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Examining/Understanding the Reading Culture and Comprehension Abilities of Learners of English as a Foreign Language in Uganda

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In this study, I analysed the reading culture and its influence on reading comprehension of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Uganda. The data were collected by interviewing ten EFL teachers in order to gather their views of their learners' reading culture and comprehension abilities. Data were analysed using Vroom's Expectancy theory. Findings indicate that the EFL learners were enthusiastic about reading even beyond the classroom reading tasks. 30% of the teachers interviewed confirmed that the learners had a positive attitude towards reading as part of their language learning, hence a confirmation of their good reading culture. The rest of the teachers interviewed confirmed that 70% of the learners possess a poor reading culture. The study further confirmed the presence of a strong link between the learners' reading culture and reading comprehension achievement. The majority of the teachers agreed that the positive reading culture exhibited by their EFL learners significantly contributed to their reading comprehension. The learners with a poor reading culture also exhibited poor reading comprehension abilities because they lacked frequent reading comprehension opportunities. The study concludes that the majority of EFL learners lack a good reading culture. There was a clear relationship between the reading culture and the learners' attainment of reading comprehension. This is confirmed by the fact that in cases where the reading culture was positive, the learners' reading comprehension abilities were better.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension has become very important among learners of EFL. Such learners' ability to completely and accurately comprehend what they read is essential to their ability to communicate in EFL, perform well in tests, and ultimately succeed in school and career. Reading is one of the most important skills for any language learner because most of the information is written, and many EFL learners have to read it and understand labels, directions, job application forms, and newspapers (Chatman, 2015).

Students who are unable to read successfully may fail to find a job, and if they do, the pay rate will be much lower compared to proficient readers (Brault, 2012). Despite this perceived importance, many of the EFL learners are not able to exhibit the required level of comprehension when they read. Their attitude towards reading, coupled with their motivation to read, plays a pivotal role in determining their comprehension. Past studies have demonstrated that reading culture and motivation to read go hand in hand (Kamalova & Koletvinova, 2016). For such advanced EFL learners, reading comprehension is considered their ultimate goal because they are expected to develop knowledge, skills, and strategies that make them proficient and independent language users who read while making meaning. Readers can attain such abilities if they are motivated and consequently develop a culture of reading.

Reading culture is a practice of consistently and regularly seeking knowledge or information from written texts. It is behaviour that needs to be patiently developed with the efforts of both the learners and their teachers. In their pursuit of reading comprehension, EFL learners are expected to cultivate a reading culture that will steer them towards attaining their reading targets (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018). However, research on reading comprehension and its instruction for EFL learners in Uganda has not received enough

attention because there is no traceable study that addresses both these concepts concurrently. Consequently, the role of the EFL learners' reading culture in their attainment of reading comprehension in contexts like Uganda has not been well documented. In other words, reading has to be part of their culture or lifestyle in order for them to become proficient readers (Magara & Batambuze, 2005). A poor reading culture has far-reaching consequences on the ability of such foreign language learners to attain their reading comprehension goals. Such learners who do not possess the ability to understand what they read are put at a disadvantage in every educational and personal life situation (Blair et al., 2007). People who do not regularly read or have a poor reading culture find reading comprehension very challenging because they do not have the opportunity to interact with texts on different subjects and with different degrees of complexity. For reading comprehension to be attained, the reader has to interact with the text many times using a set of skills or strategies to help them interpret it. Inevitably, a good reading culture enables EFL learners to understand and explore what they read with ease.

English language in Uganda is taught as a foreign language to non-Ugandans who come from countries such as Congo, Eritrea, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, among others. Such EFL learners in the Ugandan adult language schools. The enterprising teachers and other business people rise up to start language schools for the purpose of providing much-needed adult education to foreign language learners. English in Uganda is taught as a second language, and the teachers are trained to teach it; thus, adult learners from other countries study it as a foreign language because they are often accessing it for the first time in Uganda. In cases where it is not their first time accessing it, such adult language learners rarely come into contact with the language, unlike the Ugandans who regularly use it. Given their minimal

interaction with the English Language, there is a need for ideal ways of exposing the EFL learners for purposes of promoting a reading culture that will, in turn, contribute to their attainment of reading comprehension.

This study had two objectives, which were as follows: To establish the reading culture of EFL learners in Uganda and To assess how the EFL's reading culture influences their attainment of reading comprehension.

