



## Impact of Newspaper Articles in Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition among Students

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### ABSTRACT

Inability of students in the second cycle institutions to acquire and use appropriate vocabulary is the problem of many schools, and Berekum Senior High School is not an exception. The school's results reflect the poor language standard in the school. Initial observations reveal that inadequate vocabulary on the part of students results in poor expression. Therefore, students find it difficult to use appropriate words in the application of the English Language. Data was collected through use of interview, questionnaire and observation. The findings collected revealed that pupils find it difficult to understand the teaching and learning materials used in reading. This gradually retards their reading competency at the kindergarten up to primary school level. Results were analysed and discussed empirically.

**Keywords:** *English, newspaper article, students, vocabulary*



## 1.0 Literature review

A research carried out by Sonbul and Schmitt in April 2010, in Nigeria, concerning the learning of English vocabulary in Senior high Schools which appeared in the July 2010, Edition of the ELT Journal with the title: 'Direct teaching of Vocabulary items after reading passages: is it worth the effort? The lexical researchers proposed two main approaches to vocabulary learning in second language context: "explicit learning", i.e. learning vocabulary when the focus is on the words to be learnt, and "incidental learning" i.e. learning vocabulary as a by-product of any language learning activity such as reading. The study compared vocabulary learning under a reading only condition (incidental learning) to learning that is aided by direct communication of word meaning (explicit meaning). Three levels of vocabulary knowledge (form recall, meaning recall, and meaning recognition) were assessed using three tests (completion/fill in blanks, L1 translation and multiple choice respectively). Incidental learning plus explicit instruction was found to be more effective than incidental learning alone for all the three levels. The results also showed that direct instruction is especially effective in facilitating the deepest level of knowledge, i.e. form recall. These findings demonstrate the value of the time and effort spent on direct teaching of lexical items in English as a second language class. The research further stated that in practice, teachers of English in senior high schools in many foreign language contexts of which Ghana is one combine explicit and incidental approaches and with good reason, as research has shown that this combination is effective. For example, Hill and Laufer (2003) found that post-reading task explicitly focusing on target words led to better vocabulary learning than comprehension questions which required knowledge of the target words meaning. The research further quoted Mondria (2003) saying that "combination of word inference followed up by verification with a word list led to just as much vocabulary (about 50 percent) as giving students an L<sub>1</sub> translation before memorization". This shows that incidental learning plus explicit follow-up can be just as effective as a purely explicit approach. So incidental and explicit approaches are generally complementary and are often usefully combined. Pre-informed by the above research and its findings, the researcher will blend the incidental learning and explicit instruction in using newspaper articles to enhance the vocabulary stock of the students. The activities that will be carried out in using newspaper articles to enhance the vocabulary stock of the students will take into accounts all the three levels of vocabulary knowledge identified by the research, i.e. form recall, meaning recall and recognition.

Anohor Isaac also presented a thesis to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Education, Winneba in December 2012, entitled "Improving Reading Comprehension among Teacher Trainees in Ghana, A Case Study at St. John Bosco's College of Education, Navrongo". Anohor outlined basic causes of trainees' inability to read effectively. The causes of trainees' inability to read as cited by Anohor were based

on Goodman's (1970) Model on reading which sees reading as a "Psycholinguistic guessing game", that is when a person reads, he selects appropriate and necessary language cues to make predictions about what he is reading. These predictions are verified by a cyclical process of confirming, rejecting or refining. To Goodman, reading involves "... an interaction between thought and language". According to Goodman's Model, efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements but rather from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time".

Goodman believes that a reader uses a 3 cue system. They include,

- I. The grapho – phonic cue system: Information is obtained from the graphic and phonological system of oral mode.
- II. The syntactic cue system: Information implicit in the grammatical structures of the language is utilized.
- III. The semantic cue system: The reader recalls his own experiences and utilizes his own conceptual background in order to bring meaning to his reading task. If the reader does not have sufficient relevant knowledge he will be unable to comprehend what he is reading. Reading is thus the result of graphic, syntactic and semantic components all of which work together.

