INVESTIGATION INTO THE CAUSES OF STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES: A CASE STUDY AT QUEENS COLLEGE, ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

Oli Lamessa[1*], Prakash A[2], R. Saravana Selvakumar[3] & Ashraf Omar Tajmeeh[4]

[1]Lecturer, Department of English, Kotebe University of Education, SSC, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

[2]Professor, Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India

[3]Assistant Professor, Department of English, G.Venkataswamy Naidu College (Autonomous), Kovilpatti

[4]Research Scholar, Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India

ABSTRACT

Listening, speaking, writing, and reading are the four pillars of language skills. Proficiency in all language skills has become a symbol of success. The ability to read well is crucial to a successful learning process. This study aimed to assess the major causes of learners' reading difficulties at Queens College. A descriptive research design was employed for this study. For the study, one hundred twenty-three learners were selected using the simple random sampling technique. The data collection instruments that employed to meet the aim of the study were a questionnaire, English course book analysis, and classroom observation. The study found that students struggle with English reading skills because of four main factors. These factors are related to students, teachers, classrooms, and English course books. The findings show that students' performance toward reading skills can be changed by providing frequent feedback, cultivating students' motivation, reducing class size, using an appropriate teaching approach, and revising activities in the English course materials.

Introduction

English is one of the languages spoken throughout the world. It is widely spoken and has a significant impact on the world. Reading skill is an important skill for human communication. It is typically the third skill that we learn next to listening and speaking. It is the primary means by which people acquire information. Reading and understanding the texts is crucial for academic performance.

According to Krashen and Brown (2007), reading is essential to acquire and develop Knowledge. The student's performance in developing reading skills is vital for their academic success (Bernhardt, 2011). Reading can have significant effects on a person's development of learning vocabulary and grammar from a text. "We can all do reading on our own for our ability to communicate" (Essberger, 2011, p. 12). According to Daniel (2008), one reason students cannot benefit from their lessons is their inability to read.

Teaching reading skills mainly focuses on improving students' comprehension skills (Dejene, 2012). The fact that most students begin learning to read at a young age does not mean that they can comprehend texts at the college level. Several academicians argue that reading is a crucial skill for pupils to acquire. Reading is not only useful in the classroom but also in the real world. However, most learners at Queens College demonstrate a lack of reading skills in their academic performances.

Even though various types of research were conducted to improve students' reading comprehension skills, still many learners fail to comprehend what they read. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the causes of reading Comprehension difficulties at Queens College. This study aimed:

1. To investigate students-related factors that affect their reading comprehension skills at Queens College

2. To investigate teachers-related factors that affect their reading comprehension skills

3. To identify course design-related factors that affect their reading comprehension skills

4. To explore classroom environment-related factors that affect their reading comprehension skills.

Review of literature

According to Guo et al. (2011), reading comprehension is the skill to comprehend a piece of writing. According to him, comprehending a text is an iterative process that requires mastery of four distinct sets of abilities: phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. As Hutchins (2003), reading

comprehension means understanding the meaning of a piece of written material. Comprehension is a linguistic and cognitive ability that helps to understand written materials (Walter, 2007). Long-term and working memory work together to help readers accurately understand what they are reading. Specific textual knowledge, syntactic structure, and understanding of the meaning of words and symbols may all fall under reading comprehension (Kalyuga, 2006).

According to Numan (2003), to comprehend a text, readers must integrate information from the text with prior knowledge. Reading and understanding written words need to know about decoding the spelling-sound (Pasquarella, 2009). However, decoding alone will not be sufficient to explain how we read since comprehension is at the heart of the process.

Theories of Reading

Bottom-up, top-down, and interactive reading theories are the three main subcategories of reading process theories. The bottom-up theory focuses on the written text's linguistic components such as individual words, phrases, sentences, and syntactic structures. The reader's ability to comprehend the text is the ability to recognize and understand each of the elements mentioned above. Therefore, instead of guessing the meaning of each word, readers should focus on constructing larger units out of smaller ones. The top-down theory focuses on understanding the meaning of specific concepts in the material to arrive at the best understanding. The interactive theory is often known as the schema theory. It integrates and extends upon aspects of both bottom-up and top-down theories.

