

Reading comprehension difficulties in English language for primary school pupils in Tanzania

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Abstract. The study explored the reading comprehension of primary school pupils in Tanzania. The study used a mixed-methods research approach with a convergent research design. A convergent parallel design was used in the study, and data was collected using questionnaires, interviews, and documentary reviews. The sample involved 262 respondents, 252 being pupils and 10 English subject teachers. Quantitative data was analysed by the use of frequencies, percentages, and tables, while qualitative data was analysed thematically. The results indicate that most pupils struggled with understanding the main ideas, summarising, and reading English books, leading to problems with reading comprehension. The results also suggest that most of the pupils needed more help from teachers or fellow pupils to comprehend English texts and used to read passages repeatedly to understand them. The key argument from this study is that to enhance pupils' reading comprehension, teachers need to use interactive learning strategies such as group reading. For this to take place in reality, teachers' training in the proper interactive strategies and distribution of reading materials remain important.

Keywords: interactive strategies, reading comprehension, reading materials, primary schools, Standard VI pupils

1. Introduction

Reading is one of the most significant skills for pupil learning and academic success. It is one of the four language skills, which are listening, speaking, writing, and reading [13, 32, 35]. Pupils at all levels of education, ranging from primary to higher education, need to master reading skills [19]. Scholars have established that problems in reading are linked to poor performance in English subjects, and pupils' reading proficiency significantly affects their school's academic success [30]. According to Widyaningrum, Faridi and Saleh [43], effective reading comprehension is important for pupils learning a language other than their native language. It also improves their performance and understanding in other curriculum areas [27]. It is also agreed that reading ability helps pupils to understand what they learn [5]. Reading difficulties, in this context, can mean the challenges faced by pupils in trying to decode English words, read accurately and fluently, process information, and recognise words [18].

Reading comprehension challenges are stretched to learners all over the world, with negative effects on their academics [1, 14, 19, 24, 31–36, 39, 43]. In the United States of America (USA), for instance, large numbers of fourth and eighth graders are not proficient in reading comprehension [34]. Similarly, in Germany and Australia, large numbers of pupils experience reading comprehension difficulties [17]. It has been argued that in Taiwan, teachers used traditional teaching rather than modern approaches to teaching, which hindered pupils' ability in reading comprehension [38]. Agbofa [1] and Piper et al. [30] found in Kenya that most junior high school

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*Educational
Dimension*



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pupils struggled with reading comprehension. In Zimbabwe, problems such as word decoding and sound identification greatly affect reading among primary school pupils [33]. However, previous studies have been conducted in foreign countries, such as Ghana, Indonesia, South Africa, Uganda, the USA, Turkey, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The study by Tibategeza and du Plessis [39] in Tanzania focused on early English learning. Reading comprehension difficulties have been a less researched and less documented area in Tanzania. This study aimed to explore the reading comprehension of primary school pupils in Tanzania. The key research question was: What reading comprehension difficulties do primary schools face in the English language?

2. The context

Tanzania is a multilingual country with over 120 languages, with Kiswahili being used most in primary school education, and English is taught as a foreign language in primary schools and is obligatory for secondary and university levels [37, 39]. The Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 2014 (Ed. 2023) provides a broader framework for the education system in the country. This policy stipulates the necessity for pupils to be capable of using the English language in proficient ways and states the clear range of objectives to adequately prepare pupils to use the skills [41].

Though English is crucial for communication with other people in this globalised world, especially when countries are required to prepare global citizens, the majority of pupils face difficulties in learning it, and the situation is worse at the primary level of education, where they are first taught [1, 18, 30, 39]. Several factors contribute to reading difficulties, such as English not being the first language. Other studies such as that of Ghaffar and Aziz [12] and Karanja [18] have given some factors such as limited access to quality reading materials, poor instruction, and large class sizes to have adversely affected reading comprehension and led to poor school performance and a lack of interest in learning among pupils.

3. Theoretical framework

This study was grounded in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory [42], which emphasises the role of social interaction in learning. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory highlights that social interaction and cultural aspects are basics for learning and cognitive development [29]. According to Vygotsky, learning is an interactive process that takes place through interactions with more experienced individuals [40]. The implication is that when pupils participate in discussions, they are in a position to improve their understanding of the texts; they advance their reading skills and comprehension in particular. For instance, when pupils perform the reading comprehension tasks together, they share strategies, clarify misunderstandings, and help each other in a way that fosters intensive understanding of the materials they read.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept is crucial for understanding how reading skills can be effectively facilitated among pupils. The ZPD refers to the range of tasks a learner can perform with guidance or collaboration but cannot independently [21, 28]. Teachers and peers can act as mediators, providing necessary assistance to help the pupils bridge the gap between their current reading abilities and their potential level of competence. This aims to improve reading comprehension in English by providing appropriate scaffolding. Vygotsky's view is that learning is a social mediation process [15]. It also implies that through guided interactions, children internalise knowledge and gradually gain more control over their cognitive abilities. This process of mediation is fundamental to addressing the difficulties of reading comprehension to enhance pupils' reading skills and, consequently, their academic performance across subjects.

