

# Evidence Of Acquisition Of The Reading Skill Related To Comprehension Of The Narrative Passages: Data From The International Literacy Study Pilot Testing In Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

*This article reports on the evidence gathered when a selected group of form two (junior secondary) students in seven Harare and Mashonaland East schools took a reading literacy test in a pilot study that was carried out from September to November, 1989. Only results pertaining to the students' performance on the narrative passages of that test are reported here.*

*On the whole, students performed well but we note a pattern where performance was best for questions on the literal level of understanding; weaker on the interpretative and evaluative type questions and weakest on the open-ended type questions. Thus, we have made our recommendations based on this performance in reading literacy.*

## Introduction

The passages which made up the pilot test version of International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Literacy Study covered a wide spectrum of areas that students expect to read in life. Froncoise Grellet (1981) has given a comprehensive summary of the kinds of materials people read generally in life, some of which are "novels, short stories, tales, essays, biographies, diaries, anecdotes, plays, poems, newspapers, magazines, editorials, business and personal letters, classified and other advertisements, weather forecasts, radio/TV/theatre programmes, reports, reviews, recipes, travel brochures, puzzles, problems, rules for games, instructions, directions, notices, forms, graffiti, price lists,

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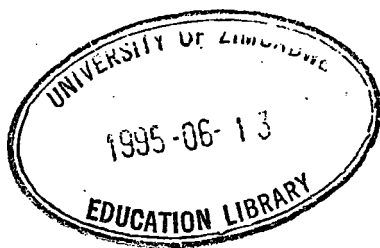
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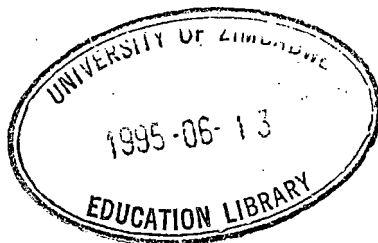
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menus, tickets, diagrams, flow and other charts, timetables, maps, statistics, dictionaries, directions" and many other materials not mentioned here.

In order to prepare children to read these materials efficiently, the primary and secondary school syllabi in Zimbabwe focus on most of these areas deliberately so that teachers can train pupils in reading them. The Zimbabwe Junior Certificate English syllabus in particular focuses on as many of the above areas as possible and these are to be found, not only in the English ZJC syllabus, but also in the English textbooks such as *English for Zimbabwe*, *English for Communication*, *Structures and Skills*, etc. Therefore, narrative passages in the IEA Reading Literacy test such as "Fox," "Killfox," "Mute," "Revenge," and "Antonia," represented the kind of material students would read for pleasure and so speed reading and other related skills would apply.

On the other hand, there were expository passages in the test which required students to read for close understanding (Ellis & Tomlinson, 1980, p. 140), because they were like textbook material which should be read at a slower pace than narrative work. There were also passages which represented what should be read only for required information such as all those that fell under *Documents*. For as Venezky (1990) correctly argues, document processing differs from reading narrative or fiction in that it is "initiated by a narrowly defined task that usually requires selective processing ...and tasks such as finding an entry in a train schedule often require specialized knowledge relevant to a particular document format. Finding information in such contexts is more like problem solving than like comprehending plot, character, or authors' purpose in reading fiction." Results on such documents and expository passages are discussed elsewhere in detail (Moyana, 1991; Jaji, 1991).

Because all these reading techniques are required if one is to be truly literate, they are included in the English ZJC syllabus and in the English textbooks as stated before, and therefore, form two students were expected to go through the set passages without hardship. They were also expected to apply the different reading skills taught in order to do well in the test (here we assume, of course, that all the different skills have been taught by the teachers). Thus, we need to make an analysis of the test scores of the selected Zimbabwean form two students to find evidence of their acquisition

of the reading skills related specifically to the narrative passages of that test. Questions asked were either on the literal, interpretative or evaluative level. So it would be valuable for us to find evidence of which level students performed their best and we will try to ascertain the reasons for such performance.

### Reading Skills

Besides focusing on *what* students read, literature on reading instruction also deals with *how* students should read. Generally, people read in different ways depending on what material they are reading. The major ways of reading are skimming, scanning, intensive and extensive reading (Grellet, pp. 4-17). Likewise, pupils are taught to adapt their reading skills to the different purposes for which they read. In the comprehension tests given, this ability to adapt one's reading skill to the passage was catered for by the wide variety of passages given, requiring a wide variety of responses from pupils. Hence, pupils were expected to adapt the appropriate reading techniques to each passage including the adjustment of speed in order to deal with long prose passages requiring the fast reading skills. In the Zimbabwean school curriculum, speed reading is catered for and educationists expect it to be taught to pupils so that they can cope with the heavy reading demands at senior secondary and tertiary school levels. Besides, the quantity of printed materials encountered daily tends to increase with time. With this increase comes a demand to read faster (Venezky, p. 12). In a research carried out by Shiela Duncan and Solomon Matema on speed reading at primary school level (1978), it was discovered that the children who read fastest had the most comprehension of the text. If this training in speed reading were to continue throughout the secondary school, particularly in the first four years, students would achieve a satisfactorily high level of basic and functional literacy assuming that their reading ability would spill over into the acquisition of other vital skills such as writing, numeracy and document processing (Venezky, pp. 7-9), all of which culminate in one's literacy.

