



Factors influencing reader's ability to contextual comprehension: A close examination



Review article



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Dominic Nti

Department of English,

Berekum College of Education, Ghana

Email: dominicnti8@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7743-0154>

Abstract

Reading and comprehending a text is a critical endeavor that enhances learners' mastery of content and vocabulary development. However, a number of factors have been identified that inhibits students' readability and vocabulary development. Various researches have shown that students who are unable read find it very difficult to climb higher on the educational ladder. For instance, Sweet (1996) in his book "Individual Differences in Second-language Learning" argues that "reading is the gateway skills; without the necessary abilities to read, students will not be able to advance into all learning areas." This implies that reading is a complex process of identification, recognition, perception, mental and application of written language. The study therefore explores the various factors that affect reading ability and comprehension of text by students in Berekum senior High School, Ghana. This study, however, found out that vocabulary development relies on proper reading skills.

Keywords: contextual, concentration, comprehension, expository, purposeful, perception, strategies



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In his research, Boabang (2010), explains that, there are quite a number of factors which contribute to a reader's ability to comprehend text. She cited G. A. K. Gogovi et al as enumerating ten factors that inhibit the readers' comprehension of a text, even though they are able to decode it. The factors are as follows: The language of the text. When the language of the text is too difficult, readers find it difficult to comprehend it. When pupils in basic six reading texts are difficult, readers find it difficult to comprehend it. When pupils in basic six reading texts are difficult, readers find it difficult to understand the vocabulary items in the texts.

The second is the presence of far too many difficult words in a text. When you read a text in which there are too many unfamiliar words, you become frustrated. In many cases, you have to refer to a dictionary many times to check the meanings of the words. Generally, the vocabulary of a narrative text is easier to understand than that of expository text. Expository texts are more compact and contain many unfamiliar words; basic six pupils lose understanding of the text. Also, when it involves new concepts and ideas which are not familiar to pupils, comprehension becomes a problem. The context of a text is the third factor. When the context of a text is far removed or foreign to readers, they find it difficult to relate to it. It is recommended that one should always try to stop reading when you see yourself falling into a habit of just decoding. Strive for meaning. As a much as possible, slow down your reading speed and analyze the text critically. Pupils in basic six need to analyze the text by asking a lot of questions.

The fourth factor is the lack or purposeful reading. Very often, we read without knowing why we are reading. There are different purposes for which we read and each purpose determines the type of reading we should engage in. It is necessary that you read slowly sometimes and rapidly at other times. Rate of reading should correspond to your purpose of reading. The teacher should help pupils understand why they are reading the text.

The fifth factor is the speed level. Comprehension involves the reader knowing the speed at which to read the materials at hand and the necessary skills to apply in understanding the text. The way you read your newspaper should be different from the way you read your storybooks or poetry. In reading storybooks or poetry, your focus is on enjoying the text. The teacher needs to adjust pupils reading speed on the text.

The sixth factor is our perception of our reading. Poor readers try to understand every word in a text and as a result read word by word. Readers need to pay attention to the parts of the text that contain the main ideas. Interestingly, one does not have to understand the individual words being read, but focusing on understanding the totality of the whole text is critical.

The seventh factor is a lack of concentration. Anyegbunan (1979), states that “Concentration is defined as giving undivided attention to whatever one is reading”. To concentrate, one has to use the whole mind. Thus, when you realize that your mind is wandering, it is advisable to pause immediately. Before basic six pupils can read a text, the teacher needs to ensure they do so in a quiet and peaceful atmosphere devoid of distractions, where the pupils can focus their whole attention on the text.

The eighth factor is the inability to connect new information in the text to background knowledge the reader already has about the topic being discussed in the text. The reading difficulty that most people have is lack of background knowledge about the texts that we read. When basic six pupils have the idea about a subject matter or main idea in the text being read, they will comprehend it better.

