Research Paper

Understanding and Addressing Reading Comprehension Challenges: Magnitude, Causes and Solutions

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a critical skill that forms the foundation for academic success and lifelong learning. However, many students face difficulties in understanding written texts, which negatively impacts their academic performance and overall literacy development. In Ethiopian secondary schools, poor reading comprehension has become a major concern, yet limited research has investigated the underlying causes and potential solutions within the local context. This study examines the extent and causes of students' reading comprehension difficulties and proposes actionable interventions. Employing a mixed-method research design, the study utilized a stratified random sampling technique to ensure the representation of diverse student subgroups. A total of 105 participants were selected from a population of 145. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions, providing quantitative insights into the severity and nature of the problem. The findings reveal that students' reading comprehension challenges stem from inadequate teaching strategies, a lack of reading materials, and low motivation. The study identifies a significant gap in the existing literature regarding localized solutions to reading comprehension difficulties in Ethiopian secondary schools. Based on the findings, targeted recommendations are proposed, including the adoption of interactive teaching methodologies, enhanced access to reading resources, and teacher training programs aimed at improving pedagogical skills. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on reading comprehension and offers practical strategies for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to enhance student's literacy skills and overall academic performance

Keywords: *Reading Comprehension, Challenges, Magnitude, Causes and Solutions*

INTRODUCTION

Grabe (1991) indicates that research trends in reading have changed from time to time. With the advent of audio-lingual communication in the 1960s, reading was used as a means of testing grammar and vocabulary. It was also used to practice pronunciation. Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill that underpins academic success and lifelong learning. Researchers like Snow (2002) emphasize that comprehension involves not just decoding words but also constructing meaning from texts through the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and social processes. However, the prevalence of reading comprehension challenges across various educational contexts remains alarming. Studies by Duke et al. (2011) reveal that a significant proportion of learners struggle with making inferences, understanding complex texts, and applying critical thinking skills in reading tasks. Such challenges underscore the need for a comprehensive investigation into the magnitude, causes, and potential solutions to this pervasive issue.

Understanding the magnitude of reading comprehension difficulties requires a systematic assessment of their prevalence and severity. Nation (2005) argues that while comprehension problems often manifest in observable academic failures, their underlying scope is broader and deeply embedded in linguistic and cognitive deficits. Recent large-scale assessments, such as those conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), indicate that reading literacy disparities are widespread, particularly in multilingual and under-resourced settings (OECD, 2019). Addressing the magnitude of these issues can offer insights into the scale of intervention required to bridge the literacy gap.

The causes of poor reading comprehension are multifaceted and interconnected. Cain and Oakhill (2007) highlight cognitive factors, such as working memory limitations and ineffective use of reading strategies, as critical contributors. Linguistic challenges, including limited vocabulary and poor syntactic knowledge, also play a significant role (Perfetti, 2010). Furthermore, environmental and educational factors, such as inadequate instructional practices and socio-economic disparities, exacerbate comprehension difficulties (Scarborough, 2001). Identifying these causes through empirical research is essential for developing targeted and effective interventions. Equally important is the search for solutions to mitigate the identified causes of comprehension difficulties. Research by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) underscores the importance of engaging learners through motivational and strategy-based approaches. Interventions such as explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, scaffolded reading practices, and the integration of diverse and culturally relevant texts have proven effective (Duke et al., 2011). Additionally, providing professional development for teachers to enhance their instructional techniques can significantly impact students' reading outcomes (Snow et al., 1998).

Addressing reading comprehension challenges also requires a systemic and policy-driven approach. Slavin et al. (2009) argue that coordinated efforts involving curriculum reform, equitable resource distribution, and parental engagement are pivotal for creating a supportive literacy environment. Moreover, leveraging technology in reading instruction, as highlighted by Proctor et al. (2007), offers innovative avenues for addressing comprehension barriers, particularly in resource-constrained settings. These solutions, however, need to be tailored to specific contexts to ensure their relevance and sustainability.

