



DEVELOPING READING SKILLS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF [2013a-2020] WASSCE ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

The paper is a study aimed at scrutinizing the levels of thinking the West African Examination Council adopted in their previous English Language comprehension test items. It is observed that the examination body's adoption of largely lower thinking levels of reading comprehension questions has resulted in limiting the cognitive abilities of language learners with regard to understanding what is read in school or out of school. Using Potts' (1976) three main levels of questioning, this qualitative study analyzed eight reading comprehension passages with their questions from 2013 to 2020. The analysis results showed that the levels of thinking questions in comprehension were low and do not challenge the cognitive abilities of learners at the senior high school level. This study is crucial because it helps examination bodies to have a clear picture of the language assessment situation in the subregion of Africa.

Subject Area is Language Curriculum and Testing.

Keywords: Language Assessment, Reading Comprehension, Senior High School, Ghana

1. Introduction

Education evaluation is crucial to instruction since it evaluates whether or not educational objectives have been met (Owu-Ewie, 2019). This means that to adequately make educational decisions about the level of competencies or proficiencies of language learners, there is a need to look at language assessment critically. Public and private school applicants in their third year of senior high school take the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). The exam is used for admission to postsecondary institutions as well as certification (*see* waecgh.org).

This current study explores the levels of thinking questions observed in the WASSCE English comprehension questions and also comparatively look at how the questions reflect the thinking levels of learners. Thus, some selected English Language WASSCE past questions (2013a-2016 and 2017-2020) will be analyzed comparatively using Potts' (1976) three main levels of questioning to investigate the levels of comprehension questions that lie therein. Again, the study compares how [2013a-2016] and [2017-2020] WASSCE English Language comprehension questions reflect the thinking levels of learners.

2 Literature Review

This section looks at some scholarly work on language assessment, teaching reading comprehension, and factors that affect reading comprehension

2.1 Language

In education, language is key for effective teaching and learning to occur. This means that if teachers are not competent linguistically and, at the same time, fluent in the language used to facilitate teaching, the entire teaching and learning process will face challenges. It has been established that

the performance and success of students are significantly impacted by the language of instruction (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2019; p.1). Language and literacy are inseparable, and for one to achieve literacy, language is the major tool to use. UNESCO (2006) cited in Owu-Ewie (2019) reports that literacy involves the set of invaluable skills of reading and writing. It brings into a light language that is spoken. It is for this reason that the Ministry of Education, as one of its core objectives, instituted Ghana Reading Action Plan (G-RAP) which seeks to promote knowledge, skills, and competencies for all students in Ghana as a critical first step in creating the human capital required for the nation's transformation (MoE, 2018, p.12).

2.2 Relationship between Assessment, Measurement, Test, and Evaluation

Assessment is an ongoing process that covers a lot more especially in language education. A good teacher does not cease to assess students in the teaching-learning process. This could imply that "students in the classroom must have the flexibility to experiment, to test their own linguistic hypotheses without feeling as though their overall competence is being evaluated in terms of those trials and errors for optimal learning to take place (Shohamy & Menken, 2015, p.4).

Owu-Ewie (2019; p.425) argues that in order to build a thorough picture of what students know, comprehend, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences, assessment is the process of obtaining and discussing information from many and different sources. He sees educational assessment as documenting and measuring learners' values, knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, etc. In order to meet the public's expectations for standards and accountability, assessment is utilized for selecting, managing, or encouraging students (Biggs, 2003; p.141 cited in Amua-Sekyi, 2016). Consequently, educational assessment affects decisions about the entire educational process or cycle – decisions about grades, placement, advancement, instruction, and curriculum (Owu-Ewie, 2019).

