

Exploring Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Teaching Reading Comprehension in Selected ESL Rural Ghanaian Junior High Schools

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Abstract

Reading comprehension in Ghanaian Junior High Schools remains a major concern despite long-standing reforms. This study examined teachers' perceptions and classroom practices in rural schools and explored how these shape comprehension instruction. Schumann's (1978) Acculturation Model guided the study and positioned comprehension as a social process influenced by learners' cultural and linguistic alignment with English. A qualitative approach using a narrative research design was employed. Fourteen English language teachers from rural schools in the Nkwanta North District were purposively selected. Data came from interviews, observations, and documents, and was analyzed thematically. Findings revealed two main perceptions emerged. Many teachers viewed comprehension as a mechanical and exam-driven task. Others framed it as a meaning-making act linked to students' social worlds. Classroom practices reflected these positions. Most lessons focused on literal recall and teacher-led routines. A few teachers used dialogue and familiar cultural examples to support deeper reading. Contextual pressures such as scarce materials, rigid syllabi, and examination demands shaped these choices and limited pedagogic flexibility. The study concludes that comprehension improves when teachers act as cultural mediators who connect learners' lived realities with English texts. It calls for teacher development that supports culturally grounded and interactive reading practices in rural Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension underpins academic success in both first and second language settings. In second-language education, strong reading ability enables students to engage critically with texts, understand instructions, and build knowledge across subjects (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Nation & Nation, 2001). In Ghanaian Junior High Schools (JHS), where English serves as both a subject and the medium of instruction, reading comprehension affects students' overall performance (Davis et al., 2022)

Recent local studies reveal persistent difficulties in comprehension among Ghanaian learners. For instance, a 2022 study of a JHS in New Juaben South Municipality found that many students struggled with inferencing and integrating background knowledge with text content (Teiku, 2022). Another investigation at Yamoransa JHS confirmed that large class sizes, lack of reading materials, and weak reading strategies undermined comprehension performance (Korsah, 2024).

Textbooks also add to the challenge. A readability analysis of JHS English textbooks showed that many comprehension passages are above the reading level of intended users, making texts difficult for learners to decode and understand meaningfully (Bakuuro & Onoja, 2024; Bakuuro et al., 2024; Owu-Ewie, 2014).

Furthermore, official data points to low comprehension results nationally. According to the 2022 National Standardized Test report, only a small proportion of lower primary learners demonstrated sufficient competence in reading comprehension, despite improvements in overall reading fluency (Addae-Kyeremeh & Boateng, 2024). This persistent gap suggests that fluency alone does not guarantee understanding.

These realities reflect a wider issue. Even though literacy initiatives exist, many Ghanaian students move through school able to pronounce words but unable to make sense of what they read. Some teachers view reading as mere decoding; their instruction centers on literal comprehension, recall, and teacher-led explanation (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025). Others recognize the value of deep comprehension but feel constrained by class size, lack of materials, or time (Batsa, 2023).

This divergence between what reading should aim for and what actually happens in classrooms calls for closer attention. Without a firm grasp of how teachers conceptualize reading comprehension and how those beliefs shape classroom practices, reforms risk addressing only symptoms.

This study explores the perceptions and instructional practices of Ghanaian JHS teachers regarding reading comprehension. It asks: *Which views of reading comprehension do teachers hold? How do those views shape their teaching practices?* The aim is to shed light on the cognitive, pedagogical, and contextual dynamics that influence reading instruction in Ghana.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore teachers' perceptions and instructional practices in teaching reading comprehension in rural Ghanaian Junior High Schools. The choice of a qualitative design is grounded in the idea that teachers' beliefs and pedagogical behaviors are socially constructed and shaped by context. These features cannot be captured through numerical or standardized measurements. Creswell and Poth (2016) state that qualitative inquiry is suitable when the aim is to uncover meanings individuals attach to their experiences and to interpret the social conditions that shape their actions. Teachers in rural Ghana teach within settings marked by linguistic diversity, limited resources, and sociocultural pressures (Yevudey & Agbozo, 2019). A qualitative approach offered room to engage these conditions as they influence instructional decisions.

This study employed a narrative research design to listen closely to how teachers describe their work with reading comprehension. Narrative inquiry treats teachers' stories as knowledge. It values how people make sense of their actions through lived experience (Clandinin, 2019). Clandinin (2006) notes that narratives help researchers trace experience across time, place, and social conditions. This view guided the study. Each teacher shared moments that shaped their views of reading. These stories helped us to see how beliefs form and how they appear in classroom practice. The design also allowed us to link personal accounts with the routines we observed in their lessons. Narrative inquiry does not aim for broad claims, but it offers detailed accounts of human experience

(Clandinin & Caine, 2013). The aim was to understand how these teachers talk about reading, how they act on those beliefs, and how their environment shapes their choices. This design supported that aim.