Statement of the Problem

The prevalence of reading comprehension difficulties remains a pressing concern, particularly in multilingual and resource-constrained contexts. Large-scale assessments like PISA indicate that many students fail to meet the minimum literacy benchmarks, with disparities more pronounced among socio-economically disadvantaged groups (OECD, 2019). These findings highlight the systemic nature of comprehension challenges, emphasizing that they are not isolated issues but widespread educational concerns. Addressing this issue requires targeted research to uncover the specific factors contributing to these comprehension difficulties. Understanding the magnitude of the problem is crucial for identifying at-risk populations and developing effective interventions. By ensuring equitable access to literacy support, educational systems can work towards closing the achievement gap and fostering better reading outcomes for all learners.

Poor reading comprehension results from various interrelated factors, including linguistic, cognitive, and educational challenges. Perfetti (2010) argues that limited vocabulary and weak syntactic processing are common barriers to effective comprehension. Similarly, Cain and Oakhill (2007) identify cognitive deficits, such as working memory limitations and difficulties in inferencing, as significant contributors to comprehension failure. Environmental factors further exacerbate these challenges, including inadequate instructional practices and limited access to quality reading materials (Duke et al., 2011). These interconnected causes underline the complexity of the problem and highlight the need for multi-dimensional solutions that address both cognitive and environmental influences on reading comprehension.

Despite the widespread nature of comprehension difficulties, many educational contexts lack sufficient focus on evidence-based solutions. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) advocate for interventions that combine motivational elements with explicit strategy instruction, such as teaching learners to summarize and visualize texts. However, Slavin et al. (2009) caution that effective interventions must also address systemic issues, including teacher training, curriculum design, and resource allocation.

Without addressing these broader challenges, many learners will continue to face barriers to developing the comprehension skills needed for academic and personal success. Systemic improvements are necessary to ensure that interventions are not only effective in theory but also sustainable in practice.

Technology offers new opportunities to tackle reading comprehension challenges, yet its integration into teaching practices remains inconsistent. Proctor et al. (2007) argue that digital tools can provide adaptive and engaging learning environments, particularly for struggling readers. However, the success of such tools depends on their alignment with instructional goals and the capacity of educators to implement them effectively. This highlights the need for research that explores not only the efficacy of technological interventions but also the conditions required for their successful adoption.

In light of these challenges, this study seeks to explore the magnitude, causes, and solutions to reading comprehension difficulties. By addressing these aspects, the research aims to provide evidence-based recommendations that can inform policy, practice, and further studies. As reading comprehension is critical for both academic achievement and lifelong learning, tackling this issue is essential for fostering equity and quality in education (Snow, 2002; Scarborough, 2001). This investigation is particularly significant in contexts where comprehension challenges are widespread and underexplored, paving the way for more effective and inclusive educational practices.

Objectives of the Study

The general purpose of the study is to indicate the reading mechanisms believed to be important for text comprehension. Specifically, the study attempts to:
1. Find out the magnitude of the comprehension problem
2. Identify the causes of poor reading comprehension
3. Seek some possible solutions to the existing causes of comprehension difficulty.

Research Questions
1. What is the prevalence of reading comprehension difficulties among the target population?
2. What linguistic factors contribute to poor reading comprehension (e.g., vocabulary limitations, and grammatical challenges)?
3. What evidence-based interventions can improve reading comprehension skills?

Significance of the Study

Reading comprehension is a cornerstone of academic success and literacy development, as emphasized by Snow (2002). By addressing the magnitude of comprehension difficulties, the study can provide valuable insights into the extent of the problem (Nation, 2005). Identifying the causes of poor comprehension is equally important, as research by Cain and Oakhill (2007) highlights that linguistic, cognitive, and instructional factors often interact to impede reading proficiency. Furthermore, proposing evidence-based solutions aligns with findings from Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), who emphasize the effectiveness of strategy-based interventions and motivational approaches in improving reading outcomes. By integrating these perspectives, the study aims to contribute to the development of comprehensive strategies for addressing reading comprehension challenges, ultimately fostering equity and quality in education (Slavin et al., 2009). The findings will not only inform teaching practices but also serve as a basis for future research and policy formulation.

