

The Impact of Reading on Second Language Acquisition: The Case of a Ghanaian Female University College of Education

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Abstract

Over the years, students have been encouraged to read extensively. New techniques of teaching English reading skills in the classroom have also been devised (Iqbal, *et al.* 2015). Learners are taught to scan for the recognition of some visual forms such as numbers, words, or phrases, and also how to read closely for visual semantic process to finally acquire information (Carver, 1992). The present study therefore aims to identify, any form of impact that reading has on students' proficiency in English Language as a second language in Ghana. Questionnaires of both open and close ended questions were administered to fifty (50) first year College of Education female teacher trainees. First, the results of the analysis revealed that English language has now become the language spoken by students not only in school as expected, but also at home, and with friends when they are out of school. Secondly, an improvement in the reading culture and the attitude of students towards reading is also indicated. Finally, this study confirms that extensive reading in a target language enriches the readers' level of proficiency in the second language being acquired. It speeds up the process of acquisition from vocabulary to writing. Some implications have also been suggested.

Keywords: Reading, Proficiency, Second Language, College of Education

Introduction

Reading has been identified as one of the important skills for acquiring knowledge. The progress in the world has also been attributed to the creation of writing scripts which enabled

reading (Iqbal, Noor, Muhabat, & Kazemian, 2015). Reading, therefore, is an activity which encompasses the interpretation and understanding of ideas represented by written or printed page. According to Shakkour (2014), through reading, more children of different language backgrounds around the world are acquiring English language as a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL), first to acquire an international identity and second, to be able to fit into a global village, and again to interact with people around the world, using English Language. This is because English language has become the tool for breaking the language barriers among the various cultures and ethnic groups of many countries. It is believed that reading has its own reward which presents to the reader the benefit of pleasure and new knowledge (Yamashita, 2013). Over the years, students have been encouraged to read extensively and for that reason, new techniques of teaching English reading in schools have been devised (Iqbal, *et al.* 2015). Moreover, students are taught to adopt different kinds of reading skills. They are taught how to scan for the recognition of some visual forms such as numbers, words, or phrases, how to read closely for visual semantic process and to also acquire information (Carver, 1992).

However, there is an assertion that learners' active reading of materials such as storybooks, newspapers and other relevant materials written in a target language, actually play a role in the acquisition of and proficiency in that target language (Uddin, 2019). For this reason, learners of a target language are encouraged to read materials written in that target language. English language, as already stated, has become a second and target language in the world which has attracted a lot of learners. Thus, in this study, it is my hope to confirm or deny the authenticity of such assumption in relation to the acquisition of English language as a second and target language. I inquire how reading materials such as storybooks, magazines, and newspapers written in English Language affect the reader's proficiency in English language, both in speech and in writing. The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. What kinds of materials do teacher trainees read and how many books do they read in a year?
2. What is the habit of teacher trainees towards reading?
3. In what ways do reading influence teacher trainees' English as their second language?

Review of Literature

A good number of researches has been done on reading. Some scholars focused on the benefits of reading at early age and the benefits of parents reading to children. Others have also paid much attention to attitudes of students towards reading, the necessary skills for reading comprehension, as well as metalinguistic variables. A more recent study done by Uddin (2019) presents three arguments concerning the role of literary works in the acquisition of a second language. First, he argues that English literary pieces such as purposefully selected stories and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:11 November 2020

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role-plays based on stories and dramas, can be used theoretically and methodically in the classroom to develop a conducive second language acquiring atmosphere to assist learners learn English with L2 competence and fluency. Secondly, he contends that the use of English literature is apt for learners to learn the English Language, specifically the vocabulary, idioms and phrases and how they are used, especially in context. He further advocates the use of literary texts in the classroom to expose learners to the structures of English language, other grammatical rules and their usage, its pragmatics and its stylistics. Finally, Uddin (2019) asserts that a person's ability to acquire a second language, and obtain mastery over its rule-based system, is dependent on his or her understanding of the socio-semantic system of the target language which can be acquired through reading a literary piece written in the target language.

Also, Economou (2015) also explored the role of reading fiction within the school subject of Swedish as a second language. For a number of reasons, Economou (2015) examined a group of advanced second-language learners in a Swedish upper secondary. First was to identify how they read and discussed a contemporary Swedish novel and second was to reveal how they interacted with the text and with each other in relation to the text. Her results indicate that second-language learners in this context indicated a positive attitude towards reading and they discussed what they read using different forms of reading. They were also seen often comparing the content of the text to their own lives during the discussions of the novel they read which facilitated the acquisition process.

