



Experiences of form two learners in English reading: a case of two high schools in Bulawayo district, Zimbabwe

Emily Mangwaya  , and Fiona Dube  

Department of Educational Foundations, Lupane State University, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Email: emangwaya@lsu.ac.zw

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed at exploring experiences of form two learners in reading for comprehension in English language in Bulawayo Central district, Zimbabwe. A case study with the target population of all form two learners and English language teachers in 2 Bulawayo Central district's high schools, Zimbabwe, was utilized. Data were collected through focus group discussions, interviews, observations and comprehension tests. The findings revealed that learners' reading comprehension level was deficient and there was need for effective implementation of reading for comprehension intervention programmes, in an effort to boost their comprehension level. It was also discovered that learners could understand the given passage if they read it more than once. The findings depicted that English language teachers made efforts to strategically assist learners during reading for comprehension, through corrections, motivation and encouragement. However, the researchers suggest that there is need for curriculum developers to revive some dormant intervention programmes, such as the effective reintroduction of remedial classes, the revival of high school libraries and effective implementation of exchange and networking academic programmes (symposia and extravaganzas).

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■ INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension has been acknowledged as one of the basis for all learning. It can be through comprehension that learners elucidate contextual meaning in a constructive and interactive manner. There exists a remarkable demarcation between word reading and reading for meaning (NSW Centre for Education, 2017). It can be within the same controlled environment that learners are allocated limited time to efficiently interact with and construct meaning from a given text. Substantially, Joseph (2018) argues that learners with poor reading skills might have experienced limited exposure to the language of instruction at a tender age of language acquisition and learning.

In addition to the foregoing, background knowledge of readers substantiates understanding of the meaning of a text. It helps readers relate

contextual information with what they already know. Toste (2020) also regards motivation as a key perambulator to becoming an efficient and fluent reader. Recent researchers indicate that there exists a remarkable difference between decoding and reading comprehension (Foorman et al., 2018). Supportively, Nguyen (2022) suggests that learners need support from the teacher during the process of reading for comprehension, in order to actively interact with a text and derive relevant meaning. Nguyen (ibid) further encourages teachers to utilize reading strategies (retelling, picturing, predicting, questioning, among others) so as to enhance reading comprehension level in learners.

The teacher can be recognized as the key motivator to learners' accomplishment of reading comprehension. Further, "students' answers to comprehension questions indicate not only where their comprehension went awry but also where it was

effective" (Stahl & Garcia, 2022:162). This is particularly evident in second language readers. According to Aljumah (2020), a second language is one which students learn after their mother tongue or native language. In most African states, it is the language used for instruction. The study explores the experiences of Form Two learners in reading for comprehension in English language in Bulawayo Central district high schools, Zimbabwe.

Statement of the problem

Reading for meaning, which is called comprehension, can be regarded as an academic pillar of learning. Second language learners (L₂) experience challenges in trying to grasp and understand meanings of passages and texts. This study explores challenges experienced by form two learners in English comprehension with a view to suggesting interventions that could be adopted to ameliorate the situation in selected schools in Zimbabwe.

The key objectives of the study are to:

- a) establish experiences of form two learners in English reading comprehension
- b) determine challenges which influence English language reading comprehension level of Form Two learners in Bulawayo Central district high schools in Zimbabwe.
- c) proffer interventions to minimize English language reading for comprehension deficiencies of Form Two learners in Bulawayo Central district high schools.

Significance of the study

The study is significant as it establishes the kind of experiences African learners have in English comprehension. Furthermore, the study can also be significant in that it identifies challenges experienced by form two learners in English language comprehension. Additionally, English language teachers may be assisted, through this study, on how they can address such challenges in the context of second language teaching. It is thus hoped that appropriate interventions will be proffered in order to address such challenges in teaching and learning, ostensibly because all learning depends on the extent to which learners comprehend what they read as well as what they are taught.