The ninth factor is the lack of necessary strategies to use during comprehension based reading. One needs to have comprehension strategies to use when comprehension breaks down. One needs to slow down and re – read the material one is reading all over again to help get the information one is looking for. It is essential for basic six teachers develop strategies to help sustain the comprehension of pupils in class.

The final factor is the reader’s own attitudes and notification. When readers have no interest in studying a particular subject, it becomes difficult and burdensome for him/her to engage in reading texts that bother on that subject. People are more motivated to read when they enjoy and are interested in what they are reading. Consequently, teachers should adopt teaching strategies that will motivate and sustain the interest of students in reading each particular subject.

Although addressing reading comprehension is not the main focus of this thesis, it has an indirect bearing on improving the vocabulary level of Berekum Senior High School students since one’s ability to read and comprehend a text depends on one’s level of vocabulary. Hence the innovative way of using newspaper articles to enhance students’ vocabulary knowledge is laudable. In another thesis presented to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Cape Coast in July 2011 by Godfred Amponsah Yeboah, entitled “Improving the Reading Skills among the Pupils of Berekum Methodist Primary ‘A’ using the Eclectic Approach”, he stated that physical defects such as poor vision and impartial hearing can also affect students ability to read. If a child has a hearing defect, he or she will then be unable to develop letter sounds association which is vital to the reading process. Similarly, a child with blurred vision will have difficulties seeing and identifying letters and words.

He also submitted that pupils whose parents show large amount of interest in their academic work try to please their parents; whiles those parents who show little

interest in the academic work of their children do not help them read. Amponsah again cited Gilchrist (2006) as saying that the home environment contributes to the pupils' low or high academic performance. He noted that pupils from a home which values education, parents who show interest in their children's education perform very well. It is accepted universally that the home is a child's school. This is where he or she develops language and where his or her association of language with object first begins. The home environment should be one that is conducive for reading. In homes where this is mentioned, when children come to school, they are either ready to read or are already reading. The home should be the first place where children are exposed to books and other essential reading materials. The parents themselves should create this kind of atmosphere.

However, research has shown that many students who are unable to read are from homes where there is lack of stimulation during the formative years. A lot of parents do not take time to talk to their children and to provide books and other reading materials to support reading at home and early age as reiterated by Gilchrist. In the same way, Amponsah cited Goldenberg (2007) as stating empathically that parents' direct involvement in the education of their children may significantly influence their academic achievement. He noted that pupils who frequently improve upon their reading skills usually receive encouragement from tutors and parents, hence parents' interest and direct involvement in their children's education is very essential if pupils are to achieve their goals in school. Parents should therefore adopt good attitude towards the education of their children by providing them with reading materials so that these children will attain optimum achievement in school. Parents who are unable to read as a result fail to provide the necessary materials to motivate and stimulate children to read. Undoubtedly, lack of interest on the part of parents is a contributing factor.

According to Amponsah, Clarke (2001) also supported Goldenberg's idea. Clarke found out that parents who have high academic attainments set firm but not harsh rules, seek information about their children's academic progress and enhance literacy skills through activities such as reading and playing of word games. Amponsah further cited Prewitt (2000) who says that in a study in Kenya, parents who buy books and educational materials, speak English with their children at home and deploy resources in a manner that creates conducive pre-school conditions see their children performing well at school.

In the year 2000, a researcher named Diane Crawford, then at the Port Henderson Primary School in Jamaica revealed in a research that poor socio – economic background is a contributing factor since parents with low backgrounds are unable to provide basic reading materials for their children. Children (siblings)

from such homes usually contest among themselves, for exercise books, pens and pencils. It was further stated that in such homes there is general lack of reading materials so students are not exposed to books until they are sent to school. Early exposure to books stimulates children to read. It is a fact that the social position of one's family can also be a barrier to school attendance. Ultimately, some students who are from low – income earning families are often not sent to school because of financial constraints, irregular attendance to school also contributes to students' inability to read.