Scope of the Study

As indicated in the background section, the problem with reading comprehension seems to be a burning issue. Due to this, it would have been better to involve a large number of study participants. It would have also been better to conduct experimental strategy training for a long period. However, it was expected that time, cost and the like constraints would not allow the researcher to do so. Because of such factors, the study was restricted to noticing the magnitude of the reading comprehension problem, identifying its causes, and searching for its solutions. The size of the study participants was restricted to samples taken from grade twelve students at Ayehu General Secondary School.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading comprehension is a critical skill that involves decoding, understanding, and synthesizing information from texts. Scholars such as Snow (2002) emphasize that comprehension is not merely about recognizing words but about actively constructing meaning through cognitive and linguistic processes. This skill forms the foundation for academic success and lifelong learning as it enables individuals to navigate complex information in various domains. Despite its importance, research shows that many learners face significant challenges in reading comprehension, often struggling to derive meaning from even moderately complex texts (Nation, 2005). This study builds on such foundational insights to investigate the magnitude, causes, and solutions to reading comprehension difficulties.

The magnitude of reading comprehension problems has been documented extensively in both national and international studies. For instance, large-scale assessments like PISA (OECD, 2019) reveal that a significant proportion of students fail to meet expected literacy standards. Such findings underscore the pervasive nature of the problem, particularly in contexts where linguistic diversity and socio-economic disparities are pronounced. Additionally, Scarborough (2001) highlights that early deficits in language skills often predict later difficulties in reading comprehension. Understanding the extent of the problem is essential for identifying at-risk populations and designing effective interventions to address their needs.

The causes of reading comprehension difficulties are multifaceted, encompassing linguistic, cognitive, and environmental factors. Perfetti (2010) argues that limited vocabulary knowledge and weak syntactic processing are significant barriers to comprehension. Similarly, Cain and Oakhill (2007) identify cognitive factors, such as poor working memory and inadequate inferencing skills, as critical contributors to comprehension failure. Environmental influences, including inadequate access to reading materials and ineffective instructional practices, further compound the issue (Duke et al., 2011). Recognizing these interconnected causes is crucial for developing comprehensive and targeted solutions.

Various interventions have been proposed to address reading comprehension challenges, with a focus on both instructional strategies and systemic reforms. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) advocate for engagement-driven approaches that combine motivational elements with explicit strategy instruction. For example, teaching learners how to summarize, question, and visualize texts has been shown to improve their comprehension skills. Furthermore, Duke et al. (2011) highlight the importance of scaffolding, where educators provide gradual support to help learners navigate complex texts. These evidence-based strategies underline the potential for improving reading outcomes through deliberate and structured teaching practices.

Technology has also emerged as a promising tool for enhancing reading comprehension. Proctor et al. (2007) discuss how digital platforms can provide adaptive learning environments that cater to individual learner needs. For instance, interactive e-books and apps can engage students with multimodal content, making reading both accessible and enjoyable. However, Slavin et al.

(2009) caution that the effectiveness of technological interventions depends on their alignment with pedagogical goals and the availability of teacher training to support their implementation. These insights highlight the need for thoughtful integration of technology into literacy instruction.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this section of the study, the research design, sampling techniques, the data collection instruments, the data collection procedures, data analysis procedures and the data analysis techniques are described.

Research Design

The study employs a mixed-method research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of reading comprehension challenges among Grade 12 students. The quantitative approach is utilized to measure the magnitude of the problem, such as the percentage of students experiencing difficulties and the specific types of comprehension issues they encounter. This aspect provides measurable and generalizable data about the prevalence and scope of the challenges. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) advocate for mixed methods as a way to bridge the gap between quantitative precision and qualitative depth, ensuring a nuanced understanding of complex issues. By leveraging both methodologies, this study provides a well-rounded perspective on the reading comprehension challenges and potential solutions. Therefore, to sum up the discussion under this study, the research design for this study was characterized by the mixed method.