Assessment can be categorized into formative and summative. Formative assessment is done throughout the course or the teaching-learning process and informs the effectiveness of the teaching or teaching pedagogy, provides feedback about the student's progress to see if any appropriate remedial lessons are necessary (Amua-Sekyi, 2016; Yambi, 2018; Owu-Ewie, 2019). It occurs during instruction and learning and is meant to offer feedback for both to be improved (Bachman, 2013; p.8). Contrarily, summative evaluation occurs at the conclusion of the teaching and learning process. Bachman believes that it is designed to provide feedback for decision-making concerning growth, achievement, or certification (p.8). It frequently goes by the name "assessment of learning" and takes the form of an external exam (Amua-Sekyi, 2016; Owu-Ewie, 2019).

Language assessment can be put under three groups (Owu-Ewie, 2019): *Assessment of learning* is an assessment of what has been learned and it includes summative assessments such as quizzes, final exams, report writing, assignment, group work, etc. Owu-Ewie suggests this assessment is 'mostly done at the end of the semester, middle of the semester, task or unit of work' (p.426). This form of assessment becomes necessary because the majority of a student's time is spent in school. *Assessment for learning*: this means in order to inform their instruction, teachers use this assessment as proof of the knowledge, understanding, and skills of their pupils. This format is used frequently during the teaching and learning process to make sure students grasp what they are learning. To help a student's language skills, a teacher may comment, provide a suggestion, point out an error, or provide feedback. *Assessment as learning* basically is a regular self- and peer-assessments, which encourages students to reflect on their work and plan their next lesson. Owu-Ewie reports that metacognition is the process that the learner goes through, and it is at this point that the learner asks particular questions about the teaching and learning process in their reflection.

Measurement refers to ways in which learners' behavior is quantified, coded, or described. This process is done through explicit rules and procedures (Owu-Ewie, 2019; Salmani Nodoushan, 2020). Measurement includes ranking, rating, or testing behaviors or traits like aptitude, attitude, intelligence, motivation, field dependency or independence, native language proficiency, fluency in speaking, and reading achievement.

A *test* is a measurement tool created to collect data on a representative sample of a learner's behavior. According to Owu-Ewie (2019, p.429), tests are either used for "pedagogical goals," to encourage students to study or to review previously taught content. Language tests can be diagnostic, placement, progress or achievement, and aptitude tests. *Evaluation* as a process gathers information on test results to help make a judgment. Part of the measurement is evaluation (Yambi, 2018; Owu-Ewie, 2019).

2.3 Language Assessment

Language assessment is important to the overall development of any language education. To make language assessment useful, it must include the following fundamental qualities: (a) there should be constructed validity; (b) reliability; (c) authenticity; (d) interactiveness; (e) practicality; (f) washback; (g) ethics and fairness, and (h) validity (Shohamy & Menken, 2015; Giraldo, 2019; Owu-Ewie, 2019).

Language assessment must be able to assess the various levels of skills required in language instruction i.e., listening skills, reading, speaking, and writing skills. Listening skill deals with the ability to decode the message, use methods, and interactive processes to make sense, and respond to what is communicated (Owu-Ewie, 2019, p.148). Reading skill develops when learners are able to decode symbols with the intention of attaining usable meaning from what is read (reading comprehension). Speaking, on the other hand, is a participatory process of generating meaning, which involves producing, receiving, and interpreting information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997 cited in Owu-Ewie, 2019, p.157) while writing is a system where language or meaning is communicated through signs and symbols.

These four skills are crucial in language education. This current study will focus more on English language reading comprehension in senior high schools in Ghana.

2.4 Teaching Reading Comprehension

According to Pellegrino et al. (2001), reading is a series of symbolic manipulations that result in the understanding of a printed text. Reading is comprehension because 'decoding without comprehension is simply *word barking*' (Owu-Ewie, 2019, p.202). The teachers' ultimate goal is to improve students' comprehension and understanding regardless of the level of teaching.

The following factors may have an impact on a child's comprehension of text: Influences on reading comprehension include, but are not limited to, reading motivation or purpose; vocabulary or word knowledge; fluency; automaticity of decoding; comprehension of and application of effective readers' tactics, and amount of reading, etc. (Owu-Ewie, 2019). Teachers need to pay attention to these underlying factors in order to ensure effective classroom practices required for reading comprehension.