Some useful reading strategies are predicting, forecasting, deducing, summarizing, examining, and evaluating. A wide variety of activities would be employed by instructors to help learners learn reading strategies in specific subject areas. Students who want to improve their ability to comprehend the text should use effective comprehension strategies (Cain & Oakhill, 2009).

Empirical literature

Scott (2010) researched Students' progress in reading comprehension. Knowledge of vocabulary in reading contexts and methods used to predict and identify words were examined in this study. Reading comprehension is mainly influenced by students' vocabulary knowledge in terms of spelling and the ability to interpret written texts. According to Kiew and Shah (2020, p. 2644), "The potential to deal with new vocabulary or unknown words in a reading

text is one of the most crucial features of reading comprehension." According to them, reading comprehension is a multi-tiered route requiring much mental effort. One of the vital aspects of reading comprehension is the ability to handle unfamiliar vocabulary or words. At word level activities, readers with a wide vocabulary knowledge may gradually progress their reading skills.

Meniado (2016) identified that learners with low reading skills lack the vocabulary to comprehend reading material. As a result, learners who struggle with reading skills because of a lack of reading strategy, learners are unable to progress in reading comprehension. According to this study, metacognitive reading strategies and motivation to learn are key factors in determining how well learners understand what they read.

Theoretical Framework

According to Elbro and Buch-Iversen (2013), prior knowledge and vocabulary breadth are very essential for enhancing reading skills. Reading comprehension is closely linked to prior knowledge and is a reliable indicator of future success in the subject. when a student lacks background knowledge, understanding of a subject is impaired (Kintsch, 2013). Students can make connections between new information and what they already know when they have a basic understanding of the subject matter. When students read, their background knowledge will be accessed and increase comprehension about topics.

A reader's literary knowledge and real-world experiences are both parts of a reader's background knowledge. As Carrell and Wise (1998) stated, students who have a wealth of prior knowledge of the reading material perform better in reading comprehension tests.

Their command of vocabulary terms impacts students' ability to comprehend the text. Students need to understand the relationship between a well-known word and other words in a text. When learning a new word, knowing its definition, the word's part of speech, and any relevant context clues is essential. They can improve their comprehension by employing these vocabulary strategies. According to Chall and Jacobs (2003), students will have difficulty understanding the text if they do not improve their vocabulary. As a result, if their vocabulary is weak, they will have difficulty expressing their thoughts or conveying their message.

In fact, according to Nation (2011), a reading text should contain at least 98 percent familiar vocabulary. Researchers found that students' ability to comprehend reading

material is influenced by their vocabulary range. If a student's vocabulary is limited, he or she is likely to be a poor reader.

Motivation to read and comprehension progress are strongly linked (Solheim, 2011). In addition, the amount of time spent reading has a direct correlation with one's motivation and interest in reading. According to Guthrie and Wingfield (2000), reading comprehension can be improved by being actively engaged in the reading material.

As Farrell (2009), reading practices help pupils and can be taught in schools. Reading comprehension improves with practice and the application of comprehension monitoring tools (Yang, 2006). Knowledge of reading strategies is very important, but some readers do not understand how to use a strategy in a given situation, or they do not understand how to apply a strategy in a given situation (Gerstein et al., 2001).

Klingner et al. (2010) argued that the amount of reading comprehension teaching offered to learners is little and with difficulties that have stayed the same in the last 30 years. Teaching reading strategies to students is essential, but it is unclear because teachers are failing to do so since they lack the skills or knowledge necessary (Klingner et al., 2010).

Learners' ability to read a passage is affected by their surroundings. When reading in a noisy setting, readers may have more difficulty grasping the meaning of the text than in a more relaxed setting. It is hard for students to concentrate on reading when in a screaming environment. Students' reading comprehension skills improve when they are in secure environments. Reading comprehension will suffer if distractions like televisions or radios are in the background (Dennis, 2008).

Teaching reading comprehension has progressed from focusing solely on decoding texts to incorporating both inferential and evaluative thinking into the curriculum. Enough time should be set aside in a reading program for students and for teachers to guide them through comprehension techniques. Students' reading time should be maximized to help them read more than once and read at an appropriate level of difficulty (Fielding & Pearson, 1994).

