

The inclusion of the subject in the Nigeria secondary school curriculum was aimed at: equipping graduates of the senior secondary schools with the basic knowledge and skills that will enable them to better appreciate the nature of Economics as a subject that has relevance to everyday life (Sangoleye, 2011).

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In view of this, the subject stands out as one of the most preferred subjects among other electives during Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination registration. Confirming this, Awoke, Awoke and Odo (2011) stated that almost 90% of the students that pass through secondary school level of education in Nigeria, choose it as their elective subject. The reason for this being that the subject is the basic requirement for admission into courses in social and management sciences in higher institutions of learning. Most students that set their targets for becoming Economist, Bankers, Accountants, and Business managers always enroll for the subject at that level of education.

The increase in the number of enrolment for the subject has not in any way reflected a proportionate increase in the students' performances. For instance, between the years 2010 and 2012, the percentage number of candidates that scored between A1 and C6 ranged between 56-59% for May/June West African School Certificate Examination and 55-65% for November/December candidates (WAEC Report, 2012 and 2013). Research evidence has shown that the average performances recorded in the subject run along gender and school location (Ede, 2009). Specifically, Ede (2009) noted that such performances were in favour of males over their female counterparts as well as in the favour of urban students over their rural counterparts.

Such performance status of students in the subject has attracted the attentions of stakeholders (parents, teachers and researchers in education) in determining the possible causes. The causes are multifaceted. According to WAEC Chief-Examiners' report (2009), the causes include:

- i. poor coverage of the syllabus;
- ii. inability to draw and label diagrams properly;
- iii. outright misinterpretation of some question;
- iv. inability to explain identifiable points during examination; and,
- v. disobedience to the rubrics.

Ede (2014) further outlined other causes to include;

- i. poor preparation of pre-service teachers of Economics by institutions of learning;
- ii. the use of unqualified Economics teachers in the teaching the subject;
- iii. inadequate number of qualified teachers of Economics in secondary school level;
- iv. inadequate instructional materials to simplify the abstract nature of the subject.

However, Sangoloye (2011) summarized those causes to be curriculum-related, teacher-related, students'-related and government/society related problems.

Assessment from the curriculum point of view shows that secondary school Economics curriculum has gone through some reviews and changes. Previously, the curriculum was described to be so brief, purely descriptive which did not involve deductive and abstract reasoning, while questions asked at the SSCE were straight forward and mainly tested lower level of cognition (Obeamata,1985). Such observations made brought about some innovations and reformations in the Economics curriculum. According to Sangoloye (2011), there was shift of emphasis from macro to micro study of Economics, from qualitative to quantitative; and from normative to positive study of Economics. It also included a shift of emphasis from eurocentricism to indigenous study of economic variables, institutions or ideas as well as increase in mathematical and statistical contents.

These changes among others, have made some of the contents of the subject to be perceived as being complex and difficult to understand; hence students perform poorly. This study therefore, sought to

identify some of those Economics concepts of secondary school curriculum which students perceived to be difficult to understand.

Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions;

1. Which of the secondary school Economics concepts do students perceived to be difficult?
2. Why do students have difficulties in learning some Economics concepts?
3. What influence has gender on the students' perception of difficult concepts in Economics?
4. What influence has school locations on students' perception of difficult concepts in Economics?

Also, the following hypotheses were postulated to guide the study which were test at 0.05 level of significance.

HO₁: There is no significant difference in the mean perceptions of male and female students in the difficult concepts in Economics.

HO₂: There is no significant difference in the mean perceptions of urban and rural students on the difficult concepts in Economics.

The result of this study however will enable teachers concentrate efforts on those perceived difficult topics and as well devise strategies in teaching such topics so as to enhance students' performances in them. It will redirect the attentions of authors and researchers on how best to simplify those perceived difficult concepts in economics as they write economics text books and carryout researches respectively.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The study was carried out in two out of the three education zones of Abia state, Nigeria namely: Aba and Umuahia education zones. A multi-stage sampling technique was used in selecting a sample of 900 senior secondary school students that was used for the study. Also, simple random sampling technique was used in selecting 20 schools (10 each from each zone as well as urban and rural schools) in the state. However, all the topics from secondary school economics syllabus were carefully grouped into eleven concepts by the researcher from which students show their perceptions on. The instrument used for data collection was a 16-item questionnaire titled "Students" Perceived Difficult Concepts in Economics Questionnaire (SPDCEQ). The instrument equally has a four-response scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD). Two experts in measurement and evaluation as well as three secondary school economics teachers validated the instrument. The reliability of the instrument was obtained using test-retest that yielded a coefficient of 0.79. Copies of the instrument were administered to the respondents with the help of two research assistants. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviations to answer the research questions while z-test statistic was used to test the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. Any mean of 2.50 and above were considered to have been perceived or agreed by students as difficult concepts in Economics and vice versa.