RELATED LITERATURE

Reading culture, according to Nyam (2015), is the use of reading as a regular activity, and thus the cultivation of an attitude and the possession of skills that make reading a pleasurable, regular, and constant activity. Accordingly, learners' reading culture evolves when they habitually and regularly read books and other information materials that are not necessarily required for them to advance in their profession or career (Gbadamosi, 2007). Stairs & Stairs-Burgos (2010) agree that reading culture is shaped when students are allowed to choose what they want to read, and this goes a long way toward enhancing their desire to read. Therefore, reading should take place at any point in life pleurably and regularly, in such a way that it becomes part of an individual's life activity (Chettri & Rout, 2013). The preceding language scholars suggest that reading should not occur as a result of conscious pressure resulting from academic tasks or as a way to prepare for employment. Instead, it should happen effortlessly and regularly. What remains to be discovered is whether the EFL learners in Uganda read what is given to them only or whether they go beyond to read widely. State et al., (2010). Nonetheless, it will be noted that the learners' reading culture is not only shaped by themselves; their teachers too have a role to play. Indeed, what learners consider to be their teachers' attitude towards them motivates or demotivates them to make extra effort to read. If their teachers believe that they will fail, no matter what, they often refuse to try (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). If students expect or desire to be successful, they will exert more effort to

succeed. This study therefore, seeks to establish the EFL reading culture in Uganda and how that culture influences their attainment of reading comprehension.

In line with the tenets of Vroom's theory, this study seeks to establish the learners' reading culture in relation to their reading comprehension targets, if any. Given that the EFL learners in Uganda may have reading comprehension targets and expectations, it remains important to establish the reading culture they develop and whether that reading culture influences their reading comprehension abilities in any way.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to gain insights into the reading culture of EFL in Uganda and how it influences their reading comprehension. The study involved teachers of the "advanced learners" of English as a foreign language in five adult language schools in Uganda. The learners in adult language schools are usually exposed to at least 6 hours a week of studying the English language for a period of two months. EFL is characteristically driven by the need to communicate in the English Language through reading, in addition to other language skills such as listening, speaking, and writing. Some of these learners harbour ambitions to live, work and pursue further studies in Uganda and other countries where English is the medium of communication.

This study relied on interviews and teachers' perceptions of their students over some time for data collection. The 10 EFL teachers who were interviewed were selected from five adult language schools in Kampala. They were between the age group of 25-40 years with a teaching experience of at least three years. Six of the teachers were female, while four were male. The interviews were carried out between August and September 2020, and each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Some of the interviews were held face to face and others via telephone calls due to the Covid-19 restrictions. The phone

call-based interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later qualitatively analysed by the researcher.

In terms of the scientific base, this study was guided by Vroom's Expectancy Theory (1964), which asserts that the amount of effort an individual will exert (to do something) ultimately depends on three perceptual relationships: (1) expectancy, a person's subjective estimation of the likelihood of successfully performing a particular behaviour; (2) instrumentality, a person's subjective estimation of the likelihood that a particular behaviour will result in certain outcomes; and (3) valence, the positive or negative value that a person places on each of those outcomes. Accordingly, individuals with different sets of goals can be motivated if they believe that there is a positive correlation between efforts and performance; favourable performance will result in a desirable reward. Therefore, it will be of interest to establish whether the observed reading culture shapes their reading comprehension abilities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Reading Culture of the EFL Learners in Uganda

Findings from the interviews carried out with the teachers confirmed that a small section of their learners had a good reading culture. Three EFL teachers out of the ten teachers that were interviewed indicated that their learners were enthusiastic to read since they spent approximately 4 hours per day on reading with several of them working hard on their reading assignments. The teachers further added that the students had been reading many materials on their own, including textbooks, newspapers, magazines, story books, and blogs, which were not on the class reading list. One teacher cited a student who had read five short stories in the two-week-long holiday on his own and could satisfactorily talk about his subject matter.

Language teachers, therefore, should carefully select relevant, interesting, and enjoyable reading material that will motivate the learners to read regularly, hence developing a reading culture. As

seen from the example above, the learners were in a position to read even beyond what they were given by the teachers. This too, points to the fact that learners should be consulted on the reading comprehension materials that are to be brought into their classroom for reading comprehension purposes. In other cases, such materials should be selected from the learners' point of view, ensuring that their interests have been taken care of since they are major stakeholders in ensuring a successful reading comprehension activity.

The remaining seven teachers, who constitute 70%, responded that the majority of their EFL learners exhibited a poor reading culture because they hardly finished their reading assignments in the given time. One of the teachers added that the learners were not regular readers because they were slow and could not accomplish a reading task in the time the teacher had allocated to them. This demonstrated that reading was not part of the activities they carried out regularly. Had it been one of the regular activities, the learners would have gained speed, and the ability to comprehend what they read would have increased gradually. Another teacher added that apart from the few learners who could read beyond the classroom assignments, the majority of the learners never read anything as a result of their own initiative. One of the teachers exclaimed that the learners seemed like they were being forced to study English because they were not interested in reading, as seen in the following quotation,

"I think that my students have a poor reading culture. They tend to be irregular in class and cannot read on their own or arrive at the meaning of most of the texts before them. It is hardly possible for them to read on their own without me compelling them. It is as though they are being forced to study the English Language".