### Description Of The Test And Population Sample

All together, 223 junior certificate students participated in this study. They read comprehension passages and answered questions on them which were mostly multiple-choice type. The test was divided into

four booklets averaging thirty-seven pages each. Some passages appeared in all four booklets while others appeared in one booklet only. Although all students answered questions in all booklets, for financial and other reasons, only one booklet per child was processed for the purposes of reporting these results. The other booklets still have to be processed. Where a particular passage appeared in all four booklets, we had 223 as the total number of students and where a passage appeared in one booklet only, we had 52, 53, 54, 57, or 60 students as the total number who answered a particular item. Ideally, a total of 60 students should have had their answers processed in each booklet, but some students omitted some questions which brought down the number to below 60. In reporting these results, therefore, the number (N) of students who answer particular questions will vary.

Since this was a pilot study, only a preferred sample of seven schools was selected to take part. The schools had to be close to the University of Zimbabwe for easy access, but the selection covered the following Ministry of Education and Culture school categories: former group B (3), conventional church (1), private high fee paying (2) and rural district secondary schools (1) in Harare and Mashonaland East Regions. Following the IEA guidelines for all participating countries, the selection of the schools was based on the 1987 form four public examination results whose achievement percentiles ranged from 97% for the highest achieving school to 4% for the lowest achieving school (Ministry of Education & Culture, 1987). For further discussion of methodology for this study, see Moyana et al. (1989; 1990).

### **Results: The Narrative Passages**

Items for the passage, "Fox," and for the other passages were multiple-choice questions asking students to choose the correct answer out of four possible ones which invariably included one strong distractor. Only in four passages were students given one open-ended question (among the other multiple-choice ones), whose answers they had to write in their own words. This first passage described how mother fox teaches her young cubs to hunt rabbits. The results of students' performance on that passage are recorded in Table 1 below.

Table 1  
"Fox."

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. What mother Fox teaches her young.	28,85	50,00
2. Reason why rabbits stayed close.	77,13	13,83
3. Reason why Fox cubs were puzzled.	46,68	22,43
4. The "watching eyes" refers to...	65,40	27,88
5. Cubs joined in game because...	39,73	35,75
6. What Fox cubs learned from mother.	53,70	17,45

N = 223

The items in this passages appeared to be difficult for the students, especially numbers 1, 3 and 5. The reason may be that the questions called for higher order skills; what Ellis and Tomlinson (1980) call Reasoning skills. When a reader exercises this skill, "it is not enough...to understand each sentence in isolation. He must be able to understand the reasoning, sequence or logic that unite the sentences into a whole. He must therefore be able to relate ideas and to deduce additional meaning from what is stated in the text" (p. 141). Almost all the questions for this passage demand this skill. For instance, nowhere in the passage is it mentioned specifically that mother Fox was teaching her cubs "how to catch rabbits;" or that the cubs joined in the game of chasing their own tails because "they feared their mother," etc. Students had to reason and deduce that information from statements like "They could not understand their mother, but knew better than to disobey her. Her teeth were sharp and both cubs had been sorely nipped for unruly behaviour."

The correct answers were therefore, not obvious for items one, three, five and six. The two items where students scored highly (two and four), were relatively easier. Although students still had to deduce the answers, the information pertaining to those questions in the passage made their task easier.



Multiple-choice exercises can be used effectively to train students how to find correct answers to questions based on their reading. Before students choose a particular answer, they must eliminate the others by referring closely to the text in order to substantiate the suitability of the answer chosen. When teachers use multiple-choice questions for training the skill of reading with close reference to the text, students are required to select the *best* answer rather than the *correct* one for each question (Hobbs, 1983). The "wrong" answers are called *distractors* and are carefully chosen in order not to make them appear obviously wrong and thus require students to understand the passage well before choosing the best answer (Hobbs, p 122). One of the distractors is always made to be closest to the best answer because students have to establish the correctness of the chosen answer through group or class discussion, or even individually as they reason out the pros and cons of rejecting each of the three unsuitable choices. When writing a test, however, students are expected to have acquired the technique of locating correct answers in a multiple-choice type exercise. Because the element of discussion is now absent in a test situation, the answers they choose are now referred to as either correct or incorrect if they happen to select one of the distractors (Harris & Sipay, 1979).

In our analysis of answers in this paper, we will notice that a large percentage of students will sometimes opt for the strongest distractor, particularly if that distractor happens to steer students more towards the literal level of comprehension. For instance, 50% in item one of Table 1 opted for the answer that said that mother Fox was teaching her cubs to *hunt other animals*. Indeed, a student would have to be very discriminating in eliminating such a strong distractor. Although rabbits are other animals, they are mentioned specifically in one of the answers. So the best answer would be that which identifies them specifically too. Let us now analyse the answers to the rest of the passages with the above information in mind to see how students fare.