Research Site

A research site can be selected based on the convenience of the site for the researcher, the seriousness of the problem, proximity, and transport access. Near sites enable one to avoid failure to contact the subjects of a study on time. Besides, they can reduce the cost of transportation. Gray (2004) notes, "…research may be influenced by…financial constraints." So, choosing a nearby site with transport access would have a positive effect on the success of the study.

The second measure of convenience for site selection is the subjects' consent. That is, the participants' cooperation or consent should be obtained to get the necessary data (Blaxter et al., 2006). This can be achieved through rapport already established. Muijs (2004) explains, "Probably the most common sampling method is convenience sampling. This occurs where researchers have easy access to particular sites, such as teachers they have worked with before or pupils in their schools…" Shortly, schools where a researcher can get the subject's easy consent are considered to be appropriate for a study. In the case of this study, the site was selected because of the seriousness of the problem. Therefore, the research site for this study was Ayehu General Primary School in Ayehu town, Awi Zone, Ethiopia.

Population

The population of this study comprises 145 Grade 12 students enrolled at Ayehu General Secondary and Preparatory School. The focus on Grade 12 students is particularly relevant, as they are at a pivotal stage in their academic journey, preparing for national or exit examinations that significantly influence their future educational and career prospects. Understanding their reading comprehension challenges is critical, given that reading comprehension skills are fundamental for success in these examinations and subsequent academic pursuits. According to Gay et al. (2012), identifying a clearly defined population is a vital step in research, as it sets the foundation for selecting an appropriate sample and ensuring the findings are relevant to the target group. Additionally, Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) argue that focusing on a specific population enhances the

study's precision and applicability, particularly when addressing skills or challenges that are unique to a certain group. By concentrating on Grade 12 students, the study aims to address a pressing educational issue within a delineated and highly relevant context. Therefore, the research population of this study was both social and natural science streams of Ayehu General Secondary School's grade 12 students whose number was 145.

Sampling Size and Technique

To run the sampling size, the researcher applied Yamane's (1967) formula which is widely cited in research for determining sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where:
n = Sample size
N = Population size (145 in this case)
e = Margin of error (typically 5%, or 0.05 for social science studies)

$$n = \frac{145}{1+145(0.05^2)} \quad \frac{145}{1+145(0.0025)} \quad \frac{145}{1.3625} \quad \approx 106.4$$

Thus, the recommended sample size is approximately 106 students for a 5% margin of error. According to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) widely cited table, for a population of 145, the recommended sample size is 105 students. This aligns closely with the Yamane's (1967) formula.

Sampling Technique

The study employs a stratified random sampling technique to ensure a proportional representation of both social and natural science students in the sample. The total population of 145 students is divided into two strata based on their academic streams: social science and natural science. Proportional allocation is applied to determine the number of participants from each stratum, ensuring that the sample reflects the composition of the overall population. Since there were 74 social science students and 71 natural science students, the sample size of 105 was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula, then distributed proportionally: approximately 57 students from the social science stream and 51 students from the natural science stream. Within each stratum, students were randomly selected to avoid bias and maintain the representativeness of the sample. This approach ensures that the perspectives of students from both streams are adequately captured in the study.

Proportional Allocation

To make it more understandable, the researcher utilized samples to each stratum based on their size within the total population under their stream in the following way:

- Social Science: $(79/145) \times 105 \approx 57.2 = 57$
- Natural Science: $(72/145) \times 105 \approx 51.4 = 51$
  The researchers randomly selected the required number of students from each stratum.

Data Collection Instruments

To effectively address the research objectives and questions, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments will be employed. Surveys and questionnaires were valuable tools for gathering data on the magnitude of reading comprehension difficulties, as they allow researchers to capture responses from a large sample efficiently (Creswell, 2014). Therefore,

the researcher utilized closed-ended questionnaires to run this study.