In addition, Vygotsky highlighted the importance of cultural tools and symbols in learning. By integrating culturally relevant materials and practices into reading instruction, teachers can make learning more meaningful and relatable for pupils [29]. For example, visual materials, such as pictures and illustrations that are relevant to the pupils' environment, like images of animals or plants, can make reading materials more interesting and meaningful to the pupils. This approach not only helps improve reading comprehension but also respects and values the pupils' linguistic backgrounds. By applying Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, this study can provide insights into effective teaching strategies that leverage social interaction and cultural context to support reading development among Tanzanian pupils.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research approach and design

The study used a mixed-methods research approach. Lelissa [20] observed that a mixed-method research approach offsets the limitations of using a single method. It is also noted that the mixed methods research approach offers flexibility in research methods and a richer understanding of research problems [9]. The study employed a convergent parallel research design. The design enhanced the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more thorough analysis of a research problem [10]. Further, the design enables two different types of data sets to be collected and analysed by supporting each other to give a complete picture of the problem under the study [8]. However, the mixed methods research approach requires a balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches, which might be problematic. It also requires more time for data analysis. It was important, therefore, to ensure that both qualitative and quantitative data were presented.

4.2. Study location

The study was conducted in Kongwa District Council in 10 public primary schools selected from the least performing schools in English subjects in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) for three consecutive years from 2022 to 2024. Kongwa District Council was selected as a study area because it persistently performed poorly in English. For instance, during the 2024 PSLE results, only 37.4 per cent of Kongwa's pupils passed the English examination, compared to 58.6 per cent in Bahi. Similarly, in 2023, only 29.8 per cent in Kongwa, while 53.7 per cent in Bahi. In 2022, only 22.4 per cent of pupils passed in Kongwa, while 31.3 per cent were in Bahi. It should be noted that reading comprehension is part of the English examination. It was, therefore, important to explore the difficulties pupils face in reading comprehension.

4.3. Sampling procedures and sample size

The study employed purposive and simple random sampling procedures. English teachers were chosen purposively, and Standard VI pupils were selected using a random sampling procedure to ensure that every pupil had an equal opportunity to participate in the study. Noor, Tajik and Golzar [26] support this approach based on its fairness and representativeness. The sample size for quantitative data was obtained through a mathematical formula by Israel [16] as follows:

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

where: n is sample size, $N = 655$ is a number of the sampling frame, $e = 0.05$ is a significant level.

Thus, the final count of pupils was 252. There were 10 English teachers, making 262 study participants in total. English teachers were involved in the study as they teach

pupils reading comprehension, and pupils have trouble with reading comprehension. Further, ten (10) English teachers were purposively selected from ten schools and participated in the study. However, these ten (10) teachers representing a qualitative sample size were obtained through the saturation principle.

4.4. Data collection methods

Data was collected using two main methods: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and documentary review.

4.4.1. Questionnaires

The Likert scale questionnaire was administered to 252 Standard VI pupils to measure difficulties in reading comprehension. The use of the questionnaire allowed the systematic measure of the extent of the difficulties encountered in reading comprehension. Cresswell and Cresswell [8] noted that the method enhances collecting data from a large number of participants, and it is simple to administer. Questionnaires tend to yield a low rate of return, especially when mailed. It was necessary, therefore, to administer them personally. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect information from the English teachers.

4.4.2. Interviews

The interview method enhanced the collection of detailed data that enhanced a deeper understanding of reading comprehension difficulties problems [22]. The collected data were recorded using an audio recorder and note-taking using notebooks. Through interviews, teachers were free to air their views concerning issues related to reading comprehension and the difficulties pupils face. The interview guides were translated into Kiswahili for easier understanding and capturing detailed data from teachers. Interviews, as has been the case for questionnaires, are time-consuming, and sometimes participants go astray from the issue under investigation. It was necessary, therefore, to rephrase the questions to ensure that the participants were directed to the issue in question to save time and get the intended data.