To minimize the impact of the factors affecting reading comprehension, Owu-Ewie (2019) outlines the following effective classroom practices for developing reading comprehension: (a) devoting more time to reading; (b) the use of explicit strategy for reading instruction; (c) allow learners talk about books read to the class, group or mates; reading a lot of the time; (d) visual representation of text; (e) making use of prior knowledge; generating questions; etc.

2.5 Components of a Reading Comprehension Lesson

To reach great heights in reading comprehension, there are important activities that teachers and learners are supposed to go through (pre-reading activities, while reading, and post or after-reading exercises).

Pre-reading activities are exercises that 'prepare/warm-up learners before they start reading the text' (Owu-Ewie, 2019, p.206). These activities will depend on the level of the learners. For example; brainstorming to know what to expect in the text, giving a contextual background of the text, students doing skimming, etc.

While reading activities are those that students engage in while reading a text. At this stage, teachers can help students make connections, ask related questions, or students make predictions, etc.

Post-reading activities are used to check students' understanding of what has been read, and to reflect on it. Here, students can do a summary, ask comprehension questions, paraphrase, pause to internalize and absorb what has been read, role play, etc.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Potts' (1976) three main levels of questioning were utilized to categorize the cognitive demands of the items in the WASSCE English language past questions into the literal level of comprehension (Low Level), Interpretive level of comprehension (Middle Level), and critical level of comprehension questions (High Level).

Literal level or Low-level thinking is explained as understanding the surface meaning of the text; meaning is explicitly or overtly stated in the text. 'which' questions are used to elicit meanings, i.e., who, why, where, when, what. These types of questions require 'short simple answers aimed at identifying essential points in the text' (Potts, 1976 cited in Owu-Ewie, 2019, p. 210).

Interpretive level or Middle-level thinking deals with implied meanings or inferences. Meaning can be inferred by using meaning explicitly and our prior knowledge of the situation described. A *critical level of comprehension or High-level thinking* uses meaning explicitly by making an informed judgment of the situation. This requires critical thinking.

3. Methodology

WASSCE past questions for the English language (2013a-2020) were purposely selected for this study, which became necessary for comparative, qualitative analysis. This was to investigate the levels of thinking questions set under the aforementioned reading comprehension texts.

In accordance with the research questions, the findings are discussed.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 *What are the different levels of thinking in [2013a-2020] WASSCE English Language comprehension questions?*

Table 1. Comprehension test items and their respective level of questioning

WASSCE	Literal Level (Question no.)	Interpretive level (Question no.)	Critical level (Question no.)
2013	[a, b, c]	[d, e, g]	[f, h]
2014	[b, c, d, f]	[a, e, h]	[g, i]
2015	[a, c, e]	[b, d, f]	[g, h, i]
2016	[a, b, d, e]	[c, f]	[g, h]
2017	[a, b, d, e]	[g]	[c, f, h]
2018	[a, d]	[e, g]	[b, c, f, h]
2019	[a, c, d, f]	[b, e]	[g, h]
2020	[a, b, c, d, e]	[f, h, i]	[g, j]

An analysis of questions presented in the 2013a-2016 and 2017-2020 WASSCE English Language comprehension items based on Potts' (1971) three levels of questioning showed that out of 68 test items, literal thinking questions were 29 (43%) as compared to interpretive level questions 19 (28%) and critical level questions 7 (29%) respectively. This analysis is for both four-year cohorts.

Table 2. Examination Question Types - Section "B" (Comprehension)

Levels of questions	Number of questions	Percentage (%)
<i>Literal Level</i>	29	43
<i>Interpretive Level</i>	19	28
<i>Critical Level</i>	20	29