Iqbal, *et al.* (2015) however have also considered the importance of reading comprehension at the secondary school level and make a claim that no habit of reading the newspapers, articles, novels and other books hinders reading comprehension. This is because they believe that with good reading skills, students will have the ability to use well-structured and meaningful sentences in English both in speech and in writing. To them, a good amount of vocabulary in addition to the writing dynamics in English can easily and naturally be acquired through reading. They therefore emphasize the need for students to be taught the various types of reading skills which they outline as loud reading, intensive reading, extensive reading, and silent reading.

Yamashita's (2013) on the other hand focused on four attitude variables pertaining to reading. He explored how a 15-week course which implements Extensive Reading (ER) in and out of class hours can affect L2 reading attitudes. Some significant influence from the Extended Reading organized for students was recorded after 15 weeks. It was observed that learners' apprehension towards reading was reduced whereas their desire to read for academic progress and mastery over English language was also increased.

Elsewhere, Khairuddin (2013) focused on the importance of identifying students' reading interest towards reading in a second language and identified that reading exposes readers to a wide range of knowledge and new vocabulary. As a result of his study, he observed that university students are rather forced to develop a reading habit of reading newspapers, academic books and websites for the purpose or for the sake of doing assignments and not for pleasure. Hence, he advocates for the need to establish programmes, techniques and strategies to teach, to improve and enrich students' reading interests.

It is also believed that reading comprehension achieved in the early stages of life is essential for a long-term academic success (Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek (2012). Focusing on child development, Dickinson *et al.*, (2012), on reading, has also intimated that as parents frequently read to their children, they present to them an opportunity for language-rich interactions as they listen and discuss the content of the books they read to their children. In their study, the need to read to children to assist them acquire the English language is emphasized.

Metalinguistic variables have also been recognized as a product of reading and understanding the content of what is read. According to Lefrançois and Armand (2003), Metalinguistic variables contribute remarkably to sentence comprehension. The results of their study explain that metalinguistic abilities play a vital role in a person's effort to come to a state of literacy which emerges from the person's ability to read and understand. The results of their study brought to light different types of metalinguistic abilities which are peculiar to reading. Such includes decoding, word recognition and understanding sentences and texts.

Much attention has been given by scholars to the need to improve reading in the classroom, making effort to eliminate the factors responsible for poor reading. Also, unearthing skills that can be implemented to improve reading has also been the focus of some scholars (Lefrançois & Armand, 2003; Yamashita's, 2013; Economou, 2015; Iqbal, *et al.* 2015 etc.). Nevertheless, scholars are yet to identify, confirm or deny how reading actually in a target language impact the proficiency of the reader in the acquisition of L2, if indeed the fluency of speakers of English as second language is as a result of the kind of reading culture or attitude adopted by learners of English Language.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research approach in attempt to gain an insight into the reasons and motivations fundamental to people's actions and find out the kind of explanation people give to their experiences and the world around them (Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005). For this reason, the social survey method was adopted using questionnaire as an instrument to gather data for the study. The choice of questionnaire enabled the inclusion of more participants within a

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:11 November 2020

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short time other than what interview would have provided. The study was limited to the first year teacher trainees of OLA College of Education. OLA College of Education is one of the public colleges in Ghana situated in Cape Coast, the central region of Ghana. It is an institution which at the moment trains up-coming female teachers both in diploma and in degree programmes in three areas: Basic Education, Primary Education and Junior High School Education. From each of the ten first year Bachelor of Education classes in the college, five teacher trainees, who study English in the college as a second language, were conveniently sampled. The sampled participants have all had a basic education from Junior High School (JHS) to Senior High School (SHS) and have acquired basic lessons in English Language as a core subject.

Due to a number of challenges, which includes finances and failure in examination, some of these trainees had to stay home for some years after completing SHS before gaining admission into the college. On the other hand, some of them had the opportunity to obtain admission into the college right after completing their SHS education. Though these two categories of trainee teachers are familiar with English Language, English Language in the college demands a higher level of proficiency which students are expected to achieve. In all, fifty (50) teacher trainees participated in the study. Therefore, after a briefing on the purpose of the research, a self-administered questionnaire, were given to the participants to respond to them, which they did approximately within twenty (30) minutes. The questionnaires were then collected right after the trainees were done responding to them. The current study's six (6) item questionnaire is presented in the appendix.