METHODOLOGY

The study used an interpretivist paradigm which enabled the researchers to penetrate the minds of participants and helped obtain data that satisfy the research objectives. Kivunja & Kuyini, (2017:26) propose that "a paradigm tells us how meaning will be constructed from the data we shall gather, based on our individual experiences... ". In the same vein, the researchers were in a position to analyze, interpret and present data obtained from individual experiences, opinions and feelings. The interpretivist paradigm argues that reality is socially constructed (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). It is a subjective model which seeks to understand, analyze and interpret world experiences of its participants and construct meaning of the research findings. The paradigm allowed the researchers to professionally interrogate the psychological status of participants towards a social phenomenon (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The research made use of the case study design (Shukla, 2020) and purposively selected four participants from each school (two teachers and two learners from each of the two high schools). Interviews were used as the primary data generation tool.

RESULTS

Factors which influence second language reading comprehension level

1) Lack of motivation

During the focus group discussions, learners expressed that lack motivation lowered their eagerness to read for comprehension in a second language. Some learners confessed that their deficient vocabulary diminished the desire to read texts written in English language, whilst others explained that phonological awareness disturbed their comprehension of a given text. Sasson (2019) substantiates that lack of motivation in learners demolishes their self-esteem. One of the learners (L_A) explained:

Problems I usually face when reading for comprehension in English language are, understanding words that I have never come across and the way they are used in a sentence.

The interviewed teachers expressed that learners can be motivated through enjoyment of the text. This is particularly true because research has noted that enjoyment relaxes the cognitive domain of learners, which in turn improves learner input. [Satriani, \(2018\)](#) notes that lack of a 'push factor' in learners to encourage them to read, with the intention of constructing meaning of a discourse, renders some learners incompetent in reading for comprehension in a second language. However, one of the teachers clarified that enjoyment of a discourse depends on the content therein. T1 elaborated:

...they enjoy narratives more than factual comprehension passages. Learners enjoy...matters that affect them like dating...making friends. However, when it comes to factual matters like the environment matters....they do not like...

It can be realized that motivation plays a crucial role in learners' reading for comprehension. [Jingblad and Johansson \(2017\)](#) agree that lack of motivation demoralizes learners' comprehension. Nonetheless, teachers in this study agreed that they assist learners in reading a passage for the first time, in an effort to motivate them (learners) to read with understanding as they prepare to read independently for the second time. [Akopyan and Saks \(2022:4\)](#) accentuate that "...the core process of reading, along with the application of reading strategies, enforces performance that requires reading engagement and a certain level of persistence". As such, teacher (T2) elucidated:

When you are reading through a comprehension passage, you cannot read it once, it has to be more than once. For my students, we try and read at least twice. So, our first port of call would be reading through the title of the passage, so that we have a rough idea of what the passage could be about, because some learners have a tendency of just jumping into the passage without analyzing the title. So, that is critically important. So, the first time they are reading the passage, they want to just get the general idea of what the comprehension passage is about, and probably browse through the questions and have the questions in mind. Then, the second time around, we are getting into detail, so, maybe we are analyzing, paying attention to detail in each and every paragraph. For instance, I would encourage them to identify the topic sentence of a paragraph and everything

else that follows. Since they have the questions in mind, they can take time to possibly underline where they can retrieve the answers.

It was acknowledged that learners, as well as teachers required motivation ([Frenzel, 2019 & Keller, 2018](#)), in order to maintain a healthy teaching-learning process.

It would be appreciated if policy makers pay attention to the reading comprehension challenges and develop and implement reading strategies, in order to curb reading for comprehension deficiencies ([Qrgez & Rashid, 2017](#)). More so, teachers, as mediators are encouraged to put the reading for comprehension strategies into effect, so as to improve the quality of learner literacy in the education system of Zimbabwe.