Whereas 30% of the teachers agreed that their learners exhibited a (good) reading culture, they are not representative of the entire EFL teachers who responded to the interviews. The majority of the teachers (70%) agreed that their learners lacked a (good) reading culture, as can be deduced

from the quotation in the previous paragraph. This confirms that whereas some of the learners exhibited a (good) reading culture, the majority of them lacked it (exhibited a poor reading culture). Promoting a reading culture should be everyone's responsibility, including the teachers, school administrators, and the students themselves. An enabling reading culture should be created, and the learners should be assisted to set reading comprehension targets, which they should further be guided to attain. The teachers should select texts about different subjects and of different types so that the learners can have an opportunity for exposure to reading.

Reading Culture and EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

The teachers were further asked to rate the same learners' reading comprehension abilities in relation to their observed reading culture. This aimed at establishing whether the learners' previously established reading culture influenced their attainment of reading comprehension in any way. It was discovered that the learners who were observed to have a (good) reading culture were rated highly as achievers who comprehended what they read with a considerable degree of success compared to their counterparts who did not often read/ lacked a (good) reading culture. This is in agreement with Guthrie (2008), who rightly opined that those who read regularly and widely tend to be higher achievers than those who do not. The teachers further reported that their learners were self-motivated to read and therefore, took time to read on their own and widely. The adequate input or exposure to reading comprehension content led them to its mastery. Some of the indicators of their mastery of reading comprehension reported by their teachers were their ability to express understanding of the subject matter, some vocabulary, and answer some of the questions about the read text. Another teacher further stressed that their learners with a good reading culture were also able to read relatively faster than their counterparts who did not read as often. In fact, one of the teachers indicated that the learners were self-motivated and

they liked volunteering to read for the entire class, which was very gratifying. Such can never be the case if the reading culture among those learners is poor. Fast reading and comprehension abilities among those learners were a result of the good reading culture they had cultivated, hence confirming the relationship between a good reading culture and attainment of reading comprehension abilities among the EFL learners in Uganda.

On the other hand, the learners who had a poor reading culture and lacked motivation to read on their own were reported to have been habitually absent from classes, and they often struggled to read and hardly understood what they were reading in class. These were also reported to be slow readers who often lagged behind in terms of reading speed compared to their counterparts who reportedly had exhibited a good reading culture. Such learners who had a poor reading culture often attained low grades whenever continuous assessments were done in class. This is because good readers have many sources of language input, which helps them increase their vocabulary, reading experience, and speed, and they potentially devise their own reading comprehension strategies, which in turn facilitate their attainment of reading comprehension strategies. Such benefits are what the learners with a poor reading culture miss out on because of their limited interactions with texts of different kinds, lengths, and complexities.

The EFL learners' socio-cultural dynamics are worth paying attention to in reading comprehension. The EFL learners in Uganda come from different backgrounds, as already pointed out in this paper. Some are from francophone countries, Arabic speaking countries, among others. Some have had previous exposure to English Language and their languages related to the English Language. These backgrounds too, are associated with limited exposure to the English Language. It is only those whose reading culture was good that were able to comprehend with some degree of ease. Therefore, it is important that both the learners, their teachers and

any other interested parties ensure that a good reading culture is supported and developed to ensure good reading comprehension results.

As part of their social dynamic, some of the learners have biases and prejudices towards the language they have to learn. This happens when a learner has negative thoughts or attitudes towards a language they are learning. This bias and prejudice often result in a poor reading culture in that language because it is the language they may not always be excited to associate with. Teachers and other stakeholders must ensure that their learners' views towards the language they are learning are positive, which will contribute to their reading culture.

The final aspect is the financial ability of the students to afford a good language school with adequate reading materials and better teachers, among others. The quality of the school and its teachers can help develop/promote the learners' reading culture or kill it altogether. This, in turn, affects their reading comprehension abilities positively or negatively. For instance, in some of the schools, it was established that the reading materials in several semi-urban language centres were of low quality, so they could not enhance reading culture, hence limited comprehension. Some of the materials in some of those schools were too simplistic, and others were too few for each student to have a copy of their own. On the other hand, the learners in the urban schools that had some relatively good reading materials were observed to read better than those who did not have them, as already explained above. These were comparatively better, and they successfully read and interpreted texts. Besides, the various reading materials helped change the learners' attitudes towards reading comprehension. This is because they had done it over and over again, and they consequently believed reading was a simpler task, a view the other students never held at all because they rarely read.