Results

Table 1: Secondary school students' perceived difficult concepts in Economics

S/N	Economics Concepts	X	SD	Decision
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1	Principles of Economics	2.36	0.86	Not difficult
2	Production Economics	1.86	0.89	Not difficult
3	Nigerian Economic sectors	2.02	0.63	Not difficult
4	Economics theories	2.64	0.73	Difficult
5	Tools for Economics analysis	2.71	0.68	Difficult
6	Market structure	3.08	0.59	Difficult
7	Public finance	2.39	1.14	Not difficult
8	Money and banking	2.41	0.73	Not difficult
9	International trade	2.22	0.65	Not difficult
10	International Economic organizations	3.18	1.07	Difficult
11	Economic growth and development	2.83	0.79	Difficult

The data in table 1 indicates that item numbers 4,5,6,10 and 11 were above the mean benchmark of 2.50. This however, indicates that students perceived those five out of the eleven major concepts in Economics to be difficult. Those perceived difficult concepts in Economics include; Economics theories, tools for economics analysis, market structure, international economics organizations; and economic growth and development.

Table 2: Reasons for students perceived difficulties in Economics

S/N	Perceived Difficulties	X	SD	Decision
12	Economics has large curriculum contents to cover before examinations	2.6	1.6	Agree
13	It has statistics and mathematical calculations that are difficult to handle	3.3	0.8	Agree
14	Teachers' inability to explain some concepts well	2.9	0.7	Agree
15	Economics has some topics that are abstract in nature and difficult to understand	3.0	1.1	Agree
16	Too many mediocre teach Economics	2.5	0.9	Agree
Pooled mean (X)		2.9	1	Agree

Table 2 shows that all the reasons outlined, recorded the mean value above the mean benchmark of 2.50. The pooled mean of 2.91 which is above the mean benchmark equally affirms that students accepted all the statements above as reasons they find studying some Economics concepts difficult.

Table 3: Mean perception of male and female students on difficult Economics concepts

S/N	Perceived difficulties	X	SD	X	SD
		Male		Female	
1	Principles of Economics	1.98	0.86	1.87	0.63
2	Production Economics	2.33	0.43	2.41	0.57

3	Nigerian Economic sectors			2.06	0.39	2.08	0.69
4	Economics theories			3.12	0.53	2.97	0.77
5	Tools for Economics analysis			2.53	0.67	3.18	0.39
6	Market structure			2.61	0.47	2.85	0.85
7	Public finance			2.11	0.88	2.25	0.45
8	Money and banking			2.46	0.69	2.14	0.83
9	International trade			2.26	0.58	2.38	0.34
10	International	Economic	organizations	2.74	0.82	3.62	0.76
11	Economic	growth	and development	2.58	0.33	2.75	0.46
Pooled mean (x)				2.43		2.50	

Table 3 shows that male students recorded mean perceptions that are above the mean bench mark in five concepts. They include; Economics theories, tools for Economics analysis, market structure, international Economics organizations; and economic growth and development. The female students also recorded mean perceptions

that are above the mean benchmark in the same concepts. However, female has slightly higher pooled mean perception than their male counterparts. This implies that females perceived those Economics concepts to be more difficult than the males.

Table 4: Mean perception of urban and rural school students on difficult concepts in Economics

S/N	Perceived difficulties	X	SD	X	SD
		Urban		Rural	
1	Principles of Economics	1.68	0.82	2.13	1.03
2	Production Economics	1.93	0.61	2.09	0.82
3	Nigerian Economic sectors	2.08	1.13	2.41	1.63
4	Economics theories	2.31	0.96	2.69	0.86
5	Tools for Economics Analysis	2.54	0.63	3.06	0.51
6	Market Structure	2.61	0.55	3.66	0.62
7	Public Finance	2.22	1.33	2.39	0.87
8	Money and Banking	2.14	0.91	2.96	0.68
9	International Trade	1.86	0.78	2.01	1.41
10	International Economic Organizations	2.83	0.56	2.94	1.21
11	Economic Growth and Development	2.69	0.93	3.05	0.90
Pooled mean (X)		2.02		2.67	

Table 4 shows that students from the urban schools recorded mean perceptions that are above the meanbench mark of 2.50 in four concepts. They include tools for Economics analysis, market structure, international Economics organizations and Economic growth and development. Students from the rural schools recorded mean perceptions that are above the mean benchmark in six concepts which include Economics theories, tools for Economics analysis, market structure, money and banking, international Economics organizations and Economic growth and development. However, students from the urban schools had a pooled mean of 2.02 which is less than the mean benchmark of 2.50 while their counterpart from the rural had a pooled mean perception of 2.67. This implies that the rural schools perceived those concepts to be more difficult.