Participants / Subjects / Population and Sample

The study involved fourteen English language teachers drawn from selected rural Junior High Schools in the Nkwanta North District of Ghana. These schools were chosen because they reflect the linguistic complexities, infrastructural limitations, and pedagogical challenges common in rural Ghana (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2024). The teachers were selected through purposive sampling. Each teacher met two conditions. The teacher had to be actively teaching reading comprehension, and the teacher had to be willing to take part in the study. These conditions ensured a sample that could offer rich insights into the focus of the research. This approach aligns with Patton's (2015) view that purposive sampling supports the selection of information-rich participants.

Instruments

Three instruments guided the development of data: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews offered space to probe teachers' understanding of reading comprehension, their beliefs about effective instruction, and the constraints that shaped their choices. Classroom observations supported the interview data and allowed the researchers to see how teachers' stated beliefs appeared in practice. Document analysis involved the review of lesson notes and students' reading comprehension exercises. This helped clarify teachers' instructional intentions and assessment tendencies. These three instruments produced methodological triangulation and strengthened the study's credibility and depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data went through qualitative analysis shaped by thematic inquiry. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were read several times to trace emerging patterns, contradictions, and convergences in teachers' perceptions and practices. Initial coding was carried out inductively. This allowed the data to guide meaning-making before theoretical ideas were applied. As themes began to take shape, the analysis moved into a more interpretive stage. Codes were refined, merged, or separated to reflect the nuances of teacher beliefs, classroom realities, and instructional choices.

Analytic memos were kept throughout the analysis to record decisions, reflections, and shifts in interpretation. These notes supported transparency and reflexivity. Attention was given to the contextual grounding of each theme, in line with the case study design's focus on situational meaning. The analysis aimed to show not only what teachers do or believe but why those practices persist within the systemic, cultural, and material conditions of rural Ghanaian schooling.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study. It summarizes the data gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Guided by Schumann's (1978) Acculturation Model, the analysis examined how teachers mediated learners' sociocultural integration into English textual practices. The findings are presented objectively and factually, with a thematic summary provided in Table 1, followed by detailed sub-findings organized under the three major themes identified in the dataset.

Table 1. Summary of Themes Identified in the Data

Theme	Description	Data Sources Supporting Theme
Teachers’ Perceptions of Reading Comprehension	Dual perceptions: comprehension as decoding for examinations; comprehension as meaning-making linked to learners’ sociocultural experiences.	Interviews, Document Analysis
Classroom Practices in Teaching Reading Comprehension	Predominantly teacher-centered, literal-focused reading routines; limited cultural integration; emerging interactive and culturally responsive practices.	Classroom Observations, Interviews
Contextual Factors Shaping Instruction	Resource scarcity, curriculum overload, and examination pressure restricting teachers’ ability to adopt interactive and culturally grounded methods.	Interviews, Observations, Document Analysis

Teachers’ Perceptions of Reading Comprehension

Interview data revealed two contrasting but overlapping perceptions of reading comprehension. Many teachers viewed comprehension primarily as a cognitive and examination-driven skill. As one teacher stated:

“For me, reading comprehension is helping the pupils to read and answer the questions correctly because that is what they meet in the BECE.” (Teacher 04)

This reveals a narrow, test-oriented interpretation of comprehension, where success is equated with answering literal questions. Under Schumann’s acculturation lens, such perceptions reflect limited mediation of learners into English discourse practices.

Conversely, some teachers conceptualized comprehension as a meaning-making process situated within students’ sociocultural worlds. One teacher explained:

“When I teach comprehension, I want the pupils to understand the story and talk about how it relates to their lives. I ask them, ‘Has something like this happened in our community?’ before we read.” (Teacher 07)

This orientation fosters sociocultural bridging and aligns more closely with acculturative literacy development. Document analysis confirmed this divide: meaning-oriented teachers included activities such as prediction and schema activation, while exam-oriented teachers moved directly to comprehension questions.

Classroom Practices in Teaching Reading Comprehension

Observation data yielded three dominant instructional patterns.

Teacher-Centered, Literal-Oriented Practices

Many lessons followed a consistent sequence: the teacher read the passage aloud, explained vocabulary, and assigned factual recall questions. For instance, at Kpassa D/A JHS A:

“The teacher reads the passage sentence by sentence while students repeat after him. Afterward, he writes five comprehension questions on the board. Students answer silently as the teacher walks around.” (Observation Notes) One teacher justified this routine by stating: *“Time is not enough. The syllabus is plenty, so I go straight to the questions. They need to pass exams.”* (Teacher 14)

Such practices restrict learners’ deeper engagement and align with the low-acculturation end of Schumann’s continuum.