Methods

The research strategy incorporated elements of both qualitative and quantitative methods. In order to organize non-numerical data, a qualitative method is employed. In contrast, a quantitative method is used for producing numerical data. A descriptive research design was employed in which participants' opinions were solicited and described. 123 students (60 males and 63

females) were selected from Queens College. A simple random sampling method was employed to select 123 respondents. For this research, primary and secondary data were utilized. Document analysis was done as a secondary source of data. Questionnaires and classroom observation were employed to gather data from students of Queens College. English course books were also analyzed to support the data. The SPSS 26 version was utilized to analyze data.

Results

I. Hypothesis Analysis

1. H0= "There is no significant difference between mean score value of male and female students in their reading comprehension skills."

Table 1. The performance of male and female learners in reading comprehension skills.

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading	Male	60	2.3000	1.05143
Skill	Female	63	2.2044	1.58151

Table 1 indicates that the mean values of male and female learners are 2.3 and 2.2044, respectively. The mean value difference between male and female students is 0.01. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which says, "There is no difference between mean score value of male and female students in their reading comprehension skill," is accepted, and the alternative hypothesis that

says, "There is difference between mean score value of male and female students in their reading comprehension skill" is rejected.

2. H0= "There is no significant difference between urban and rural students in their reading comprehension skills."

Table 2. The mean score value of Urban and Rural learners in reading comprehension skill

Location		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading	Urban	95	2.0329	1.20907
Skill	Rural	28	2.9911	1.53128

Table 2 indicates that the mean score value of urban learners is 2.9911, and the mean score value of rural learners is 2.0329. The difference between the mean score values of male and female students is 0.9582. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which says, "There is no difference between mean score value of male and female students in their reading comprehension skill," is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis, which says, "There is difference between mean score value of male and female students in their reading comprehension skill" is accepted.

II. The Analysis of the Questionnaire

The data that was gathered from the sample via a questionnaire was analyzed and supported by the information which was collected from teachers through an interview and English course books analysis as follows:
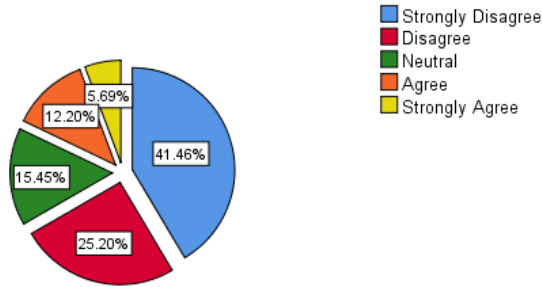
Q1. I am good at reading comprehension.

Figure 1. Students' level of agreement on their reading comprehension skill

Figure 2. Students' level of agreement on applying their background knowledge

Findings from students' responses in Figure 1 indicate that most students (41.5%) strongly disagreed that they are good at reading comprehension. 25.2% disagreed that they were good at reading comprehension, and 15.4% of the participants were neutral with the view that they were good at reading comprehension. However, 12.2% of the participants agreed that they are good at reading comprehension, and only 5.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that they are good at reading comprehension. These findings are supported by the data gathered through classroom observation. During English reading class, most students do not comprehend reading because of many factors. This shows that most of the learners are not good at reading comprehension.

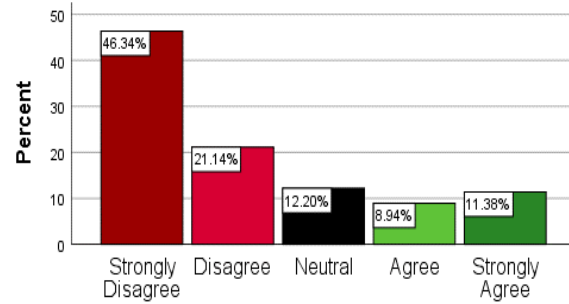*Q2. I use my background knowledge while I am reading.*

Findings from students' responses in Figure 2 reveal that most of the participants (46.3%) strongly disagreed that they use their background knowledge while they are reading, and 21.1% disagreed that they use their background knowledge while they are reading, whereas 11.4 % and 8.9 of the participants strongly agreed and agreed respectively that they use their background knowledge while they are reading. However, 12.2 of the respondents were neutral that they used their background knowledge while reading. This means most of the learners did not utilize their background knowledge while reading.