Again, Amponsah cites Diane Crawford (2000), who also reported that poor nutrition is also another factor which contributes to children's inability to read. A student who is malnourished cannot sit down and listen to instruction. They (malnourished students) are usually listless, tend to sleep in class and have short attention span. Malnutrition can also affect students' vision. Language barrier is also a cause of reading difficulties. For instance, the predominant languages used in almost all homes in Berekum is Asante Twi or Bono Twi, while most books used in school are written in either American or British English. Amponsah reiterates ideas propagated by Angling (2000), who states that lower class children are not facilitated at school because the language they use to communicate at home differs significantly from the language used in teaching methods. Angling further hinted that lower class homes seem to be characterised by a lot of noise and very little sustained verbal communication; while the middle class homes seems almost the reverse. As matter of fact, language is one of the barriers to reading. Amponsah reports Diane Crawford as visiting Port Henderson Primary, a school in a rural district in the province of St. Mary, Jamaica. She met a young girl of about five years and interacted with her. She questioned the girl "what is your name?" The child did not respond. She then used the cariole language to ask the same question. Quickly, the child responded. One can say that sometimes the difference in speech pattern used by students and the language in books can become barriers which can affect a child's ability to read.

Lack of motivation and interest on the parts of students are also factors that affect reading. The student might not necessarily see the need to learn to read in that time period when a majority of the populace who are unable to read have succeeded in running very lucrative businesses and are seen to be doing well in life. This phenomenon serves as a great disincentive to a lot of children, who at that tender age believe that one does not need education to succeed in life. They may resort to dropping out of school and engaging in menial jobs. Motivation is again usually low on the part of both teachers and students. It is recommended that students who are found to be making the effort of speaking the English language

should be encouraged. Essay competitions (with rewards for the best performing students) should be organized to improve upon students' English speaking and vocabulary. On the part of teachers, an award scheme should be set up to reward deserving teachers as well as motivate other teachers to improve upon their teaching methods.

Amponsah cites Agyemang (2000), who states that teachers who do not have both the academic and professional teacher qualifications undoubtedly have a negative influence on the teaching and learning of his students. He however argues that, a teacher who is academically and professionally qualified but works under unfavourable conditions of service would be less dedicated to work and consequently less productive than a teacher who is unqualified but works under favourable conditions of service. There is no doubt that pupils of Berekum Methodist Primary School are battling this problem, almost all the teachers are qualified but work under poor conditions of service. Amponsah also mentioned that the teaching strategies and methodology that are employed by teachers can also contribute to students' inability to read. The teacher should be a facilitator rather than an oracle in the classroom. Students should be given opportunities to discover and explore for themselves and the lesson should be centred on their interest and their abilities. A very effective method is to group students according to their level when teaching them to read. He pointed out that the way a teacher plans his lessons will affect the teaching and learning situation in many ways. It is the teacher who should create the learning environment by making it conducive and wholesome and develop readiness in pupils by motivating them to learn (how to read).

According to Broom (2004), the creative use of variety of media increases the probability that students would learn more, retain better what they learn and also stated that young children are capable of understanding abstract ideas, if they are provided with sufficient materials and concrete experience with the phenomena that they are to understand. If English teachers would be provided with sufficient and appropriate learning materials, then teaching students to read would be much simple and students would understand much better, thereby sustaining their interest in reading.

Again, class size has been identified to impact on academic performance. Studies have shown that schools with smaller class sizes usually perform better than schools with larger class sizes. Amponsah cites Kraft (1994) to buttress his point. In Kraft's study of the ideal class size and its effect on effective teaching and learning in Ghana, he concluded that a class size above 40 students has negative effects on students' achievements. This idea was supported by Asiedu – Akrofi (1978), when he said that since children have different levels of motivation, interest and abilities and

also differ in health, personal and social adjustments and creativity, the smaller the class size, the more attention that can be given to individual students. Generally, good teaching is best done in a class with smaller members that allow for individual motivation. With this in mind, pupils will be motivated to read since the teacher can manage the class well and would be able to identify each child's problem and pay attention to the problem by finding solutions to it. By making inferences from the above discussions, although it is not directly related to this research topic but it has some link because motivating and sustaining the interest of individual students in learning to identify and acquire vocabulary is fundamental to reading, hence the need for this innovative way of using newspaper articles to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge.