Limited Cultural Relevance and Interaction

Across several schools, texts lacked cultural resonance. A notable example was a passage titled *“A Day at the Seaside,”* taught in a community with no coastal experience. Students’ disengagement reflected the sociocultural distance embedded in the text. A teacher commented: *“We use what is in the textbook. Sometimes the examples don’t match their life, but that’s what we have.”* (Teacher 05)

Emerging Interactive and Culturally Responsive Approaches

Some teachers adopted practices that aligned with acculturative literacy development. At Bonakye R/C JHS:

“Learners eagerly described how they danced during the Borborbor festival. The teacher connected these experiences to the passage, prompting students to identify similarities between the text and their lives.” (Observation Notes)

This teacher encouraged comparative reasoning:

“Why do people celebrate festivals in your hometown?”

A student responded:

“To remember our ancestors.”

The teacher continued:

“Good! In the passage, how did the writer explain the reason? Let’s compare.”

This approach fostered cultural integration and dialogic meaning-making.

Contextual Factors Shaping Instruction

Teachers’ instructional decisions were strongly constrained by systemic factors, including resource shortages and exam-driven curricular expectations. One teacher lamented: *“We have only one English textbook for the whole class. I read for them to listen. It’s difficult to make everyone follow.”* (Teacher 11)

Another explained:

“Without electricity, I can’t print extra comprehension passages. So I just use what is in the old textbook.” (Teacher 02)

Institutional expectations also shaped pedagogy:

“If you spend too much time on one passage, the headteacher will ask why you’re behind.” (Teacher 06)

These pressures produced what Schumann refers to as “social distance,” limiting teachers’ ability to create culturally meaningful comprehension experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings showed that teachers in rural Ghanaian Junior High Schools hold two contrasting conceptions of reading comprehension. This split reflects wider international trends. Kehoe and McGinty (2024) found that teachers’ declarative knowledge shapes the depth of their comprehension instruction, with stronger knowledge linked to inferential and metacognitive teaching. The dominance of literal, test-driven views among teachers in this study aligns with their work and highlights how assessment culture shapes what teachers believe counts as effective reading instruction. The emphasis on “answering questions correctly” mirrors Alzahrani and Almalki’s (2025) findings in Saudi classrooms, where comprehension is treated as decoding due to rigid assessment regimes. Our reading of this pattern is that teachers work within a system that rewards compliance rather than interpretive thinking, so comprehension becomes task performance instead of meaning-making.

Some teachers, however, viewed comprehension as social meaning-making and grounded their explanations in learners’ everyday experiences. This aligns with the acculturative orientation of Schumann’s (1978) model and echoes Osei’s (2024) observation that Ghanaian teachers who see comprehension as communication use more interactive approaches. These teachers model the pedagogical shift the country needs. When they ask, “*Has something like this happened in our community?*”, they draw reading into the learner’s cultural space. This act of mediation confirms that comprehension grows when learners recognize themselves in the text. We read this as evidence that meaningful reading instruction requires cultural anchoring, not just linguistic accuracy.

The persistence of narrow and mechanical views among many teachers signals a deeper epistemic issue. Mohsin’s (2018) work in Saudi higher education made a similar point: teachers often inherit routines shaped by institutional norms rather than informed reflection. This study reinforces that claim. Teachers’ beliefs in these rural schools are shaped by institutional expectations that privilege examination outcomes. In Schumann’s terms, this produces limited acculturation. Teachers and learners participate in English only at a functional level while remaining socially distant from its discourse practices. As a result, comprehension becomes a technical drill, not a space for exploration. Our classroom observations further confirmed this link between belief and practice. Teacher-centered routines dominated many lessons. Question–answer cycles framed comprehension as a recall activity rather than an interpretive one. This pattern parallels Korsah’s (2024) finding that Ghanaian comprehension lessons focus heavily on literal recall. Our observations showed teachers reading aloud, students repeating lines, and then answering predictable factual questions. Even when teachers claimed to value deeper engagement, their practices followed procedural paths shaped by anxiety over examinations and limited time. Kehoe and McGinty’s (2024) report of similar disjunctions between teacher intention and practice helps situate this finding. For us, this dissonance shows how performance pressures override pedagogical ideals in many rural classrooms.

The lack of cultural connection in texts and activities also shaped the teaching observed. Teachers relied on passages far removed from learners’ lives, such as those set in British seaside towns. Students who had never seen the sea struggled to interpret the imagery. Osei (2024) described similar misalignments. Schumann’s idea of “social distance” explains this gap well: when texts do not reflect learners’ worlds, comprehension becomes an act of cultural translation rather than understanding. Alzahrani and Almalki’s (2025) note that such limitations stem more from contextual constraints than intellectual gaps in teachers. We share that view. When teachers rely on imported materials, they unintentionally push students away from the meaning-making process.