The questionnaires which the participants responded to were first coded for easy identification and analysis. The data responses from the questionnaire were then analyzed using simple counts and percentages, categorizing them into themes for easier discussion of findings. Descriptive statistics was also used in reporting the findings of the study. The data collected were then labeled with the initial alphabet of the word 'Reading', in addition to Arabic numerals (e.g. R1, R5, etc.) before analyzing the responses provided by respondents in both the close and open ended questions, using qualitative content analysis. Since a person's or group's conscious or unconscious beliefs, attitudes, values and ideas often are revealed in their communications through a rigorous content analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000), the choice of qualitative content analysis helped to reveal how the reading of materials written in English Language can affect the reader's proficiency in English Language. For inter-rater reliability, a colleague tutor of English Language Studies in the college was also allowed to independently analyze the data and the percentage of reliability was ninety.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section discusses the results of the analysis on the role that reading plays in the acquisition of English Language as second and target language. To realize this aim, findings

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related to reading habits of teacher trainees, the types of materials they read as well as the impact of reading on their English proficiency are discussed. The purpose of the study was to confirm or deny an assumption that extensive reading helps in the acquisition of English language as a second language. A six (6) item questionnaire was administered to fifty (50) respondents who are first year female teacher trainees in a Ghanaian university college of education, pursuing a degree programme in various subject areas and with English Language studies as a compulsory subject. Results of the analysis of the data are discussed as follows.

Places where teacher trainees speak English Language

With the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate the places where they make use of English language. Options such as at the school, at home, with friends or in all these areas were provided on the questionnaire for participants to tick. In the data, it was revealed that forty-four (44) students, which is eighty-eight percent (88%) of the data set, reported that they make use of English language in their day to day activities, in areas such as the school, at home and with friends. On the other hand, four percent (4) each of the remaining respondents, only speak English both at school and home, at school only and at school and with friends respectively.

Reading habits of Teacher Trainees

Another information that was solicited from participants through the use of the questionnaire was how they would rate their reading habits. Reading habits in terms of how often they read and how long it takes them to finish a material they choose to read. Again, options such as Bad, Worse, Good, Very Good and Excellent were provided for participants to choose from. Feedback from respondents is summarized in table one.

Table 1: Rates of students’ reading habits

RATES	COUNTS	PERCENTAGE
Bad	2	4
Good	24	48
Very good	16	32
Excellent	8	16

In terms of rating reading habit of respondents, though twenty-four (24) respondents, which is forty-eight percent (48%), rated their reading habits as being Good, sixteen (16) respondents, which is thirty-two percent (32%) of the participants, rated theirs as Very Good. Eight (8) respondents on the other hand, which make sixteen percent (16%) of the participants, rated their reading habit as Excellent yet only two respondents, which is four percent (4%) of the participants, confessed of a bad reading habit.

Number of books teacher trainees read in a year

The questionnaire also required respondents to state the number of books they read in a year to ascertain their level of reading habit and how it impacts their proficiency in English Language. Table two summarized the feedback form respondents.

Table 2: Number of books read in a year

Respondents	Percentage of Data (%)	No. of Books Read Annually
10	20	5
10	20	5
8	16	6
8	16	4
6	12	2
4	8	8
4	8	10

In response to this question, it was revealed that six (6) respondents which formed twelve percent (12%) of the data reported that they read two (2) books in a year and ten (10) respondents which indicate twenty percent (20%) of the data reported of reading five (5) books in a year. Again, ten (10) respondents, which is twenty percent of the data (20%) said they read five (5) books annually and eight (8) respondents making sixteen percent (16%) and another eight (8) respondents, also making sixteen percent (16) of the data read six (6) books and four (4) books respectively every year but four respondents (4) which is eight percent (8%) of the data also reported that they read eight (8) books per annum while four (4) respondents making eight (8%) also read ten (10) books yearly.

Kinds of materials teacher trainees read

The purpose of this question was to identify the kind of materials students read in order to appreciate the kind of influence that reading has on their proficiency in English Language. From the data, whereas eighteen (18) respondents, which is thirty-six (36) percent of the data, read Storybooks, Magazines and Newspapers, twenty-two (22) respondents, which make up forty-four percent (44%) of the data, read storybooks only. In addition to reading Storybooks, four (4) respondents which is eight percent (8%) of the data and six (6) respondents, which is twelve percent (12%) of the data, also indicated that they read Magazines and Newspapers respectively. Table 3 is a summary of the data gathered from respondents on the kind of materials they read.