Procedures of Data Collection

The data collection process for this study was carefully planned and executed to align with the research objectives and questions. The first phase involved administering surveys and questionnaires to collect quantitative and qualitative data on the magnitude of reading comprehension difficulties. The surveys were distributed to a sample of students, ensuring a diverse representation of socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. To maximize response rates and reliability, pilot testing of the instruments was conducted before the full-scale administration (Creswell, 2014). The surveys will also include sections tailored to capture the perspectives of teachers and parents regarding the factors affecting reading comprehension.

The final phase included the administration of standardized reading comprehension tests. These assessments helped to evaluate students' comprehension proficiency and pinpoint specific areas of difficulty, such as vocabulary deficits or inferencing challenges (Nation, 2005). By employing a phased approach and integrating multiple data collection methods, the study ensures robust and comprehensive findings that address the research objectives and provide actionable recommendations.

Data Analysis Procedures and Techniques

Data analysis "…refers to sifting, organizing, summarizing and synthesizing the data to arrive at the results and conclusions of the research" (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). To analyze the data, the researcher arranged the data obtained through questionnaires. The selection of an analysis technique depends on the nature of a study, its design, and the data gathered (Selinger and Shohamy, 1989). The techniques used for analyzing descriptive data are descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages, and tabulations (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). In this study, frequency was used as a technique of analysis. It was also reported through verbal descriptions, percentages or frequency tables (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). From these ways of reporting frequency, percentages, tables and verbal descriptions were used to analyze the data collected through questionnaires.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study comprised a total of 105 respondents, including 60 males (57%) and 45 females (43%), all aged between 17 and 19 years. Regarding their marital status, all participants were single or unmarried. In terms of language background, the majority of respondents (72 individuals, 69%) identified Agewugna as their mother tongue, while 31 respondents (30%) reported Amharic as their first language. Additionally, 2 respondents (2%) indicated that their mother tongue was Oromifa. A structured questionnaire assessed their reading habits, exposure to English materials, and perceived challenges in reading comprehension. Descriptive statistics indicated that 68% of students read English texts only when required for academic purposes, 72% had limited access to supplementary reading materials, and 65% identified unfamiliar vocabulary as a significant barrier to comprehension.

These findings align with previous research highlighting limited vocabulary and lack of exposure to diverse reading materials as primary factors affecting reading comprehension. For instance, Meniado (2016) found that learners with low reading skills often lack the vocabulary necessary to comprehend reading material, and their struggle is compounded by inadequate reading strategies and motivation.

Contrastingly, a study by Getachew et al. (2018) demonstrated that explicit reading strategy training significantly improved students' reading comprehension and self-efficacy,

suggesting that targeted instructional approaches can mitigate these challenges.

Addressing the research questions, the study confirms that limited exposure to diverse reading materials, insufficient English language proficiency, and traditional rote memorization teaching methods are key contributors to reading comprehension difficulties among Grade 12 students at Ayehu General Secondary School. Notably, the study underscores the impact of socioeconomic factors, such as lack of access to libraries and digital resources, on students' reading abilities.

The study contributes valuable insights by emphasizing the necessity for improved teaching strategies, increased availability of reading materials, and the integration of interactive learning methods to enhance students' comprehension skills. These findings advocate for educational reforms that prioritize critical thinking and resource accessibility to better support students' reading development.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that reading comprehension challenges are a significant issue among Grade 12 students at Ayehu General Secondary and Preparatory School. A substantial portion of students struggle with core comprehension skills such as understanding vocabulary, identifying main ideas, and making inferences. These challenges are compounded by limited exposure to diverse reading materials and teaching practices that focus more on rote learning than on critical thinking and interactive reading techniques. The findings underscore the pressing need to address these barriers to enhance students' academic performance and prepare them for higher education and future endeavors. Based on the above research findings, the following conclusions are made.