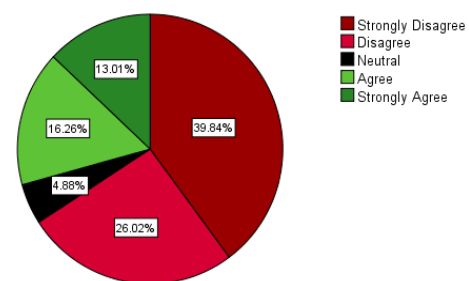*Q3. I have an interest and motivation for reading*

Figure 3. Students' level of agreement on their reading interest and motivation

The result from participants' responses in Figure 3 indicates that 39.8% of the participants strongly disagreed that they have an interest in and motivation for reading. Besides, 26% of the participants disagreed that they have an interest and motivation for reading, but 16.3% and 13% of the participants agreed and strongly agreed with the view that they have an interest and motivation for reading. Only 4.9% of the participants said neutral about whether they have interest and motivation for reading. The classroom observation supports this finding. The researcher found that students were less motivated and interested during reading comprehension classes. This implies that most of the students had no interest or motivation for reading.

Q4. *My teacher uses a modern teaching method while teaching reading skills.*

Table 3. Students' level of agreement on teacher's use of modern teaching method while teaching reading skills.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	45	36.6
Disagree	35	28.5
Neutral	14	11.4
Agree	17	13.8
Strongly Agree	12	9.8
Total	123	100.0

Table 3 reveals that 36.6% and 28.5% of the respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively, that their teachers employ the modern teaching method while teaching reading skills, whereas 13.8 % and 9.8% of the participants agreed and strongly agreed respectively that their teachers use the modern teaching method while teaching reading skill. However, 11.4% of the respondents were neutral that their teachers use the modern teaching method while teaching reading skills. The classroom observations also support this finding. The researcher observed that teachers used the teacher-centered teaching method to teach reading comprehension. This shows that most of the teachers have used traditional teaching methods while teaching reading skills.

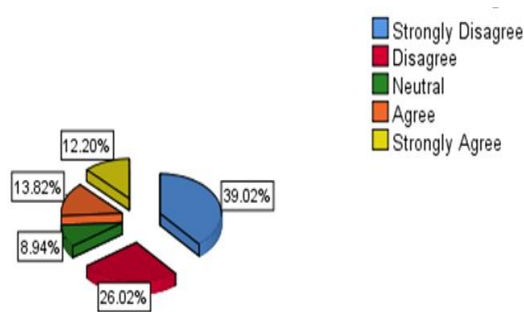Q5. *My classroom environment is comfortable for learning reading.*

Figure 4. Students' level of agreement on comfortable classroom environment

The above Figure 4 indicates that most respondents (39% and 26%) strongly

disagreed and disagreed respectively that their classroom environment is comfortable for learning reading. However, 13.8% agreed, and 12.2% strongly agreed that their classroom environment is comfortable for learning reading. 8.9% of the participants were neutral about whether their classroom environment is comfortable or not to learn reading. The classroom observation supports this finding. The researcher observed that the institution is located in the city center, where the noise highly destroys one's attention. This result indicates that their classroom environment is unconducive for learning and teaching reading comprehension.

Q6. Reading activities designed in the English course book are adequate to develop my reading comprehension skills.
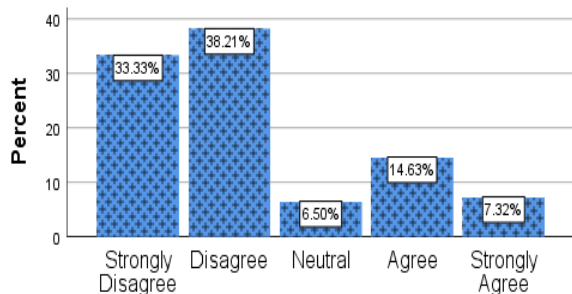

Figure 5. Students' level of agreement on the adequacy of reading activities

The result from participants' responses in Figure 5 indicates that 33.3% strongly disagreed that reading activities designed in the English course book are adequate to develop their reading comprehension skills.

Besides, 38.2% of the participants disagreed that reading activities designed in the English course book are adequate to develop their reading comprehension skills, but 14.6% and 7.3% of the participants agreed and strongly agreed with the view that reading activities designed in the English course books are adequate to develop their reading comprehension skill. Only 4.9% of the respondents said neutral on the statement. The analysis of the English course book shows that there are a sufficient number of activities, but teachers do not give students sufficient time to practice these activities. This implies that reading activities designed in the English course book are adequate to develop their reading comprehension skill, except the time set for practicing these activities is insufficient.