Because the English as a second language (ESL) Learner has not developed full linguistic competence in the second language, he may find it difficult to participate in the "psycholinguistic guessing game". Sampling the graphic, syntactic and semantic cues in the writers' text may prove quite a problem for the ESL student. The student may understand all the lexical items in the passage and yet may not understand the passage because the syntactic rules of his native language differ from those of the second language. The ESL reader's literacy in his own language may help to a certain extent as he is able to transfer the more mechanical aspects of reading automatically to reading in a new language. However, his unfamiliarity with grammatical rules of the target language and words which he may never have encountered before will severely hinder him from developing appropriate sampling techniques. He is therefore forced to rely heavily on the graphic display in the text in order to achieve meaning. Metacognition (Flavell 1979; Kuhn 2000: 178; Veeman 1993; Oneil and Abedi 1996) refer to two aspects, namely the students' self – awareness of knowledge base in which information is stored about how, when and where to use various cognitive strategies and their self-awareness of and access to strategies and their self – awareness of and access to strategies that direct learning (e.g. monitoring difficulty level, a feeling of knowing). This awareness is developmental and lies in a continuum. Proficient readers use one or more cognitive strategies to comprehend texts. Yet, teacher trainees especially those of St. John Bosco's College of Education lack these self – awareness hence a difficulty in understanding texts. Anohor cited Sackeyefio (1998), who states that the "teacher's

attitude towards teaching this aspect of English language (Reading Comprehension) affects student's comprehension to a text. She terms these attitudes as:

- I. The free – period attitude
- II. The least – effort
- III. The ill – effort if only silent reading

By her submission, most teachers underrate comprehension lessons and unwittingly feel that such periods are free. The least – effort attitude is when the teacher hardly does work but just sits down and asks learners to open any reading material available and read. In this case it is only the brilliant students who read aloud then follows the answering of some questions by those same students. Sometimes teachers do not even listen to what is read by the brilliant students.

III – effort silent reading is the situation where silent reading is overdone. Sackyefio thinks that silent reading of a passage is followed by silent answering of questions and this has repercussions which include:

- i. Making the lesson boring in that, class participation is very poor.
- ii. Favouring only few students who can read but do not achieve much in the reading.

Yorio also said that much as he agrees with Sackyefio on the causes of trainees' inability to understand reading comprehension, he thinks that most teachers lack the competence of handling comprehension lessons effectively and this brings the attitudes suggested. By making inferences from the above discussions, although it is not directly related to this research topic, it has some link because the few cues which Goodman's Model suggests as the basis for comprehension in reading will not yield any positive results if students do not have those cues as their part of their vocabulary stock, hence their innovative way of using newspaper articles to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge. In a related thesis presented to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Education, Winneba in December 2011, entitled "The Effects of Vocabulary Treatment on Reading Comprehension, A Case study at Nana Ankobea Takyiwah Junior High School, Mampong – Akuapem" in the Eastern Region, Juliet Annan stated that, "a good stock of vocabulary is crucial for understanding and communication". According to her, she made this statement based on the answers she received from the students for the question below:

"Does vocabulary play a major role in reading comprehension lessons?"

These were the answers she received from the respondents:

"Erm, any time our teacher tries to explain the vocabulary to us, we enjoy reading"

"I love reading when I understand most of the words in the passage".

"When I meet words that I already know in the passage, the reading becomes interesting".

“Anytime my English teacher takes time to treat unfamiliar words with us, the lesson becomes interesting”.

“If I am able to identify a meaning to a word in the passage, I don’t even want the lesson to end”.

She further enquired from students how they figure out the meaning of words without consulting a dictionary through the question below:

“How do you make meaning of new words in a text without resorting to a dictionary?”

The answers from the respondents were:

- i. “I ask my teacher for the meaning”.
- ii. “In our text books, meaning of some difficult words are written at the last pages, so I just refer”.
- iii. “I ask some people like my father, mother, friends or sister for an answer”.
- iv. “My teacher usually forms sentences with those words”.

Although the focus of this research is to enhance students’ vocabulary through the use of newspaper articles and not the importance of vocabulary, but one can boldly say that the researcher is very right in trying to increase the vocabulary knowledge of students because by looking at the responses of students to the questions above, one cannot underestimate the importance of vocabulary knowledge if one wants to learn, especially reading comprehension in particular. In the same thesis, Annan mentioned some attitudes of teachers and students which may inhibit reading comprehension. On the part of the students, she mentioned that when a student mispronounces words or a word in the cause of reading, the other classmates usually label that student and spread the news all over the school. When this happens, the next time that student is called upon to read, he focuses on getting pronunciations right rather than understanding the text. Consequently, the comprehension aspect of the reading is inhibited. On the part of teachers, she said reading comprehension may be inhibited if a teacher has his/her favourite student that he/she appoints to read all the time. When this happens, the rest of the students feel ignored and for that matter do not pay attention to whatever is going on in class thereby losing so much. She also mentioned the situation where some teachers do the reading all by themselves without appointing some of the students to partake in the reading as one of the causes of students’ inability to comprehend a text. All these although not directly related to this researcher’s topic, one can say that all boils down to vocabulary because if a student has enough vocabularies he will be conversant with a lot and for that matter reduce the number of mistakes in terms of pronunciation to avoid embarrassment from other students. This clearly shows how important vocabulary knowledge is in learning.