4.4.3. Documentary review

This study also employed documentary review as a method of data collection. The method involves gathering information from various materials such as books, journals, government records, examination results, and census data. The documents surveyed and their respective information are as indicated in table 1.

Table 1

Documents surveyed and information collected.

Nº	Type of documents surveyed	Information collected
1	Books	Research methods
2	Empirical studies and journal articles	Background information, knowledge gap, what takes place in other countries, and the status of reading comprehension.
3	Examination results	Position of the study area in English subject.
4	Census data	Information for calculation of the study sample.
5	Educational policies	Issues related to the policy support of the English language.

However, documents can sometimes be outdated and sometimes used for a different purpose and context. Thus, it was necessary to check their relevance to the study and scrutinise them to ensure that they supported the study at hand.

4.5. Data analysis and ethical concerns

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics frequencies and percentages in tables. For qualitative data, the analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis strategy [3], a six-step systematic procedure. It started with data immersion through listening to audio recordings several times and transcribing Kiswahili conversations into English to acquire their meanings. Thereafter, initial codes were created and sorted into themes. Then, patterns in findings were looked for, categorising codes of like nature into clean, neat themes. After finding the themes, the report was written, linking results to study questions and the existing literature.

All research ethics were followed, including securing the ethical clearance and research permit from the university under the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academics, Research, and Consultancy (DVC ARC) of the University of Dodoma. This included the acquisition of an introduction letter to be presented to the Regional Administrative Secretary (RAS) of Dodoma. Following RAS approval, the approval letters were sent to the District Administrative Secretary (DAS) and the District Executive Director (DED). Then, it was routed to the Ward Education Officer (WEO) and the head teachers. To gain the trust of the participants, a formal introduction was made to the authorities before interacting with the participants. He took extra precautions to follow ethical standards, such as keeping respondents' confidentiality and maintaining their privacy, not revealing their identities, and obtaining permission from the head teachers for children under 18 years old (pupils at Standard VI). The participants were assured that the data collected would be used for academic purposes alone. Before recording the voices of the teachers, consent was obtained from them. All research participants were assured of their freedom to take part in the study. Plagiarism of ideas was largely avoided by paraphrasing the words and acknowledging the source of information.

5. Results

5.1. Reading comprehension difficulties among Standard VI pupils

This study aimed to explore what kind of reading comprehension difficulties faced by primary school pupils. The study revealed that the majority of pupils struggled with reading comprehension. Pupils also found it difficult to understand the main ideas of the text, summarise it, regularly read English books or texts, need help from the teacher or classmates to be able to understand texts, and need to reread English texts more than once to understand them (table 2).

Generally, the results indicated that pupils faced many problems in reading comprehension that, as indicated earlier, might have contributed to poor performance in English language subjects in the National Examinations.

5.1.1. Understanding the main idea of the stories

The results indicated that 102 (40.5%) agreed and 62 (24.6%) strongly agreed that they find it difficult to understand the main ideas of the stories in English (table 2). If agreed and strongly agreed are put together, then 164 (65.1%) of pupils agreed that they could not understand when reading stories in English. During the interviews, the English teachers also reported that pupils struggled with this aspect of reading. The English teachers confirmed that comprehension is a significant issue for many primary school pupils. One of the English teachers had this to say:

I have observed that many pupils have difficulty understanding what they read, which hampers their ability to engage with the material. When pupils struggle to comprehend the text, reading becomes a frustrating and overwhelming task rather than an enjoyable or informative activity. This

Table 2

Reading comprehension difficulties among Standard VI pupils in public primary school.

Statement	SD F (%)	D F (%)	N F (%)	A F (%)	SA F (%)	Mean
I find it difficult to understand the main ideas of the stories in English	6 (2.4)	48 (19)	34 (13.5)	102 (40.5)	62 (24.6)	3.66
I find it difficult to summarise a passage after reading it	0 (0)	29 (11.5)	22 (8.7)	103 (40.9)	98 (38.9)	4.07
I do not regularly read English books or text	0 (0)	7 (2.8)	2 (0.8)	202 (80.2)	41 (16.3)	4.10
I need support from my teacher or classmates to understand English reading passages	1 (0.4)	9 (3.6)	81 (32.1)	110 (43.7)	51 (20.2)	3.8
I need to re-read English texts more than once to understand them	7 (2.8)	30 (11.9)	25 (9.9)	145 (57.5)	45 (17.9)	3.76
Average						3.88

Key: 0-1.4 strongly disagree (SD), 1.5-2.4 disagree (D), 2.5-3.4 neutral (N), 3.5-4.4 agree (A), and 4.5-5 strongly agree (SA).

persistent challenge leads to a sense of discouragement as they find themselves unable to connect with the content or grasp its meaning. (Interview, English Teacher 5, 12th August 2024)

Another teacher added on the same issue that pupils faced problems with reading comprehension and stated:

I have been observing that most of the pupils struggle with reading comprehension in English. They often struggle to understand the main ideas and have difficulty interpreting sentences. I believe these challenges are even more noticeable for pupils who have a limited vocabulary and do not get enough time to practice reading. (Interview, English Teacher 2, 14th August 2024)

Based on the results, it is clear that reading comprehension in English, specifically understanding the main ideas, was a common challenge among most primary school pupils that can affect their learning and academic performance in one way or another.

