An investigation into the Classroom Strategies Employed for Reading Comprehension Ability in Secondary Schools in Kisumu North, Kisumu County, Kenya

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Abstract
Learners of English as a second language (L2) experience difficulties understanding what they read in terms of language and cultural settings. Effective comprehension is vital to the learner as it enhances performance not only in English, but also the other subjects offered in the school curriculum. This can be achieved when learners engage in reading strategies that will enable them activate relevant background knowledge. This study, guided by the schema theory was therefore carried out to investigate classroom strategies employed for reading comprehension ability. The objectives of the study were to investigate if learners employed reading strategies in the language classroom to enhance reading comprehension ability and establish if they activate background knowledge in the reading process. The study used a mixed method research design. Two hundred and fifty six form three secondary school learners were sampled through systematic random sampling from a population of 855 from all the 16 secondary schools at the time of study (2011) in Kisumu North Sub County. Data was collected by means of classroom observation and a students’ questionnaire and this limited the findings to be generalized to other learners with similar characteristics. Data analysis revealed that learners did not employ appropriate reading strategies thus not activating background knowledge which hindered effective comprehension. From the analysis and interpretation of the findings, the study concluded that reading strategies had significant influence on activating background knowledge for effective comprehension. The study recommends that instruction on reading strategies should be given to learners throughout the reading process in order to enable them activate relevant background knowledge. This study will provide insights to teachers and students on the significance of always using reading strategies to activate background knowledge as this will result to reading with a purpose hence effective comprehension.

Keywords: reading strategies, background knowledge (schema), comprehension ability, text.

INTRODUCTION
Reading is depicted as a basic skill and is demanded in the education system in the society, (Lei, 2010; Cox, 2009; KIE, 2002; Brindley, 1994) as it is a prerequisite to most subjects offered in the school curriculum. More still, our everyday demands are placed on readers of print and there are few aspects of our lives that are not linked in one way or another to the reading of print (Brindley, 1994). Reading skills of English language include those skills that help students to recall what they have read, comprehend it and analyze. Comprehension requires efficient knowledge of the world and a given topic, and an efficient knowledge of the language (Grabe, 1997). It is therefore through reading that learners will widen their experiences and knowledge about their culture and other cultures hence understand the world around them.

There is need for learners to acquire reading skills and strategies early enough in their life for if they do not understand what they read, they will struggle to cope with the demand for reading in all academic disciplines, thus leading to poor academic results in English (Ahmet, 2009). The background knowledge a reader has enables him/her to understand what he is reading as he combines textual information with the information they bring to a text during the reading process. This gives reason why learners should activate background knowledge (schema) through the use of appropriate reading strategies for comprehension to be effective. The richer the schema is for a given topic, the better a reader will understand the topic. Comprehension of a text will be difficult if a reader’s schema is incomplete and does not provide an understanding of the incoming data from the text. (Rumelhart, 1977).

There is evidence that many of the serious problems facing secondary school English reading should be on lack of understanding of what the students have read (KNEC Report 2011, Lei, 2010;Masinde, 2005). There is a great concern among educators that students’ reading is declining at an alarming rate (Agak, 1995). Diller (2007) observes that despite teachers trying to improve the understanding of
reading, many students while decoding do not comprehend what they are reading and a large number of pupils join secondary schools with extremely weak reading skills (Hodgson, 2008). This is one among several reasons why reading skills should be developed deliberately and systematically in secondary schools (KIE, 2006) as most of the learning in all subjects is through reading, in a language, which students have not mastered well.

It is therefore, in this light, to note that the acquisition of reading skills is important and students need to refine them during their course of study. Students need to engage in activities that would enable them activate background knowledge which they should relate to the task at hand. In view of the above, and because of the role played by reading across the school curriculum, one could argue that if learners utilized appropriate reading skills and strategies, effective comprehension would be enhanced. This resulted to a knowledge gap to investigate if learners employed reading strategies in the language classroom to enhance reading comprehension ability.

