

**READING AND COMPREHENSION IN
GHANAIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REVIEW**

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Students may learn how to read in primary school, but as they progress through school, they continue to learn how to learn from texts. Programmes in Secondary reading education have produced a reading methodology which incorporates many instructional practices from the primary school. In the past two decades, reading researchers have focused on understanding the reading process. Research projects have undertaken to better understand how readers comprehend texts. Comprehension instruction has increased as research has discovered how people comprehend printed materials. This paper reviews the most common pattern of secondary reading method against the background of common classroom practices in our schools. It traces how people comprehend printed materials through two definitions of reading and draws out their implication for teaching comprehension. It concludes with strategies for developing comprehension at the secondary school level of instruction.

READING METHODS

The guided reading format which is prevalent in our classrooms is a holistic reading approach which emphasizes student purposeful reading - that is, meaningful processing, affect, and communication related to the message content of the language experience (Hill

1991). The holistic approaches tend to implement the following premises: that learning and application of reading vocabulary and processes are most effective when derived from successful, purposeful and realistic print message situations; that increasing the amount of continuous on-task reading of materials of student-appropriate interest and readability, will improve instructional productivity and learning efficiency; that reading instruction should facilitate the working together of language, thinking and learning processes; and as students mature, that reading instructional materials should reflect a broader representation of school and life-related use of print sources and genre (Bruner 1967). The teacher thus guides a group of readers through a text to discover the meaning of the content, while vocabulary and reading-thinking processes are introduced or reinforced as related activities.

A typical guided reading lesson sequence involves: the identification of objectives to be implemented in reading and re-reading the text; students' readiness for the text through motivational and preteaching activity; initial silent reading to gain a general understanding of the text as guided by the set purposes and teacher intervention; feedback from teacher monitoring and discussion of first reading to identify content, processes and purposes needing further attention; oral/silent reading guided by deeper reading purposes and supporting teaching aids; and follow-up activities in the form of practice exercises, creative language projects, or supplementary related reading (Hill 1991).

In a recent survey of classroom teachers' preferences of teaching/learning interactions, English teachers in Senior Secondary Schools (SSS) in Cape Coast were asked to describe the steps they take their students through during a comprehension lesson. Of the 124 respondents, 106 of them representing 85% of English teachers

indicated the following sequence: silent reading, oral reading, answering of questions based on the text. Only 11 out of the 124 respondents representing 8.87% indicated any motivational and pre-teaching activity. None of the respondents indicated the use of supporting teaching aids, follow up activities or creative language projects or exercise. When asked to describe the steps they take students through during a lesson on the novel, 83 out of the 124 respondents representing 66.93% of teachers indicated the following sequence; first reading to identify content and subsequent reading guided by deeper reading purposes. Eight out of the 124 respondents representing 6.65% indicated the use of supporting teaching aids in the form of role play and dramatization. While there is evidence that teachers guide students to the message content of the language experience, there is no indication of any creative language project.

Documentary evidence indicates that many students in our secondary schools, as well as in tertiary institutions, fail to use cognitive processes to direct and control their comprehension and learning from text. Students fail when reading independently to set purposes, monitor meaning gained against those set purposes, and interactively and flexibly use information processes to get beyond the surface level of print information (Anderson 1984). Students no doubt need instruction in question raising, the systematic teaching of information restructuring techniques including summarizing and meaning elaboration practices (McNeil 1987).

THE READING PROCESS

Thorndike (1917) defined reading as reasoning. Prior to 1917, reading was defined as the ability to transform printed words into oral responses. Emphasis was on accuracy in word identification and oral reading. Comprehension as such was not taught when students could

read aloud accurately, fluently and with appropriate intonation. The assumption was that students could use their reading ability to learn from texts in any content area. Research evidence in 1917 showed that students' responses in trying to comprehend a paragraph were analogous or parallel to processes in solving a mathematical problem. This led to a change in the definition of reading. Emphasis shifted from oral reading to silent reading, so that students could focus their attention on use of their reasoning process during reading.

Secondly, it was realized that readers varied their processes of reading according to changes in their purposes, and the type and difficulty of the reading material (Judd and Buswell 1922). This led to the need to establish purposes prior to reading, search for information to satisfy these purposes during reading, and use reasoning processes after reading to answer questions on information stored in memory.