5.1.2. Summarising passage after reading

Respondents were asked to express their agreement with this statement: “I find it difficult to summarise a passage after reading it”. The results suggested that 103 (40.9%) agreed and 98 (38.9%) strongly agreed. If both agreed and strongly agreed are combined, then 201 (79.8%) of pupils confirmed that they struggled with summarising passages (Table 2). One of the English teachers had this to add:

I have noticed that many pupils struggle to summarise passages after reading them. This difficulty suggests that they face challenges with comprehension, particularly in understanding the main ideas of the texts. When pupils cannot summarise, it makes it hard for them to keep up in English lessons, complete assignments, and answer questions correctly. (Interview, English Teacher 1, 13th August 2024)

Similarly, another English teacher shared the following insights:

I have been seeing that many pupils experience challenges summarising texts. They struggle to identify the main ideas of the text or passage, which makes their summaries unclear. When pupils cannot grasp the material, it's hard for them to create a summary. This problem also affects their ability to think critically, which is important for their learning. (Interview, English Teacher 3, 16th August 2024)

These results from the English teachers and pupils inform that summarising a passage was a significant challenge among Standard VI pupils.

5.1.3. Irregularly read English books or texts

The results regarding the third item, "I do not regularly read English books or texts", indicated a serious alarming trend among pupils. Specifically, 202 (80.2%) pupils admitted they rarely engaged with reading English books, and 41 (16.3%) strongly agreed on the same (table 2). If combined, then 243 (96.5%) of pupils did not regularly read English books. Insights from interviews with English teachers support the results. One of the English teachers pointed out:

Many of my pupils struggle with reading comprehension, largely due to their lack of regular reading of English textbooks or storybooks. Their limited exposure to reading hampers their ability to identify the meanings of texts. As a result, their infrequent reading habits contribute to a gap in comprehension. (Interview, English Teacher 7, 19th August 2024)

Another English teacher shared a similar concern:

I have been witnessing that most of my pupils do not read regularly. When pupils do not read often, they miss out on important practices that enable them to learn how to identify the meanings of various texts. This limited regular reading strengthens the gap regarding reading comprehension skills. (Interview, English Teacher 4, 21st August 2024)

The results and expressions from qualitative and quantitative data from pupils and teachers suggest that irregular reading of English books or texts highlighted the prevalence of reading comprehension difficulties among Standard VI pupils. It also highlighted a lack of interest among most pupils in reading, which could affect their academic performance in English subjects.

5.1.4. Need support to understand English reading passages

Results revealed that many pupils felt that they needed more help to comprehend English texts. Specifically, 110 (43.7%) pupils indicated they need help, and 51 (20.2%) pupils strongly agreed. When the results are combined then, 161 (about 64%) of pupils needed more support for them to read English texts (table 2). This finding is supported by interviews with English teachers, confirming that pupils often seek assistance to better understand challenging words and passages. One English teacher provided additional insights:

In my observations, I found that pupils often ask for help when they struggle to understand English reading passages. This support usually consists of explaining difficult words and clarifying confusing sentences. When someone takes the time to simplify these challenges, it really helps pupils understand the material better. (Interview, English Teacher 6, 22nd August 2024)

Another English teacher had this to say:

I often find pupils asking their teacher or classmates for help to make sense of English passages. This help usually includes explaining difficult words. This difficulty impacts their subject performance, as they are unable to understand presented materials. Many pupils find it hard to connect ideas within a text, which further exacerbates their comprehension issues. (Interview, English Teacher 9, 24th August 2024)

The results from both quantitative and qualitative expressions show that many pupils seek support from either teachers or classmates to comprehend passages they read. This provides insights into how pupils struggle and face difficulties with reading comprehension to understand the text fully.