Again, Annan also mentioned that students find text very difficult to comprehend when familiar words and simple sentences are not used. She cited Franscoi G. (1992) to further drum home her message. She said Franscoi G. confirmed “one vital aspect of reading comprehension is the ability to assess and evaluate the language used by the writer, the kind of sentences he chooses and the way he arranges them”. Although this is not directly related to enhancing students’ vocabulary through newspaper articles, it has some indirect bearing because it boils down to one’s vocabulary which if wide affects one’s level of comprehension hence the need for students’ vocabulary knowledge to be enhanced through innovative ways like newspaper article reading. In another thesis presented to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Education, Winneba in December 2012, entitled “Helping JHS One Students improve their Reading Comprehension through Language Game: An Action Research at Obuasi Presbyterian JHS in the Ashanti Region” by Benjamin Kojo Eshun. Eshun mentioned that the role that vocabulary plays in reading cannot be overemphasized. He said reading moves hand in hand with vocabulary. He cited Mckeown (1985), as saying “vocabulary knowledge and reading achievements are closely related, students with larger vocabularies are more capable readers and they have a wider repertoire of strategies for figuring the meaning of unfamiliar words than less capable readers do”.

In that same thesis, Eshun cited Nagy (1988:1) saying “Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension; one cannot understand any text without knowing most of the words”. In a discussion of high correlation of vocabulary and comprehension test scores, Mary E. Curtis emphasis how vocabulary level of difficulty and our background knowledge work together to affect the challenges we face when reading. He said the relationship between reading and vocabulary is typically one of mutual improvement and growth. This is because as someone reads more, his or her vocabulary typically expands and grows and then he or she is able to read a wider range of works. While there are some exceptions to this idea, in general, a person is likely to develop a stronger vocabulary by reading and reading a wide range of materials. In order for reading and vocabulary to have this mutually beneficial relationship, however, a reader must be sure to actually try to improve his or her vocabulary while reading by learning new words. He also mentioned that reading and vocabulary are both important concepts within any written language, and they typically develop together for young people. While most children begin to acquire spoken language prior to reading, this language development is often somewhat limited. As the child begins to read and write, then his or her vocabulary typically expands a great deal beyond what he or she previously had. This is because reading and vocabulary are connected as a process of learning and expanding on ideas.

As a person reads, he or she is likely to encounter new words and ideas that he or she has never read before. Even though many teachers focus on vocabulary

lessons in a classroom, no number of lessons can ever hope to teach every word available in a complex, written language. Reading and vocabulary are important to each other because reading provides an opportunity for new words to be discovered, so the vocabulary of the reader can grow and expand. Eshun continued that, this is not an absolute relationship, however, and reading can be done without any improvement to vocabulary. Someone reading a book below his or level is not likely to encounter new or unfamiliar words. Similarly, if someone does encounter a new word, but simply passes over it without an effort to understand it, then his or her vocabulary is unlikely to expand. Reading and vocabulary often work together only if the reader actually makes an effort to understand a new word. As someone's vocabulary expands through reading, the he or she is able to read at a higher level. This allows a person to take on more challenging works of literature or writing as his or her comprehension of language has improved. Reading and vocabulary do not always benefit each other in this way, however, as someone may not be able to encounter specialized words or language by reading a text related to another issue. Eshun again said reading is an interactive process of constructing meaning. Meaning derived from reading depends upon the reader's word – recognition capabilities, purpose for reading, strategies for monitoring performance, and experiential and conceptual background. Vocabulary is a major contributing factor to reading comprehension. The words that readers know represent the concepts and information available to help them make sense of what they read. Words and experiences are woven together to learn, to confirm, to reason, to experience, to enjoy and to imagine. It is this interaction that makes vocabulary such a powerful part of reading and writing for meaning. Eshun cited Davis, (1994, 1968) as saying “one of the longest, most clearly articulated lines of research in literacy education describes the strong connection between readers' vocabulary knowledge and their ability to understand what they read. An interesting side of this connection, however, is the fact that, despite this strong persistent relationship, programmes designed to teach vocabulary have often had surprisingly little effect on reading performance”.