Total	68	100
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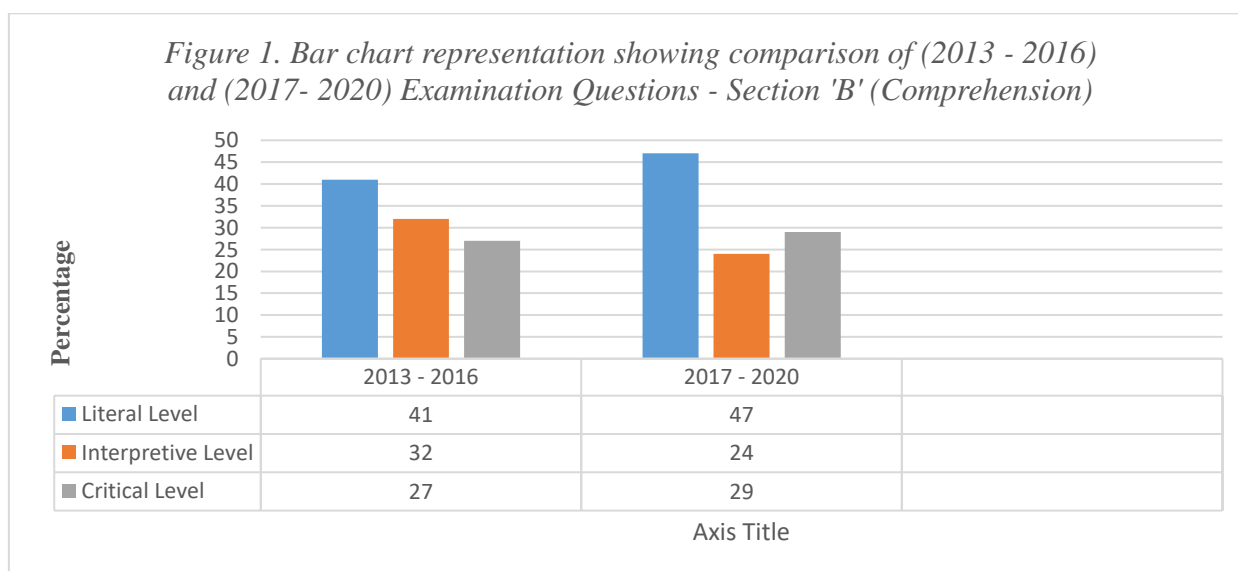
4.2 To what extent do [2013-2016] and [2017-2020] WASSCE English comprehension questions comparatively reflect the thinking levels of learners?

Table 3. Examination Question Types - Section "B" (Comprehension, 2013a-2016)

Levels of questions	Number of questions	Percentage (%)
<i>Literal Level</i>	14	41
<i>Interpretive Level</i>	11	32
<i>Critical Level</i>	9	27
Total	34	100

Table 4. Examination Question Types - Section "B" (Comprehension, 2017-2020)

Levels of questions	Number of questions	Percentage (%)
<i>Literal Level</i>	16	47
<i>Interpretive Level</i>	8	24
<i>Critical Level</i>	11	29
Total	34	100



Tables 3, 4 and figure 1 above show that comprehension items set generally measure lower thinking skills of learners even though WASSCE candidates are expected to be tasked to develop some middle to high thinking skills. The data above saw a lower number of critical-level (High level) questions in both four-year cohorts. Both data report that learners' cognitive skills are not being challenged enough and, therefore, may not develop as quickly as expected. There is, however, a marginal increase in the middle to a high level of thinking questions in 2013-2016 test items as compared to that in the latter four-year cohort.

Amua-Sekyi (2016, p.5) suggests that teachers will need to learn to assess problems in their training if they want to encourage evaluative thinking in their classrooms. They are, therefore, advised to devote more time to reading and also try to explore more knowledge in language assessment in order to develop the cognitive skills of learners.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper sought to interrogate the types of comprehension questions found in 2013-2020. It also tried to do a comparative analysis of how these comprehension questions reflected the thinking levels of learners. The data show that the levels of thinking questions in comprehension do not

challenge the cognitive abilities of learners. Policymakers of education, however, could periodically engage language teachers in refresher courses specifically to apprise themselves of good reading strategies. Also, the curriculum for senior high school requires a certain level of learning as well as the development of higher-order thinking abilities and processes, both of which can be facilitated by the use of effective teaching strategies and assessment tools.

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