Table 3: Kinds of materials respondents read

Materials	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Storybooks	22	44
Storybooks & Magazines	4	8
Storybooks & Newspapers	6	12
All of them	18	36

Impact of reading on English Language proficiency

Again, respondents were required to share their views on how reading has influenced their proficiency in acquiring the English Language. This question was in two part. The first part gave respondents the options of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers for them to make a choice. The second part of the question then gave respondents the opportunity to explain their choice of answer in the first part of the question. After analysis, the data showed that forty-eight (48) respondents, which is ninety-six percent (96%) of the data confirmed that reading materials written in English Language has a positive influence on their proficiency in English Language. Two (20) respondents on the other hand, which is four percent (4%) of the data, did not support the fact that reading has any direct impact on their reading, though they read materials written in English.

Moreover, it was also observed from respondents’ explanations that reading materials written in English language positively impact respondents’ proficiency in English Language as their second language being acquire through formal education. First, just as Iqbal et al (2015) identified in their study, thirty-six (36) my respondents, which is seventy-two percent (72%) of the data explained that reading such materials assisted them in the acquisition of new vocabulary in English Language. they report that reading these materials also taught them the appropriate construction and use of variety of sentences in speech and writing. Again, respondents admitted that reading these materials written in English enabled them to amass rich ideas for essay writing during examinations. Below are some of their responses.

I was able to learn to acquire more English expressions and words...R5

Because I read, my scope of thinking has improved...R31

Reading storybooks and newspapers have improved my reading skills and usage of grammar...R40

Again, fourteen (14) respondents, which is twenty-eight percent (28%) of the data rather saw an improvement in their construction of sentences and in their use of appropriate vocabulary as well. Khairuddin (2013) established from his study that reading exposes readers to knowledge and new words. In the same vein, respondents of the present study also report that by reading

extensively, they are equipped with the needed information to be able to write good essays with rich content in examinations and it also improves their vocabulary. Thus, reading these materials results in an improvement in their writing skills. Finally, they also noted that reading keeps them abreast of current issues aside the fact that it gives them pleasure. This is a confirmation of Yamashita's (2013) report that reading presents to the reader the benefit of pleasure aside knowledge. Some examples of their responses are as follows.

I read story books for fun and also just to know what the story is about...R25
I read newspapers and it helps me to know the current issues in the country...R12
It has improved my academic performance...R50
I think it somehow has a positive impact on my writing skills...R1

Conclusion

It was the aim of this study to confirm or deny the authenticity of the assumption that teacher trainees' extensive reading of materials written in English Language affects the reader's proficiency of English language as a second and target language both in speech and in writing. Therefore, questionnaire was administered to fifty (50) first year Bachelor of Education female students in a Ghanaian University College of Education.

As a result, the analysis of this survey presents four major outcomes. First, it reveals that learners of English language in Ghana not only speak English at school as expected, but also at home and with friends. Secondly, the results of the study indicate an encouraging reading culture and a positive attitude among teacher trainees towards reading. Again, storybooks especially have become a source of vocabulary, expressions, and correct sentences construction for teacher trainees to acquire and improve their proficiency in English Language as their second language. Finally, this study confirms that reading in a target language enriches the readers' level of proficiency in the second language being acquired from vocabulary to writing in the target language.

Pedagogically, the findings of the present study will be beneficial to both teacher trainees and tutors at the college. It will also bring to the attention of educators the specific role reading plays in the learners' acquisition of English language. Teaching syllabus can be revised and improved taking a second look at reading lessons and the selection of reading materials for learners. It will also be a steppingstone for other researchers to expand the study for in-depth knowledge on reading as a tool for second language acquisition.

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APPENDIX

APPLIED LINGUISTICS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Where do you use English language?
Only at school [] Only at home [] Only with friends [] All of them []
2. How will you rate your reading habit?

Bad [] Good [] Very good [] Excellent []
3. What kinds of materials do you normally read?

Story books [] Magazines [] Newspapers [] All of them []

4. a. Do you think your attitude towards reading has any influence on your proficiency in English Language? Yes [] No []

b. Explain how the materials you read help you acquire English language?

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