STUDY OBJECTIVE
The main purpose of this study was to find out if learners employed reading strategies in the language classroom to activate background knowledge for effective reading comprehension.

RELATED LITERATURE
Conceptualization of Schemata
Schema theory states how knowledge is acquired, processed, and retrieved (Ahmad, 2006). All knowledge is organized into units and within these units; information gained through experiences is stored as cognitive constructs, in the long-term memory (Widdowson, 1983). Therefore the schema one has enables to interpret the information read and continues to change as new information received build mental representations in a readers mind in relation to the past experience. A text does not carry meaning by itself (Brown, 2001), but the reader brings information, knowledge, emotion, and culture to the printed word. This implies that the reader contributes more information to what he is reading and the understanding of a text depends on how much related schema they have. When one aspect of a schema is activated, the whole schema becomes available to the reader and, in turn, affects the interpretation of the text. This meeting of the reader and the text is what results to comprehension (Hoev, 2001) as illustrated in figure 1.1. For a reader to achieve this during the reading process he has to employ reading strategies that can activate background knowledge.

The Reading Process
Reading is an interactive meaning making process, (Anderson, 1999; Carrell, 1988), in which readers utilize a multitude of strategies to achieve the goal of comprehension. The process of reading requires the reader to construct meaning from a written text (Ur, 1996). The readers utilize a multitude of strategies to achieve the goal of comprehension. The interaction in this perspective takes place at three levels: The interaction between lower-level and higher-level skills, between bottom-up processing and top-down processing, between the background knowledge presupposed in the text and the background knowledge of the reader. The interactive model explains that higher order knowledge, influences the processing at lower level. Therefore, when information from one source, such as word recognition, is deficient, the reader will rely on information from another source, for example, contextual clues or previous experience to enhance reading. All these sources of knowledge influence the processing and final interpretation of the text (Rumelhart, 1977). This information from different sources converges in the mind, where it is accepted, retained and allocated according to needs. The reader is thus expected to use appropriate reading skills and strategies to retrieve this information (schema).

Reading Strategies
Omulando (2009) views a strategy as a classroom activity, specifying the teacher learner roles in a language classroom. The learner may be understood as an active reader who constructs meaning through the integration of the already existing schemata and new knowledge and the flexible use of strategies to foster, monitor, regulate and maintain comprehension. Thus, comprehension largely depends on the reader’s ability to interact with the
text using ‘pre reading’, ‘during reading’ and ‘after reading’ strategies (Iwai, 2007; Ajideh, 2003). Schema theory requires activation of background knowledge before starting to read in order to comprehend the text better.

Pre reading phase is the most important for building background knowledge (Ajideh, 2003) where the instructor has the opportunity to use pictures, slides, movies, games, and other such devices to activate and build upon the students’ background knowledge. Previewing helps readers predict or guess (top-down processing) what is in the text and thus provides a reader with necessary background to organize activity and to comprehend the material (Yusuf, 2011). Several stimuli in a text, such as the title, photographs, illustrations, or subtitles, are usually closely connected to the author’s ideas and content (Yusuf, 2011), so gives them a clue of what they are about to read which results to motivating them (Ur, 1996). Skimming enables them to predict the purpose of the passage (Brown, 2001), build knowledge base necessary for dealing with the content and the structure of the material. In relation to this, the teacher has a role to identify and enable the learner to develop a set of reading strategies; and match appropriate strategies to each reading situation for effective comprehension.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY
This study adopted the mixed method design. The study employed self-administered questionnaires for students and classroom structured observation schedule as tools to collect data. The respondents were required to give opinions and describe the nature of existing conditions. This study was carried out in Kisumu North subcounty. There were approximately 4,594 students in the 16 schools at the time of study (Kisumu North District Education Office, 2011) and approximately 855 form three students in the 16 schools. The study dealt with a sample of the population from the form three students. Two hundred and fifty six (256) learners were selected through systematic random sampling. Sixteen (16) questionnaires were given to each school to give a chance to every member of the target population to stand an equal chance of inclusion and minimize biasness (Gall and Borg, 2007; Kombo and Tromp, 2006). A total of 16 lessons; one per school were observed for consistency since majority of the schools were single streamed. This sample acted as a representative of the characteristics found in the entire group and conclusion from the study was generalized to the entire population (Grinnel 2001).

STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Reading skills and Strategies
The results of this survey indicated that learners acknowledged that reading strategies are important for language learning and comprehension as shown in Figure 1.1.

Table 1.1: Learners Use of Reading Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Strategies</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Before I read, I think of what I know about the topic.</td>
<td>107 86 51 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I review the text to know about its length, organization and main idea.</td>
<td>72 117 43 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. When reading I decide what to read closely and what to ignore.</td>
<td>87 123 39 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I use the theme of the text to help me guess/ understand what I read.</td>
<td>69 78 26 83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I use pictures, diagrams in the text to increase my understanding.</td>
<td>- - 63 193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I use context clues like familiar words and connectors to help me better understand what I am reading.</td>
<td>83 75 56 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I try to picture or visualize information to help me know what I read.</td>
<td>85 93 41 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text.</td>
<td>99 95 49 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I take note of the key expressions and ideas while reading to help me understand what I am reading.</td>
<td>21 84 93 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I can find supporting ideas for the main idea of what am reading from the text.</td>
<td>62 96 51 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL FREQUENCY</td>
<td>685 847 512 516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERCENTAGE</td>
<td>(26%) (33%) (20%) (21%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: 1- Never, 2- Rarely, 3- Occasionally, 4- Always

![Figure 1.1: Importance of Reading Skills and Strategies](image-url)
The Use of Reading Strategies in the Classroom
The findings from the lessons observed revealed that there was no lesson where the learners used pictures as no visual aids were presented to the learners before they embarked on the reading exercise. The learners did not preview the texts to familiarize themselves with sub topics, length and type of sentences, connectors and vocabulary. There was also no lesson where the learners discussed on the topic or title of the reading material but rather went ahead and started reading.

The results revealed that the learners engaged in during reading activities that enabled them activate background knowledge. The learners in all the sixteen lessons observed answered oral questions from the text they had read. These were commonly questions from the course book which appeared after the passage, and this required recall of what had been read or learners to scan for specific ideas. Some texts had pictures and the learners used them during reading which resulted to them having a clue thus activating the correct schema. The learners were also engaged in group discussions on the texts they had just read. This enabled them to ask questions amongst themselves and also give their own opinions whereby schema activation was inevitable.

In the after reading activities, it was observed that the learners engaged in various tasks which included: answering comprehension questions from the text, making notes and writing summaries of what they had read.

The results revealed that the following strategies were commonly used answering questions from the passage, reference to pictures and diagrams in the text, class discussion, making notes and summary writing. These strategies were commonly used ‘during reading’ and ‘after reading’. This included answering both oral and written questions, reference to pictures, discussions in groups, writing summary and making notes. However, (Yusuf, 2011) views that activation of background knowledge is effective, when these questions are conducted before the reading, rather than after the reading. When questions appear at the beginning, they stimulate meaningful discussions and it is only after the schema is activated, that one is able to see or hear, because it fits into patterns that he/she already knows. When learners go ahead and start reading without reflecting on the topic, no purpose for reading is set, there is lack of motivation, hence poor comprehension.

CONCLUSION
The study concludes that the learners were aware that reading strategies are important for effective reading comprehension but did not use them appropriately thus hindered effective comprehension. Pre reading activities give learners a clue of what they expect from a text as they set a purpose for reading. However, minimal instruction was given to learners as pre reading strategies. It is therefore important that reading strategies are employed to activate relevant background knowledge as this acts as valuable clues to the text to be read.

RECOMMENDATIONS
From the findings and conclusions of this study, curriculum developers and teachers should consider activities that will engage learners use appropriate reading strategies to activate background knowledge for effective comprehension.

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