He again cites Graves (1994) saying “students vocabularies are tremendously important to their success in school and in the larger world outside school. Education has shown that teaching vocabulary can improve the comprehension and memory of selections containing the vocabulary taught. He said for both children and adults, vocabulary are probably best increased through extensive independent reading. But direct instruction also results in vocabulary growth. He again cited D'Myeto (1988:183) saying “Vocabulary knowledge is a principal contributor to reading comprehension. It may comprise as much as 50 percent to 80 percent of what children comprehend. This is especially true in subject areas where the vocabulary is technical”. It is clear from the above discussions that there cannot be any meaningful or purposeful reading when the reader lacks word recognition and word identification skills. Vocabulary knowledge

is therefore a key to reading at any level of education. Readers must have a bit of knowledge of what kind of text they are reading to be able to make meaning and enjoy it hence the innovative way of using newspaper articles to enhance the vocabulary stock of students.

Oxford and Scarcella (1994) in a research concerning the learning of English vocabulary in the second language context, proposed a new research-based approach to vocabulary teaching after examining relevant research concerning student motivation and need, the complexity of knowing a word, as well as factors that affect L2 vocabulary acquisition. Compared with traditional approaches, in which vocabulary is often taught unsystematically in class and teachers tend to leave their students to learn vocabulary on their own without much instruction or guidance, teachers following this new research-based approach focus on words students are expected to meet frequently, and present words systematically based on a careful consideration of needs analysis. Vocabulary instruction is personalized according to learners' different learning needs, goals, and styles. Since most vocabulary learning takes place outside of the language classroom, learners are also trained to raise their awareness of the knowledge involved in knowing a lexical item and the process of learning a new word. As it has been mentioned that most vocabulary learning takes place outside the classroom then the researcher believes using newspaper articles to enhance student's vocabulary stock will work to perfection because newspapers are mostly found outside the language classroom. This will further help students to become independent language learners outside the classroom. Substantial emphasis on vocabulary learning strategies helps students become independent language learners inside and outside class. Among the numerous vocabulary learning strategies, guessing from context is held to be the most useful one. However, some studies (e.g. Pressley *et al.* 1987; Kelly 1990) indicate that learners seldom guess the correct meanings. In this approach, therefore, teachers guide students to use this strategy effectively and give them opportunities to practice the skill in class. A final point to note is that teachers reduce "decontextualized" vocabulary learning activities in class (e.g. word lists, flashcards) whereas implementing more "partially contextualized" (e.g. word association, visual and aural imagery, semantic mapping) or "fully contextualized" activities (e.g. reading, listening, speaking, and writing in authentic communication activities).

In a related research carried out by Lescano in June, 1995 in Cameroon concerning the reading problems of senior high school students, it was found out that two out of every ten students in a class in Cameroon cannot read. Although this research does not directly relate to using newspaper article to enhance students' vocabulary, but a critical look at this research area reveals that those students do not have enough vocabulary that is why they cannot read because reading is done with vocabulary items. Sweet (1996) in his book "Individual Differences in Second- Language learning" says '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. Although not so much related, the complex process of identification, recognition, perception and application of written language all boils down to vocabulary because one's ability to recognize and apply a particular language tells you straight away that that person has that vocabulary in stock. In a thesis presented to the School Of Graduate Studies, University of Cape Coast in August 2012, entitled "Improving the Reading Skills among First Year Students of Drobo Secondary School in Brong Ahafo Region", Amoako – Attah Benjamin stated that all the language art contributes to vocabulary growth. He says that it is only through constant process of reading that develops the awareness of the meaning of words. He added that 'words are the currency of communication, the main medium of exchange of ideas is through words'. He said it is essential to any spoken or written language experience. For this reason, vocabulary development is an essential part of language art. He continues that vocabulary development begins long before formal reading instructions. Although it is not directly related to the researcher's topic, it has some link with it because it further emphasizes the importance of vocabulary and consequently, its development and so the innovative means of using newspaper articles to enhance the vocabulary stock of students.

In that same thesis, Amoako – Attah asserts that the ability to read serves as a tool for vocation and aids in meeting everyday needs, a pursuit for leisure time, a tool citizenship, a source of spiritual refreshment and aids to enrich and experience life fully. This means that one's ability to read could give him\her leisure and vocation and helps him\her to develop spiritually. One's ability to read also depends on his\her stock of vocabulary which inherently tells us that we must have a very good stock of vocabulary in order to go into vocation, leisure and above all, develop spiritually hence the innovative way of enhancing students' vocabulary through the use of newspaper articles. He finally mentioned that there is no substitute for reading. Thus, reading remains second to speech as the major means for communication. It is a learnt skill and therefore has to be taught, the more pupils read, the more they will have a good academic foundation. All these that have been said about reading indirectly have some link with vocabulary because one cannot read without vocabulary and based on these research findings and others, the researcher decided to use newspaper articles to enhance students' vocabulary stock so that they can have a good academic foundation and function effectively in society.