2) Background knowledge

Background knowledge was distinguished as a key psychological tool in learners' reading for comprehension. During the focus group discussions, learners communicated that their background knowledge assisted them in reading for comprehension. Some learners (L_A and L_D) expounded:

L_A: *What assists me when I am reading a comprehension passage sometimes,...is my general knowledge.*

L_D: *What assists me when I am reading a comprehension passage is my imagination and when it is more explained I can see more and understand more.*

Learners attested that background knowledge, as well as imagination (which can be enhanced by background knowledge) improve their reading comprehension. [Hasan \(et al 2017:4\)](#) pronounce that:

...when students make connections to what they are reading as well as listening, their comprehension increases. Prior knowledge of the learners or also known as the mental schemata is one aspect of language processing which enhances the comprehension in learning a language".

It was observed that background knowledge equipped learners with the ability to read, understand, as well as answer comprehension questions ([Starke, 2021](#)). In other words, learners used their background knowledge in identifying, as well as relating words and phrases in the text with their world experiences ([Hall et al., 2020](#)). The tabulated test scores below

display the vitality of background knowledge in reading for comprehension:

Table 1. Test scores for schools A and B

Learner	Mark scored	Possible mark	Percentage
A	15	20	75 %
B	11	20	55%
C	07	20	35%
D	08	20	40%

Some learners performed well as they scored above fifty percent (50%) whilst others performed dismally. Their performance could possibly depict the effectiveness of their background knowledge. Those whose performance went below 50% could be possibly due to insufficient prior knowledge (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018).

3) Reading pace

Researchers obtained that reading pace affected some learners as they failed to complete the test within the stipulated timeframe. As learners read in a controlled environment with limited time, there was need for a reasonable reading pace (Wijaya, 2018). It was discovered that a quick pace in reading does not mean learners understand the meaning of a text (Dünder & Akçayır, 2017). However, some learners failed to complete the test, perhaps, due to slow reading pace. This might have negatively affected their test outcomes as they were the ones who performed poorly. One learner (L_C) pleaded:

I struggle to try and understand the story. So, I need a little bit of time, maybe to read it three times.

One teacher (T₃) elaborated:

Some learners have problems with speed...some learners are fast readers...some do not comprehend the language well.

Suggestively, teachers are urged to monitor the pace at which learners read for comprehension, in an effort to assist them in mastering the art of reading proficiency.

4) Vocabulary

It was discovered that minimal vocabulary affected learners' reading comprehension as the amount of vocabulary of a language points to an individual's ability to communicate effectively as well

(Halik & Jayasundara, 2021). One of the teachers (T₄) worriedly explained: *At times, not all learners get to understand what the passage is about, mainly because their English could be minimal and reading through a text that is written in English might not be as easy as reading a text that is written in vernacular or mother tongue...*

It can be appreciated that sufficient vocabulary in English as a second language can escalate individual learners' fluency, as well as proficiency. If the learners' schema are conversant with English vocabulary, comprehension can be achieved proficiently. Additionally, in his study Balqis (2018) discovered the significance of vocabulary in a language. Learners who lack vocabulary (Lynch, 2020) can be susceptible to poor writing. Tanczike (2017) agrees that deficiency in vocabulary of a language affects learners' comprehension.

5) Phonological awareness

Researchers revealed that learners experienced challenges in the phonological nature of words in English as a second language (Milledge & Blythe, 2019). Learners experienced difficulties in recognizing the words written in a second language, which (Catts & Lonigan et al, 2018) affected their ability to decode the content of a discourse. In other words, decoding enhances comprehension, as well as proficiency. One of the learners (L_D) grumbled:

...when they give us a comprehension passage, we are expected to understand, even though, to some of us it is not our language that we speak at home. So, it is really difficult for us to understand

Second language learners appear to be more affected when it comes to comprehension of vocabulary and phonology (ibid). One teacher (T₂) explains:

I help with pronunciation...if I notice some words are not pronounced well, I help with pronunciation. I also help with giving meanings of words using the context.

Nonetheless, it was learnt that teachers assist learners in pronunciation, as well, there is need for learners to understand the nature of syllables of English as a second language, in order to construct comprehensible meaning of a given text. Consistent reading of material written in English language (Zubidah & Waleed, 2021) can boost individual learners' phonological awareness.