Yet this study also documented moments of innovation. Some teachers used learners' cultural experiences and oral traditions to support comprehension. At Bonakye R/C JHS, for example, the teacher linked a reading passage to a local festival. Students responded with ease because they recognized the context. This practice reflects reduced social distance in Schumann's terms and brings English into the learner's cultural world. We see these examples as evidence of teacher agency. They show that even within deprived contexts, teachers can design meaningful comprehension tasks through thoughtful cultural integration. Yakubu (2020) argued for training that builds such context-driven practices. Our findings give weight to that call.

The study also revealed how resource scarcity shapes instruction. Teachers worked with limited textbooks, overcrowded classrooms, and poor infrastructure. Many had only one English language textbook for an entire class. This condition reflects Yakubu's (2020) description of systemic constraints across Ghana. Such shortages force teachers to rely on teacher-led reading and narrow questioning techniques, a pattern also noted by Korsah (2024) and Osei (2024). From our perspective, this is a structural barrier that shapes how teachers and learners engage with English language. It also aligns with Schumann's (1978) view that social and institutional factors influence language engagement as much as cognitive ones.

Pressure to complete the syllabus further limited interactive approaches. Teachers described how administrators viewed student-centered methods as slow or inefficient. Kehoe and McGinty (2024) observed a similar shift toward test-driven teaching in pressured environments. In these rural schools, this pressure turns comprehension into a utilitarian task aimed at examinations rather than growth. We see this as an educational contradiction: the system expects comprehension gains but discourages the teaching that produces them.

In spite of these constraints, some teachers demonstrated resilience and creativity through local examples, storytelling, and culturally grounded activities. Though not widespread, these practices reflect the acculturative ideal of bridging linguistic and cultural distance. They show the power of teacher agency to shape meaningful comprehension experiences. Mohsin (2018) argued that cognitive and institutional change must move together. This study supports that claim, as teacher innovation thrives only when supported by institutional structures.

Taken together, the findings map a pattern consistent with Ghanaian and global scholarship. Teachers' beliefs, practices, and contexts are woven together. The study strengthens the claims made by Kehoe and McGinty (2024) and Osei (2024) by showing how comprehension instruction in rural Ghana is shaped not only by teacher cognition but by resource poverty and cultural disconnection. Using Schumann's (1978) framework, comprehension teaching emerges as a cultural encounter. Teachers act as cultural brokers who help learners navigate the space between their lived worlds and the discourse of English texts. The challenge, then, is not only to teach strategies but to support teachers to shape classrooms that honor culture, experience, and meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the complex relationship between teachers' perceptions, classroom practices, and contextual realities in the teaching of reading comprehension in rural Ghanaian Junior High Schools. The findings show a clear pattern. Many teachers continue to interpret comprehension through a mechanical, examination-oriented lens, and a smaller group adopts culturally grounded, meaning-oriented approaches that support deeper engagement. These outcomes reinforce the study's central insight: comprehension teaching in multilingual and resource-poor settings is not only a cognitive task; it is a sociocultural negotiation that links learners' lived realities with the discourse norms of English. This aligns with work such as Kehoe and McGinty (2024), Osei (2024), and Alzahrani and Almalki (2025), which describe similar tensions between belief, context, and enacted practice.

Viewed through an Acculturation lens, the study shows that effective comprehension instruction in deprived contexts depends on teachers' ability to build scaffolds that bridge students' cultural worlds and the language of schooling. Teachers can create such scaffolds through dialogue, shared storytelling, and locally relevant texts. The findings also show that material deprivation does not remove the possibility of strong pedagogy. Teachers who used community knowledge and oral traditions created meaningful learning even with limited resources.

The study points to three key outcomes. First, teachers' perceptions shape practice in direct ways. Second, contextual pressures restrict the use of interactive and inference-based methods. Third, culturally grounded instruction leads to richer comprehension. These results place teacher agency, resource conditions, and cultural alignment at the center of comprehension teaching in rural Ghana. The recommendations that follow speak to specific groups who can improve reading instruction.

The Ministry of Education and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment should revise reading materials so that texts reflect Ghanaian settings. District Education Offices should support schools with targeted in-service training that introduces sociocultural strategies for comprehension. Colleges of Education and university teacher-education programs should integrate sociocultural theories of reading into pre-service courses, giving teachers practical ways to use local experiences and languages as cognitive tools. Head teachers should create space in school timetables for interactive lessons that support meaning-making rather than test rehearsal. Classroom teachers can continue to draw on storytelling, community experiences, and oral traditions to help students build connections with English texts.

Improving reading comprehension in Ghana calls for a shift in pedagogical philosophy. Teachers must be supported to act as cultural mediators who foster both linguistic competence and social understanding in the classroom. This study shows that such teaching is possible when institutional structures, assessment practices, and training programs work together to sustain it.

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