5.1.5. Need to reread English texts more than once to understand them

The results indicated that pupils needed to reread the English texts more than once to understand them. A significant number, 145 (57.5%) pupils, reported that they often needed to reread passages for them to understand, while 45 (17.9%) pupils strongly agreed that this was their usual approach to understanding the message (table 2). If these results are combined, then 190 (75.4%) of pupils struggle to understand the message unless they reread the English text. Teachers also recognised the problem of pupils having to reread the passages given to understand them. One of the teachers commented during the interview:

I frequently notice that many pupils must reread English texts several times to fully understand them. This is due to their underdeveloped comprehension skills, causing them to miss important details or fail to initially grasp the meaning. (Interview, English Teacher 10, 20th August 2024)

Similarly, another English teacher shared:

I have often found that many pupils need to read texts twice to understand the meaning. This aspect indicates that they have a major reading comprehension problem. This repeated reading shows that they may not have the vocabulary or techniques to read the text effectively. (Interview, English Teacher 9, 26th August 2024)

The results of this study suggested that most of the pupils needed to reread to comprehend the text. Both teacher and pupil results indicated the same, signifying a problem of comprehension difficulties among the pupils.

6. Discussion of the results

The results indicated that most of the pupils demonstrate discrepancies in reading comprehension. It was found that reading comprehension was a challenge, and pupils found it difficult to understand the main ideas from the texts. Pretorius and Klapwijk [31] in South Africa also found the same results that many pupils struggled to identify the main ideas in the texts they read. Gedik and Akyol [11] also had similar results in Turkey that pupils with weaker language skills were less likely to comprehend the main ideas from the messages they read. The results were again supported by the study by Butterfuss and Kendeou [4], who found in the USA that many pupils experienced frustration when trying to determine the main idea from a text.

Apart from understanding the main idea of the text, summarising passages after reading was also a challenge among most pupils. These results confirm what

Chuenchaichon [7] in Thailand found that many students did not fully develop their summarisation skills at the university level, primarily due to insufficient practice in breaking down texts into simple summaries. Nanglakong et al. [25] again found in Ghana that many pupils struggled with summarising a passage after they had read it. This challenge often comes from having a hard time drawing the main ideas from the text or grasping its key points. Thus, it is not surprising to find that pupils in primary school struggle with the summarisation of information, as the problem seems to face even university students, as was the case in Thailand as indicated earlier in the study by Chuenchaichon [7]. Thus, there is a need to have a strong foundation of English at the primary school educational level so that when pupils reach university education, they have such skills and competence.

The results again indicated the need for targeted support for the pupils to comprehend English texts. These results align with the work by Kaya [19] in Turkey, who suggested having a strong foundation regarding reading strategies to help pupils who encountered challenges in understanding texts and limited comprehension abilities. The study by Altamimi and Ogdol [2] in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) suggested that schools need to have structured reading interventions, such as shared reading approaches. To them, the approach can enhance comprehension skills among pupils. Some studies, however, such as that of Pretorius and Klapwijk [31] in South Africa, found that challenges with understanding what pupils read could not be addressed solely by teaching strategies. They considered the importance of the School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs) and teaching and learning resources to play a significant role in improving the teaching and learning of reading comprehension skills. Agbofa's study in Ghana again found the same results and suggested that instructional materials are more likely to help pupils strengthen reading comprehension skills [1]. According to Gedik and Akyol [11] study results in Turkey, interactive strategies such as paired reading and repeated reading also contribute to pupils' understanding of the reading materials. This also supports Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which stresses social interaction as a central focus when teaching for effective pupil learning.

The results further indicated that pupils needed to reread English texts more than once to understand the message and irregularly read English books or texts, which seemed a serious challenge. McTeer, Rasinski and Bintz [23] study in Pennsylvania found that many pupils went through texts multiple times for them to understand the key ideas and details. However, Ceprano, Shea and Gandt [6] results in New York in the USA revealed that rereading helps pupils grasp important ideas and connect different parts of a text.

7. Conclusion and implications

In this study, we investigated the difficulties of primary school pupils in Tanzania with reading comprehension in the English language. The results indicated that the majority of the Standard VI pupils faced severe reading comprehension challenges, that is, difficulty in understanding the main ideas from the text, summarising texts, and irregularly reading English books or texts. Pupils also needed help from the teacher or classmates to understand texts, and they needed to reread the English texts more than once to understand them. The results suggested a need for the application of interactive strategies, such as group reading, to enable pupils' learning. It also suggests having an increased budget for teacher training to optimise their capacity to support and enable pupils to develop their reading skills. Nevertheless, the provision of adequate reading materials by the government is likely to enhance the pupils' regular reading practice, boost their reading comprehension skills, and strengthen their confidence in reading.

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