Ali Aisha also presented a thesis to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Cape Coast in July 2013 titled: "Assisting First Year Students of Bechem Presbyterian Senior High School to overcome their inability to comprehend a Text". She mentioned a lot of factors that account for the students' ability to comprehend a text. For instance, she mentioned that "students are compelled to read when they are moved", that is,

when students are not ready. She said the situation is worse in the kindergartens where pupils are wrongly introduced to reading while they are not ready. They build a perception at that age that reading is a difficult task. She also mentioned the presence of too many difficult words or vocabulary. When a student is reading this kind of text in which there are so many difficult vocabulary items, he/she becomes frustrated. She suggested that in many cases they should have dictionaries to check the meaning of the unfamiliar words which in many cases slows down reading process. In the same thesis, she mentioned the content of the text as another factor which inhibits students' ability to comprehend a text. She said when a context is far removed or new to readers, they find it very difficult to relate to it. She said students always feel reluctant to continue reading when the context of the text is far-fetched.

She also mentioned the perception of reading as a contributing factor which affects students' comprehension skills at Bechem Presbyterian Senior High School. She said if students perceive reading a necessary tool for academic advancement, they tend to take it seriously but if they perceive it as a leisure activity it affects their level of seriousness thereby affecting their level of comprehension. She expatiated further stating that, poor readers try to understand every word instead of looking for the idea in the text. She further mentioned lack of concentration on the part of students as one of the factors that affects their comprehension. Again, she cited the inability of students to connect new information in the text to the background knowledge as one impediment to students' comprehension skills. When a student in a secondary school has an idea of a particular subject matter, there should be the presence of background knowledge. She further identified the lack of purposeful reading as a factor that affects the students' comprehension skills. This in other words means that very often, many people read without knowing why exactly they are reading that particular piece of text. There are different purposes for which we read and each purpose determines the type of reading one should engage in. So if students engage in reading without an underlying definite purpose, they tend to read without comprehending the text. By looking at all the assertions that Aisha made, it is evident that even though these assertions are not directly related to enhancing students' vocabulary through newspaper articles, but a critical look at it shows that comprehension of any text relies heavily on vocabulary, because if one's vocabulary stock is strong, his/her chances of comprehending a text is very high hence the innovative way of enhancing students' vocabulary through newspaper articles. In a thesis presented to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Cape Coast in July 2010, entitled "Investigations into Basic Six Pupils' inability to Read and Comprehend a Written Material: A Case Study at Wamfie S.D.A Primary School" by Franscisca Boabang, she mentioned that a student's ability to read is one of the most dependable indicators of whether that student will obtain the competence needed, most importantly to achieve academic success in school and contribute immensely to society. However, many pupils of various cultures around the globe do

not have this level of competence, despite global and national efforts to improve literacy. Furthermore, most experts including educationists have expressed their views about some of the causes of poor reading.

She cited Veatch (1966) and Gagg (1953) as suggesting the following as the causes of poor reading. First, pupils are compelled to read when they are not matured. This is worse in the kindergarten when pupils are wrongly introduced to reading while they are not ready. Pupils build a perception that reading is difficult. This perception poses a great problem to pupils at the tender age. These problems have become permanent for pupils in reading. Secondly, teachers assume that the pupils have already acquired reading skills. Pupils who do not attend kindergarten before the primary normally suffer a lot from this problem. Teachers at the primary school usually assume students have reading skills already. This creates reading problems for pupils at the primary level. Also, there is no established detector or device for measuring a pupil's level of reading competency. Based on this, it is difficult to assess specifically whether a pupil is developing in reading or retrogressing. Teachers find it difficult to notice a pupil's improvement till end of term work. The teacher will not be able to know the level of pupil's reading ability. Again, some teachers do not use the general advocated techniques and pedagogy in teaching reading. Some teachers have fewer techniques in teaching reading. Pupils therefore find it difficult to read because pupils have inadequate skills for reading. Finally, the teaching learning materials (TLM) used also affect pupils reading. Teachers use highly complex teaching and learning materials in teaching and learning reading. Pupils find it difficult to understand the teaching and learning materials used in reading. This gradually retards their reading competency at the kindergarten up to primary school level.

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