Table 5: Z-test analysis of male and female students'

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Gender	N	X	SD	Df	Std error	Z-cal	Z-criti	Remark
Male	396	2.43	0.76	1078	3.11	0.02	1.96	Accept HO1
Female	684	2.50	0.75					

mean perceptions of difficult concepts in Economics

Table 5 shows that the z-calculated value is 0.02 while the z-critical value is .96. Since the z-calculated value is less than the z-critical value at 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis that stated that there is no significant difference in the mean perceptions of male and female students on difficult Economics concepts is accepted.

Table 6: Z-test Analysis of Urban and Rural Students' mean Perceptions of Difficult Concepts in Economics

School location	N	X	SD	Df	Std error	Z-cal	Z-criti	Remark
Urban	620	2.02	0.68	1078	3.21	0.20	1.96	Accept HO2
Rural	460	2.67	0.36					

Table 5 shows that the z-calculated value is 0.20 while the z-critical value is 1.96. Since the z-calculated value is greater than the z-critical value at 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis that stated that there is no significant difference in the mean perceptions of urban and rural students on difficult concepts in economics is accepted.

Discussion

The sampled students were able to identify five major Economics concept which are mostly difficult to comprehend during teaching and learning processes. These include Economics theories, tools for Economics analysis, market structure, international. Economics organizations and Economic growth and development. These revelations agreed with Ede (2009) who stated that some students identify some Economic topics to be difficult or easy during instructions; especially when such topics have some calculations or appeared difficult to pronounce.

Some of the possible reasons for the difficulties students encounter in learning some Economics concepts were identified to include: so many calculations and statistics in the subject which students are always afraid of, so many abstract concepts that are two

difficult to understand as well as too many mediocre that teach the subject at that level of education. This finding is in-line with Adu (2004) and WAEC, Chief examiner's report,(2009) that blamed the poor academic achievements of students in senior secondary school Economics to the abstract nature of some topics as well as their fear of statistics and other calculations involved in the subject.

Although the results in table 3 showed that females perceived those Economics concepts to be more difficult than their male counterparts; having recorded a slightly higher mean perception, the findings in table 5 showed no significant difference in their mean perceptions. The finding is not in agreement with the earlier findings of Ede (2009) which stated that the interest and achievements of students in Economics run along gender. Though table 4 showed that students in urban schools perceived less number of concepts to be difficult than their rural counterparts, the findings further showed that there is

no significant difference in the mean perceptions of students in both school locations. This finding agree with the views of Ozoihu (2011) who noted that both urban and rural school students have equal opportunities of doing well in academic activities if given equal chances. It disagree with other researchers (Ede, 2009) Jekayinfa 2000 who stated that learners from urban schools have better and positive perception over academic activities than their rural counterparts.

Conclusion/Recommendations

This study has identified some of the Economics concepts which students usually encounter some difficulties to comprehend during classroom instructions. It equally has shown some of the possible reasons that make students encounter some difficulties in understanding those identified difficult concepts in economics. The study also found that there was no significant difference in perceptions of students on difficult economics concepts based on gender and school locations. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government should organize special workshops for Economics teachers on how best to teach those difficult concepts in economics.
2. Economics teachers should endeavour to use variety of instructional methods and materials while teaching those identified difficult economics concepts. This will help simplify the abstract nature of those concepts and as well enhance the students understanding of those topics.
3. Curriculum planners should develop and recommend appropriate instructional strategies that could be used in teaching each of those difficult concepts so as to enhance performances in the subject.
4. Adequate attentions and preparations should be given to those identified difficult Economics concepts during teaching and learning processes. This will enable the students overcome those difficulties.
5. Researchers and authors of Economics books should redirect their efforts on how best to simplify the understanding of those identified difficult Economics concepts.
6. Economics curriculum should be restructured in a way that concepts that appeared difficult are split and taught in bits with adequate lesson periods.

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