Strategic measures to minimize reading for comprehension deficiencies in second language

1) Prediction

The research findings indicated that prediction was utilized as an effective reading tool for curbing comprehension deficiencies in a second language. Teachers testified that they assisted learners in discussing the title of a text, which helped learners predict the content therein. One of the teachers (T3) explained:

...we usually start with discussing the topic of the comprehension passage, we probe with learners, what they think the comprehension is going to be about, just by looking at the topic and then if there are also images (pictures) in that story, we also look at the pictures. Sometimes, we also look at topic sentences then we discuss if the comprehension is about this. And then when we read they are enthusiastic to find out if what they were guessing is ok.

It was also learnt that accompanying related pictures to a passage are key for effective comprehension as they act as clue. Agreeably, [Ramadhianti & Somba \(2023:3\)](#) posit that:

...reading skills place an important stage in getting the knowledge or information; consequently, the students must improve this skill as the first input to support their studies. The better their reading comprehension skills, the better learning achievement they will get. It can be realized that, learners with insufficient reading skills ([Ekorini, 2020](#)), struggled to understand the contextual meaning of a text. More so, prediction of meaning enhanced comprehension ([Lenchuk, 2020](#)). As they look at the title of a text, learners ought to develop a habit to predict the meaning of the text beforehand. This might help them brainstorm towards the subject. In other words, "...self-reflection is ensured with self-assessment of text comprehension and the used reading strategies..." ([Akopyan & Saks, 2022:4](#)).

2) Dictionaries

It was acknowledged that learners used dictionaries for clues ([Par, 2020](#)), as well as predicting meaning. Second language dictionaries guided learners to relate word meaning to the entire text ([Satriani, 2018](#)). During the focus group discussions, one learner (L_D) explicated:

I use the dictionary...to help me in understanding the words.

Also, teachers were interviewed and they agreed:

T1: I may instruct them to take out their dictionaries if they are really stuck, but then, the dictionary meaning should just act as a guide to what we really want because at the end of the day, we are looking at how certain words have been used in the context....

T3: ...we look at the dictionary together, I give them extra work, homework to go and find the meaning of words, so that it helps them understand because you have to understand the vocabulary first for you to comprehend.

It can be appreciated that dictionaries can be efficient sources of guidance for general meaning of words.

3) Skimming and scanning

Skimming and scanning can be predictive reading techniques which enhance comprehension. The duo can expand learners' reading pace as they develop into proficient readers ([Bandityilai, 2020](#), [Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023](#)). The two reading techniques improve learners' reading pace, as well as comprehension. Teachers (T1 and T2) clarified:

T1: ...So, the first time they are reading the passage, they want to just get the general idea of what the comprehension passage is about, and probably browse through the questions and have the questions in mind. Then, the second time around, we are getting into detail, so, maybe we are analyzing, paying attention to detail in each and every paragraph. For instance, I would encourage them to identify the topic sentence of a paragraph and everything else that follows. Since they have the questions in mind, they can take time to possibly underline where they can retrieve the answers"

T2: ...I have also taught them to read the topic sentences of each paragraph and also the last paragraph in full, so that they get a general feel of what the passage is about before they start reading the whole passage".

Skimming was considered as a fundamental technique as it allowed individual learners to have an overview of the subject of a passage ([Bandityilai, 2020](#)). [Bandityilai \(ibid\)](#) explains that learners quickly browse through a passage and read only the topic sentences of each paragraph, in order to obtain a general idea of the entire passage. On the other hand, scanning complements skimming (*ibid*) as it helps

individual learners with more detail about a discourse.

4) Questioning

Questioning equips learners with critical thinking, as well as problem-solving skills. One teacher (T4) said:

At the moment we are just probing before we read, we discuss, we brainstorm on the topic.

Questioning can be embraced as an effective reading technique which helps learners "...monitor their comprehension and stay engaged and interested in their reading" (Banditvilai, 2020:46). It enhances learners' problem-solving skills and constructive thinking (Abdelhalim, 2017). They also engage in critical thinking (Clarke, 2019), which improves reading proficiency. English language teachers agreed that questioning enhances learners' adequate response to the required information about a text. (Glenberg, 2017).