In July 2011, Godfred K. Kwang also presented a thesis to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Cape Coast. The thesis had the topic "Improving the Reading Skills of Pupils of Drobo D/A Primary School Class Five". In this thesis, Kwang mentioned some general problems associated with reading in which he cited Bryon (1990) as mentioning "lack of rich language environment" as part of these problems. Pupils who are not exposed to rich language structures in the home and in other activities face reading problems. The activities done in nurturing literacy such as reading books, listening to stories and engaging in free exchange of ideas form important basis for language skills. However, not all families provide such advantages. Some parents lack the reading skills to foster literacy in their wards. Others do not value such experiences but rather value obedience and respect from children. Kwang again cited Alderson and Viqualar (1984) as asserting that "poor first language readers will read poorly in a foreign language and good first language readers will excel in a foreign language due to adequate knowledge of the target language". The extract above goes on to support the educational directives that a child should be taught in the first language three years in the school of which when followed nicely will be very beneficial to all children.

According to Kwan, Roger (1990 -1991), in his book "Developing Reading for Thirteen Years" states that "the pleasurable aspects of reading have not received the same attention". This has been a contributory factor to the reading problems of children especially the pupils in Primary Five of Drobo D/A Primary School. Whilst much talk is done on the golden age of children literacy, he declares by stressing on the frequent use of libraries. Roger further points out that some perceptive parents begin to realize that their ward is not reading and further, they are totally unable to be self – sufficient in books and other kinds of reading materials.

Kwang again mentioned that according to Chill Jacobs and Baldwin (1979), some reading problems are based on the individual's background. He said the

individual's background impacts significantly on the development of reading. The early development of the ego and self-concept also depends upon the support and encouragement of parents' studies that compare good and bad reading to show that pupils who experience success are much likely to have a favourable environment. To further buttress his argument about the impact of one's background on reading, Kwang cited Southgate and Robberies (1979), who also affirm how the home background contributes greatly to reading problems among pupils in the upper primary schools. They said "among the relevant factors, the pupils' social background are the socio – economic and cultural level of their parent including their interest in books and the extent to which they read and the children's progress".

The above argument clearly shows that parents are very important in stimulating love for reading by their children in school, parents who keep to the reading of their wards or talking about their favourite actors and also asking them to explain a character's role in a film, taking children to libraries, buying books and newspapers for their wards and reading to them often will inculcate the habit of reading in the children. Sadly, today's children if not coming from a literate home or environment may come from an increasingly single parents with a difficult illiterate environment. Kwang also mentioned the social environment as contributing to reading problems. He said successful interactions with friends have provided many satisfactory opportunities for confidence. He cited Pearl Dauahul and Brgon (1986) who assert that, unfortunately, evidence shows that social unpopularity tends to accompany school failure or reading problems among pupils in upper primary schools. Poor achievers or readers are uninvolved in extracurricular activities. Pupils with reading problems tend to have problems in interaction, usually exhibiting poor social perception skills. When children develop normally, they learn social skills in casual and informal manners. These include what to say, how to say it, how to behave and how to "give" and talk in human situations. However, pupils with reading problems are sometimes not sensitive to social menaces. In contrast to normal achievers, under-achieving pupils tend to overestimate their own social shortcomings and have difficulties reacting to peers in a social setting.

If this researcher is going to achieve success in improving the vocabulary levels of students of Berekum Senior High school, then it is imperative that all the social factors that inhibit reading are addressed so that the students can make the best out of reading newspaper articles to enhance their vocabulary. In that same year 2011, Peter Okrah presented a thesis to the School of Graduate Studies; University of Cape Coast entitled "Improving the reading ability of Junior High School Pupils using the Syllabic Method at Wamanafo S.D.A Junior High School". In that thesis, Okrah outlined some causes of pupils' inability to read properly. He said poor reading habits

and reading difficulties do not help pupils to excel in their academic performance. He said there are numerous factors that contribute to pupils' inability to read properly. Among these are social factors, lack of continuity and concentration and inappropriate reading materials.