In a situation where reading materials are diverse enough and of good quality, they cause the learners to pick interest in reading. A combination of such reading materials and good teachers who

are in a position to support the learners' reading efforts, a good reading culture, and reading comprehension abilities are the expected outcomes.

Socio-cultural matters further exhibited themselves in terms of some of the EFL learners refusing to take part in some language activities that involved holding hands with people of the opposite sex. These found it unacceptable in their cultures and religious beliefs. Such learners missed out on language activities that would enrich their vocabulary and, consequently, reading comprehension abilities. It is arguably correct that the learners who have had previous exposure to the target language have the upper hand in mastering it better than those who lack such exposure. Such previous exposure is the basis upon which reading builds for the learners to attain comprehension. The assumption that learner who are self-motivated to read beyond class work will perform better in their reading comprehension was therefore confirmed by the study findings. This is very true for youths and adults as well who are learning to read in a second or foreign language. It is therefore, true that people without a reading culture are behind those with a reading culture in terms of comprehension because they lack a foundation on which to build their reading activity.

The learners with a poor reading culture were also reported to have been dropping out of class because they felt that they were not achieving as much as they ought to have been achieving. One of the teachers indicated that such learners felt like misfits who could not move at the same pace as the rest of the students. Their confidence in giving answers about the texts read and reading speed was reported to be low. This is in agreement with Cunningham and Stanovich (2001), who, after their study, concluded that lack of exposure and practice for less skilled readers delays the development of automaticity and speed at word recognition. Reading fosters creative thinking builds inquisitive minds, and enhances the lifelong learning abilities of a person (Bulgurcuoglu, 2016). From the foregoing, it was

clearly observable that lack of a reading culture or possession of a poor reading culture had far-reaching consequences on the EFL learners' attainment of reading comprehension. Such learners who are not passionate about reading miss out on such benefits to their detriment. Therefore, because they lack motivation to read, such learners fail to try reading, and when they try, they do not succeed because they have not mastered the art of reading and interpreting texts, which usually comes through regular exposure to texts of different kinds. Fosudo (2010) argued that the amount of reading children do for enjoyment and for school was found to be a major contributor to their achievement.

The study therefore, confirms the presence of a link between learner motivation, reading culture, and reading comprehension attainment. The study confirms and agrees that the amount of effort an individual exerts (to do something) ultimately depends on their estimation of the likelihood of successfully performing a particular behaviour, the likelihood that a particular behaviour will result in certain outcomes, and the positive or negative value that a person places on each of those outcomes. This explains why some of the learners with a poor reading culture give up on realising that they are not achieving reading comprehension. When they are not motivated to read and attain reading comprehension, they will not even try to read.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the teachers' point of view, the EFL learners in Uganda lacked a good reading culture, and consequently, their reading comprehension abilities are not well developed. The few learners who exhibited a good reading culture, according to their teachers, were also found to be good readers who ably comprehended most of what they read. The learners' poor reading culture (lack of a reading culture) had far-reaching consequences among the EFL learners. It led to students' absenteeism, dropping out of classes, and low interest in the language. The teachers of EFL should therefore, pick an interest in

understanding their learners' reading culture and also seek to improve it or change it for the better.

The study established that a (good) reading culture positively impacted the reading comprehension abilities of EFL learners. The teachers associated the EFL learners' reading culture with their motivation to attain reading comprehension. The teachers reported that learners who were not well motivated to set their reading comprehension goals did not attempt to complete the reading task given during the lesson. This presents an urgent need to assist the EFL learners in setting goals and further motivating them to pursue them. EFL learners should therefore, be encouraged to set reading comprehension goals and also read widely so that they fall in love with the practice, which will consequently ensure a reading culture.

The teachers should carefully select relevant, interesting, and enjoyable reading material that will motivate the learners to read regularly, hence a reading culture. The carefully selected material will, in turn, stimulate them to read while enjoying with the aim of understanding how the story ends. A reading culture can be systematically cultivated among EFL learners when teachers introduce a range of reading materials that are both on and off the syllabus. Since learners with a good reading culture were able to comprehend with a considerable degree of success compared to those who did not have a good reading culture, the study concludes that EFL learners' reading culture influences their attainment of reading comprehension. It should therefore be every EFL teacher's concern to devise means of helping their learners build and sustain a reading culture which will in turn facilitate their attainment of reading comprehension. The EFL teachers should also be intentional and help learners set reading comprehension goals and continue to help them realise such goals. The reading culture should be deliberately promoted because of the benefits it has on the learners' attainment of reading comprehension skills.

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