Holmes (1965) stated that reading ability consists of two major components: the ability to read relatively easy material rapidly (speed of reading) and the ability to read relatively difficult material analytically (power of reading). Underlying each of these components are a number of abilities and processes readers mobilise to solve problems in reading.

At one moment, the reader may mobilise his ability and processes for identifying a printed word; at another, for attaining a contextually defined word meaning; and at still another, for making an inference (understanding what the writer says), interpretation (searching for implicit or intended meaning) or evaluation (reacting to the text in terms of its relevance and significance). Readers do not only switch from one problem to another, they may also have to try to solve a problem in more than one way. The reader who cannot readily retrieve or construct the meaning of a word, might try to analyze it into its constituent meanings (prefix, root, suffix) and integrate them,

or try to infer a word's meaning from the context. Readers must therefore learn to mobilise different abilities and processes according to changes in their purposes and the demands of the reading task.

Throughout the process of reading, active readers direct, monitor and evaluate their cognitive processes (Brown 1981), which interact with their affective reactions to the text and themselves (Athey 1982). Reading comprehension therefore involves an interaction between the text and the reader's responses to the text. Interaction includes everything that the reader brings from his own literary and life experience to enable him to interpret a satisfying meaning from the text.

Projection is an important element of this activity. We interpret situations and events in a text by reading into them our own experience and feelings. Good reading is a searching out, a reaching out for meaning. A reader goes to a text with anticipation, with questions, with specific intent. A reader turns to a newspaper with the purpose of finding out what has happened recently. He searches and chooses from the headlines a story that arouses his curiosity. He reads the story in order to find out what the headline means. He gets meaning from what he reads because he asked questions as he went along.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING COMPREHENSION

To expect the child to understand what he pronounces reinforces the fact that reading is for the purpose of deriving meaning. Without comprehension, the act of reading is a vacuous event. Students obtain better comprehension when texts selected are at difficulty levels that are appropriate to them. Students comprehend better when a text has adequate explanations for its facts instead of an arbitrary list of information. Comprehension is enhanced when facts are close to the

main ideas or topics they support. Perhaps, most important to comprehension is a text that students can relate to their previous knowledge and use for constructing new knowledge. Reading is not simply a matter of applying decoding conventions and grammatical knowledge to the text. Reading is an interactive process between what a reader already knows about a given topic or subject and what the writer writes. The ability to relate the text and the background knowledge efficiently is particularly significant for second language learners. Thus, the selection of a text is a crucial initial step in teaching comprehension and an appropriate text should therefore start at the level of the student's knowledge framework and build upon it. It should have examples that activate and make contact with the student's previous knowledge and experience; use analogies to explain new concepts, provide information necessary for constructing new knowledge categories, place related information together, and be written at a level of abstraction that can be related to and build upon the student's knowledge framework. The goal of instructional strategies therefore is to help students learn how to select and process important information, information that is relevant to their purposes and goals in learning from texts (Singer 1991).

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING COMPREHENSION

More is now known theoretically and practically about comprehension than ever before. With this knowledge has come a renewed commitment to teach comprehension as a thinking process. How the human brain processes text information is the key to meaning making (Vacca et al, 1991).

The teacher could direct reading activity by explaining the purpose for reading the text, relating the text to students' previous knowledge, teaching the technical terms, guiding the students through the text,

explaining and demonstrating how to read and interpret it, how to make use of the rhetorical devices in the text, how to evaluate whether the objective has been reached; that is, whether an answer to a question has been found and how to check whether the answer is correct. Teachers usually explain the content when students have difficulty in comprehending the text but that is not enough. They should have students go back to the text to perceive the way the text explains the content. This way, teachers can teach students how to learn from texts (MacGinitie 1981).

If students are to learn anything new from texts, such texts must be relatively difficult for them. The teacher can help bridge the gap between what students know and what they must learn by defining terms with examples related to the students' experience, inserting needed background knowledge to clarify ideas, making use of analogies to relate new knowledge to previous knowledge, using questions to focus attention on relevant information and indicating where students should process the text more carefully. Teachers may also suggest where readers may consider alternative purposes and perspectives and justify their interpretation. This might stimulate students to apply text information or their conclusions to new situations.