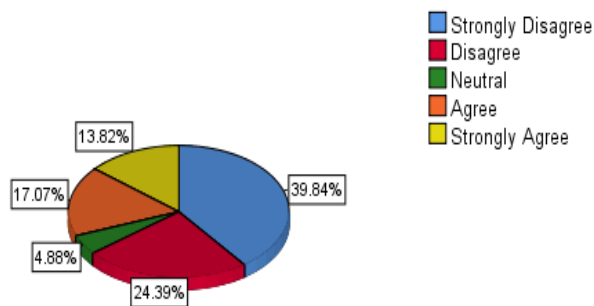*Q7. I know different reading strategies and use them accordingly.*

Figure 6. Students' level of agreement on the use of reading strategies

Figure 6 reveals that the majority of the students (39.8%) strongly disagreed that they

know different reading strategies and use them accordingly, and 24.4% of the participants disagreed that they know different reading strategies and use them accordingly, whereas 4.9% of the respondents were neutral with the view that says, I know different reading strategies and use them accordingly. However, 17.1% of the participants agreed, and 13.8% strongly agreed that they know and use different reading strategies accordingly. This reveals that most of the students do not know different reading strategies and use them accordingly.
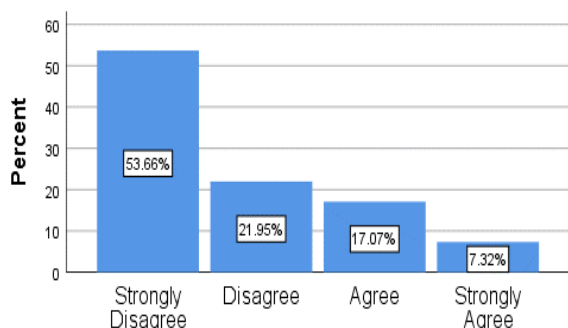
Q8. I practice reading.

Figure 7. Students' level of agreement on practicing reading

Figure 7 indicates that the majority of the respondents (53.7% and 22%) strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively that they practice reading. However, 17.1% agreed, and 7.3% strongly agreed that they practice. This result indicates that almost all students never practice reading. The classroom observation supports this finding. The researcher observed that the majority of the learners were rarely involved during reading comprehension class.

Discussion

The Findings of the research explored that the student's reading comprehension skills are highly affected by lack of interest and motivation, traditional teaching methodology, unquiet classroom environment, little knowledge about reading strategies, lack of vocabulary knowledge, insufficient time to do reading activities, and lack of practice. Among these factors, lack of practice reading is the most noticeable factor that deteriorates their reading comprehension skills. Most learners lack interest and motivation to practice reading both inside and outside the classroom because of their background experience with reading. Most language teachers use traditional reading teaching methods because of how they have been trained. The reading activities designed in the English course books do not help learners develop their reading skills because when they were designed, students' language abilities and interests were not assessed and considered. Furthermore, the classroom environment is not convenient enough for reading practice since most schools in the town were built on the main road where high traffic is seen. These are all the main factors

that affect students' reading comprehension skills.

Conclusion

Reading is one of the language skills the students are expected to develop. It is the most important skill for communication, knowing about the world around us, and achieving academic achievement. However, most students struggle with reading comprehension skills, so efforts should be made to practice reading that enables students to develop their skills. The analysis of the collected data reveals that many factors influence learners' reading comprehension. These factors are related to teachers, students, classroom environment, and time given to each reading activity. Teaching reading comprehension will not succeed while the above factors exist in language teaching. Therefore, language teachers should pay attention to students' interests, motivation, practice, teaching methods, the physical classroom environment, and the designed activities to enhance the learners' reading comprehension skills. Besides, learners should know reading methods like scanning, skimming, predicting, anticipation, and previewing, which can enhance their reading comprehension skills. Reading provides students with various new vocabulary words, information, knowledge, wisdom, experiences,

others' cultures, and ways of living. If students' reading skills get to improve, their other language skills will also be improved. Students, teachers, educators, and potential future researchers may all benefit from this study's findings. Moreover, students are made more aware of the elements that affect their reading and comprehension skills. It provides them with solutions for enhancing their reading comprehension skills.

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