5) Retelling

Retelling equips learners with interpretive skills (Abdelhalim, 2017), hence comprehension. It enhances learners' cognitive status and makes reading enjoyable. Retelling improves learners' reading proficiency (Reutzel & Cooter, 2018). Researchers observe that learners who practice retelling in class develop as motivated readers (Gashti, 2018). Teachers (T2 and T4) said:

T2: *They can give an oral summary of what they would have read. So, that is an indication that reading would have been done properly.*

T4: *They can give an oral summary of what they would have read. So, that is an indication that reading would have been done properly.*

6) Inferring

Learners agreed that inferring meaning rejuvenated their strengths in reading for comprehension in English as a second language. Learner D elaborates:

...it puts more impact into my life and how I can do things maybe similar to the character that was working hard. I like novels or comprehensions that talk about people who work hard. So, when I understand and see, I think it helps me in my life".

Inferring meaning from a given text (Altalhab, 2019) equips learners with the ability to independently deduce, as well as construct the required meaning. Alenizi (2019) concurs that drawing inferences and generalizations from a given text boost learners' comprehension level. Etemadfar et al. (2019) suppose that inferring also encourages learners with self-assessment on the four academic skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening).

■ DISCUSSION

The focus group discussions proved that learners' engagement in learning activities escalated their comprehension levels. Discussions allowed individual learners to expose their capabilities through self-expressions. However, it depends on the teaching techniques. The more enjoyable the discussions could be, the better the comprehension level. One of the teachers (T4) agreed:

It depends...the teacher has to make reading exciting...

It was observed that learners were fully engaged (Roomy & Alhawsawi, 2019) and immersed into practicality and familiarity with the text. This could have helped learners perform impressively well as testified by the tabulated scores. Protacio (2017), Sin & Siahpoosh (2020) agree that discussions act a stimulating components, which stimulate individual learners' cognitive functioning.

Meaning analysis

Teachers appreciated that meaning analysis encouraged critical thinking in individual learners, "...thereby building...children's capacity to think for themselves" (Blint, 2022: n.p). They agreed that meaning analysis (Abdelhalim, 2017) enabled learners with effective problem-solving skills and constructive thinking. Teacher 1 explained:

...when faced with questions that require personal opinion, they want to look for answers in the passage, but they will not find the answers in the passage. So, I would encourage learners to try and cement what they read with what has happened in their lives".

Learners were able to analyze some of the questions from the comprehension test. It was also observed from the test scores that individual learners

were able to present diverse points of views towards a concept. Meaning analysis could help learners engage themselves in self-assessment (Marzuki *et al.*, 2020), in order for them to realize their capability to meet the requirements of a text (Tigchelaar, 2019).

■ CONCLUSION

It was found out that learners, experienced different challenges in reading for comprehension in English language. They experienced difficulties in pronunciation and their limited vocabulary hindered their reading fluency, as well as proficiency. Minimal background knowledge and phonological awareness affected their reading pace, as well as comprehension. However, it was learnt that English language teachers strategically assisted learners in reading for comprehension through corrections, motivation and encouragement. The learners' reading comprehension level was deficient and there was need for effective implementation of intervention programmes such as effective re-introduction of remedial classes, revival of high school libraries, as well as exchange and networking programmes, such as symposia and extravaganzas, in an effort to provide unique and engaging learning opportunities. These programmes attract experts, professionals and peers to share their knowledge. This would allow learners to listen to and acquire new ideas that would improve their reading comprehension and performance, through group activities, presentations, facilitated discussions and multimedia resources.

■ DECLARATIONS

Corresponding author

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to E-mail: emangwaya@lsu.ac.zw; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1674-8614>

Data availability

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Authors' contribution

E Mangwaya and F Dube contributed to the research, data analysis, and manuscript writing.

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