USE OF QUESTIONS TO PROMOTE COMPREHENSION

Teachers encourage active comprehension when they ask questions that elicit questions in return (Singer 1978). This can be at any class level. A primary teacher might focus attention on a picture or illustration from a story or a book by posing a question that gets questions in response, instead of asking students what the story is about. For example, the question "What would you like to know about this picture?", might generate questions that focus on the details, main

idea, or inference from the illustration.

The teacher in the secondary school, after getting students to read a text or portion of it, could ask questions such as "What more would you like to know about (a character/characters)?" Students may ask questions about the behaviour of a character or "some whys?" about an event. Whether the character or characters enjoy doing something good or bad and how they felt about their actions. These questions do not only stimulate interest and arouse curiosity, they draw students into the story. In the process, students reading behaviour will be more goal directed. In other words, they will read to satisfy purposes that they have established and not what the teacher has established. The transition from teacher-directed questions to student-generated questions can be adapted for primary as well as secondary readers. The teacher could discuss the importance of asking questions as he/she directs students' comprehension of a story. Most students will tend to ask literal questions because they do not know how to ask questions that will stimulate inferential or evaluative levels of thinking. The teacher needs to provide a model that students will learn from. The teacher could model the types of questions that can be asked about the content. That is, setting, main character/s, any obstacles encountered while attempting to resolve a problem or achieving a goal. Students could work in groups with the group's leader eliciting questions from group members. Students could also work on their own to generate questions (Vacca et al. 1991). Training students to ask questions will no doubt result in active and superior comprehension.

When students have responded to questions related to the story line, they could be engaged in discussions centred around other important aspects of the story such as the theme, character development, or the reader's personal response to the story. Examples of questions on

theme are; what is the major point of the story? Why do you think the author wanted to write the story? What did you learn from the story? Examples of questions on characters are; what do you like or dislike about (a character/characters)? Does (character) remind you of anyone else that you know? Why do you think (character) did that?

The teacher may use a discussion guide to direct students to select or recall the factual or literal information in the text. Through the use of questions, the teacher could lead the students to form an interpretation or a concept. Next, the students may form a generalisation. Thus, through discussion, students can be guided from recall of factual information to the formation of generalisation.

An overview of a passage prior to reading may enable the student to grasp the situational context. In a class in which most of the students have appropriate background knowledge for the reading selection, discussion before reading enables the students to approach the text with anticipation of what lies ahead in the material. The student however needs the necessary repertoire of vocabulary to do this. An explication of a text's vocabulary may serve as an advance organiser. Sometimes, the pre-reading activity that was initiated at the beginning of the lesson, while necessary, was not sufficient to maintain the readers' interaction with the text. The students may have trouble understanding the text because they are able to process only bits and pieces of information but fail to grasp in any coherent way the author's intent and message. Thus guiding reader-text interactions becomes an important part of comprehension instruction. Students are more likely to remember text information if they summarize it in their own words.

If questioning is to promote reading comprehension, it must first and foremost serve as a springboard to conversation and discussion. Discussion initiates thinking by going beyond right answers to

making inference, reaction, and evaluation. The ultimate goal of discussion is to have students add to their knowledge or judgement on the matter being discussed (Dillion 1983). A few questions carefully planned in advance to provide direction are essential. Three types of questions at key points in a discussion will keep students on task: first, the teacher might ask a question to identify a problem or issue, followed by a question or two to clarify or redirect the discussion, and finally, a question or two to establish a premise for further discussion (Vacca et al. 1991).

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Reading comprehension or the understanding of what is read, while it is being read (West 1978) is the goal of any exercise in reading and a prerequisite for the other components of reading; perception, interpretation, integration and rate of reading. Teachers initially guide students towards comprehension with teacher-posed questions, often at the literal, inferential, interpretive and evaluative levels. They may also ask students questions which can only be answered by drawing upon background knowledge. However, if students are to develop independence in learning from texts, whether narrative or expository, the teacher has to shift responsibility to the students by having them set their own goals, arouse their own curiosity, formulate their own questions, monitor their progress to the goal, and evaluate their achievements. For example, teachers may promote students' independent reading by asking students where they might find information, how the information may be related to what they already know, why the facts in the text are significant, how they can be used, and how they would know they have achieved their goal. This way, teachers can develop students into active readers who read to answer their self-generated questions, and in doing so, direct, monitor and evaluate their cognitive processes and affective reaction to the text and themselves. Students read to learn and they need comprehension in the

reading-to-learn experience to help them operate more efficiently in the English medium curriculum.

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