Socially, a number of factors were identified by Okrah as contributing to pupils' reading difficulty at the basic level. He cited Freiser (1970) as classifying these social factors into cultural factors, material variables and emotional variables. With regards to cultural variables, it is generally known that children of literate parents have high academic achievement since such parents knowing the benefits of education provide necessary support for their wards to read and learn properly at home and school, but the situation is usually the reverse in the home of poor parents. Okrah cited Hann (1984) in support of Freiser's point which states that, positive attitude towards reading and success in reading can be influenced by many factors including home background and stimulating linguistic – cultural experiences, communication skills and cultivating interest in variety of reading materials. In relation to material variables, children from poor homes or those that have large family sizes lack the pertinent materials that will help them perform better academically. Such children are usually deprived of opportunities for linguistic development but this is not to say that all children from poor and deprived homes can never do well in school, especially with regards to reading.

With emotional factors, it is generally known that children from poor homes where there are constant friction and confusion between the parents or within the society are usually denied the necessary psychological needs such as security and love. Such children are emotionally disturbed both at home and school. This type of situation adversely affects the child's ability to learn in general and reading in particular. On the part of Bamman (1992), he observes that lack of continuity may exist in a school if teachers disagree on when and how children out to be taught to read. Children may face demands they cannot meet when they move to a higher class along the academic ladder. Also, other children may be asked to repeat instructions even though they have already mastered the skills being taught. This may bring about frustration which could lead to failure in reading; buttressing the point that reading requires concentration and continuity.

With regards to inappropriate reading materials, Bamman (1992) notes that, reading success is determined not only by how well a person reads but also how readable the material is. At the basic level, pupils' inability to read is due to the fact that the reading materials are not available. Those few books which are available are either below or above their level. When it comes to preparation to read, beginners have to be taken through series of activities before formal reading starts. These

activities are meant to equip pupils or readers with skills necessary for formal reading. For reading skills to be achieved effectively, preliminary activities need to be introduced. Such activities include recognising word boundaries, sorting picture dominoes, jig – saw puzzle, box and dot game and recognising rhyming words among others. Hann (1984) refers to reading readiness as the point or stage at which the child is ready to begin the process of reading. Hann asserts that for pupils to be successful at reading, one must be ready or prepared for it.

Tsadidey (2002) argues that the concepts of reading readiness is based on the assumption that for reading to be effective, there should be gradual transition from speaking through exposure to reading itself. It is thus important to make sure that beginners go through different activities to prepare them for reading. With regards to methods of teaching reading, unlike walking and breathing which are natural phenomena, reading is learnt and thus must be taught. It requires a number of skills since it is a very sophisticated activity. Joyce Morris in her introduction to Mayle (1968) observed that reading is a product of civilisation. She indicated that reading comes as a result of interaction with others, hence the teaching of reading should be conversational. Pupils must therefore be given systematic instructions based on an accurate diagnosis of their individual differences. Okrah again mentioned Tabi – Arhin P. (2010) in his book “Practical English Methodology” who enumerated several activities that can be employed in teaching English reading at the basic level. He further classified these activities into skills that the child needs in order to read well. According to him, the skills are: Oral Language Development, Auditory Discrimination, Visual Discrimination, Visual – Motor Skill, Visual Comprehension Skill and Concept Building. He again described syllabic and phonic methods as the widely accepted method used in teaching English reading.

Conclusion

Considering the above arguments, it is evident that this literature has no direct relationship with the topic enhancing vocabulary through the use of newspaper articles; however, it has an indirect bearing on it since vocabulary acquisition relies heavily on proper reading skills.

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