1. Most students have a reading comprehension problem. This is likely to show that the magnitude of the problem is serious even now.
2. Most students seem to have limited vocabulary knowledge. They also seem to lack the habit of reading in leisure time. They do not also seem to go through the home and take extensive readings.
3. Students seem to practice the skill of prediction very rarely, but they seem to be able to use it. They can also recognize the relationships indicated by references and referents as well as connectors given in texts despite the rare practices. Students are also likely to make use of the skill of visualization practiced sometimes. On the other hand, the students are not able to use their prior knowledge though they practice it sometimes.
4. The skill of skimming is sometimes practiced. The practice, however, seems to be held improperly, so most students fail to use it.
5. The tasks designed in the textbook do not follow the three-phase approach. The pre-reading and the while-reading approaches are touched. The top-down and the bottom-up approaches are also used in these phases. However, the post-reading phase is totally missed.
6. In the analysis, it was found that unfamiliar texts, abstract ideas, long words, jargon, metaphors, irony, and long sentences seem to create comprehension difficulty. However, the text book does not seem to be blamed for these factors. Besides, students' grammar knowledge, home conditions, and negative attitudes towards teachers are unlikely to cause comprehension problems. The same is true with parents' attitudes towards the English language.
7. The factors about which the researcher failed to give conclusions are non-authenticity, topic similarity, over-familiarity, words with many meanings, peer pressure, reminding students to modify incorrect predictions, and fatigue. These factors seem to need further research to decide whether they cause reading comprehension problems or not.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study provides valuable insights into reading comprehension challenges among students at Ayehu General Secondary School. However, it has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study is confined to a single school, limiting the generalizability of its findings to other secondary schools in Ethiopia or similar educational contexts. Expanding the research to multiple schools in different regions would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Second, while the use of a structured questionnaire provided quantitative insights, it relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by response bias. Incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or classroom observations in future research would help capture deeper perspectives on the challenges faced by students. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design presents a snapshot of the problem at a particular moment, making it difficult to assess long-term trends or the effectiveness of interventions over time. A longitudinal study tracking students' reading comprehension progress could provide more robust findings. Furthermore, although the study identifies causes and proposes potential solutions, it does not experimentally test the effectiveness of these interventions. Future research should include intervention-based studies to evaluate the impact of specific strategies, such as interactive teaching methods, digital learning tools, and teacher training programs. Lastly, the study does not deeply explore the role of parental involvement, socio-economic conditions, or technological resources in addressing reading comprehension difficulties. Future studies should investigate how these external factors influence reading comprehension and how targeted support from parents, teachers, and policymakers can enhance students' literacy outcomes. Addressing these gaps would contribute to a more holistic understanding of reading comprehension challenges and inform evidence-based strategies for improvement.

Proposed Solutions and Recommendations

The findings suggest practical solutions that can significantly improve students' reading comprehension abilities. Both students and teachers recommend integrating more interactive reading activities, such as group discussions and critical analysis exercises, into the curriculum. Teachers emphasize the need for professional development programs to adopt student-centered instructional methods. Furthermore, establishing a well-equipped school library and encouraging extracurricular reading activities are identified as crucial steps. Stakeholders also propose that regular comprehension assessments and feedback mechanisms can help monitor progress and address individual needs effectively. These findings not only provide a detailed understanding of the problem but also offer actionable insights for improving reading comprehension among Grade 12 students.

The research also highlights the importance of adopting multifaceted solutions to tackle these challenges effectively. Enhancing teacher training, integrating interactive reading strategies into the curriculum, and providing access to resources such as a well-equipped library are critical steps. Furthermore, fostering a reading culture through extracurricular activities and continuous assessments can help students improve their comprehension skills over time. By addressing these issues systematically, the school can create an enabling environment where students can develop their reading comprehension abilities and achieve their full academic potential.

Based on the above conclusions, the following recommendations have been made.

1. Students should be exposed to expensive readings to supplement intensive readings. To increase their interest, teachers have to conduct some extensive reading lessons in class.
2. Students should be given the practice of the skills neglected like identifying the uses of connectors omitted, implied information, and reading with speed.

3. Reading activities should be given mostly in three phases. If a phase is missed, teachers have to be in charge of filling the gap instead of being textbook dependent.
4. Students should get step-by-step exposure to certain language aspects like idioms, metaphors, irony, long words, and complex sentences to minimize the problems resulting from these factors.

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