**Table 2**  
**The Story Of The "The Magician's Revenge"**

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. Why magician's brow was clouding.	69,00	15,70
2. Why author listed articles up magician's sleeve.	49,33	79,00
3. Why magician's reputation sank below zero.	70,48	11,28
4. Magician's "final effort" "rallied for..."	29,60	56,10
5. Why Quick Man could no longer understand.	34,28	31,68
6. How Quick Man would feel next day.	77,35	14,15
7. The last thing magician did.	63,93	15,23
8. (Open-ended): Why a "great hush" fell on audience.	8,50	77,70

N = 223

Again the questions for this passage required students to deduce most of their answers. Items one, three, six and seven posed no great problems. Item six for instance, asked students how the Quick Man would feel the following day and 77,35% were able to deduce the correct answer that he would be "angry with the magician" for having destroyed his property in the name of playing "tricks" (the Quick Man kept disrupting the magician's activities by whispering information to the audience which worked against the magician's tricks). The strongest distractor for this answer said that he would feel *sorry for the magician*, which is most unlikely given the context of the story. The worst performance was on item eight which required students to respond freely to the question. The majority of students, 77,70% had answers which fell outside the range of acceptable answers while only 8,50% had answers within the range of correct answers. Judging by those answers, few students fully grasped the aspect of the story which was asked. A question which

was perhaps difficult for students is item four: "What was 'the final effort' the magician 'rallied for'...?" If that question had required a response on the literal level of comprehension, the answer would have been a *Japanese trick*; an answer which became the strongest distractor for that item. However, that was definitely not the correct answer because there was one other option which went beyond the literal facts. The magician, in his final effort, was rallying for *his punishment to the Quick Man*, which he did to his thorough satisfaction. Only 29,60% managed to get this answer correct.

On the whole, however, the average performance for this passage was not too different from that for the first passage, "Fox." This is because similar comprehension skills were required for students to get correct answers. Now we move on to the third passage, "Force," with results recorded in Table 3 below.

Most items for this passage were evidently difficult for the pupils. On more than half of the items (eight), less than 50% of the students managed to select the correct answer. The passage itself was long, representing what students at this educational level would normally read for pleasure.

The items for the passage included a wide variety of comprehension skills which students should be familiar with at this level. Some questions (1,2,4) were on the literal level of understanding; some (3,6,7,9,10) needed the interpretative skill; others (11,12,14) were on the evaluative and inferential level (especially number 13 on the inferential level). Generally, students performed better on the items requiring the literal skill than on the others as the table indicates. On item nine for instance, students needed to interpret "my best professional manner" to mean "skillfully," the word which was the correct answer for that item. The strongest distractor for that question was "gently and reassuringly." Yet professionalism in that particular context had nothing to do with gentleness and reassurance. Likewise, on item ten, students needed to interpret the Doctor's speech in terms of it being "threatening." Only 45% managed to do that while the rest could not. Perhaps the most difficult questions were numbers 12 and 13 which required both inferential and evaluative skills. Only 20% and 30%, respectively, managed to get the correct answer.

Table 3  
"Force."

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. Why Matilda lied to parents.	55,00	21,70
2. Best description of Matilda's feelings.	63,33	16,70
3. Differences between Matilda & parents to Doctor.	55,00	-- --*
4. Best explanation why Matilda clawed Doctor.	73,33	8,33
5. Cause for Matilda's shrieking.	33,33	48,33
6. Dr.'s reaction to mother's speeches.	35,00	31,70
7. Dr.'s reaction to mother's last speech.	35,00	28,30
8. Dr.'s first impression of Matilda.	53,33	25,00
9. Meaning of "my best professional manner."	43,33	38,33
10. Dr.'s first <i>threatening</i> speech to Matilda.	45,00	26,70
11. Best description of Dr.'s changes.	55,00	23,33
12. Best summary of what Dr. says.	20,00	36,70
13. Most important inference to story's development	30,00	31,70
14. Least relationship between Matilda and Doctor.	40,00	23,22

N = 60

\* = Answers were spread out, not concentrated on strongest distractor.

Table 4  
"Planet."

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. Captain Botchik's feelings.	47,4	26,3
2. Reasons for Botchik's belief in no life on the planet.	89,5	---*
3. What was in the glass cage?	57,9	---*
4. What we can tell about Hedden.	80,7	8,8
5. Section of library where one would find such a story.	70,2	14,0

N = 57

\* = No significant distractor emerging. Answers were spread out.

This passage gave students the opportunity to read dialogue. It was short with few items. Questions 2,4 and 5 were done particularly well as shown by the high percentage of those who got the correct answer. Questions 2 and 4 were on the literal level of understanding while for questions 1 and 3 students needed to deduce the answer from the descriptions given. No mention of *feelings* is done for instance, but from the context it can be concluded that the captain was *annoyed*. The strongest distractor for that item was *curious*. Those who selected this and other words like *scared* and *surprised* failed to correctly interpret the meaning of *storming* into a room and asking *gruffly*. .. Question 5 was a general knowledge type for which one needed to draw from personal reading experience where such a story would be placed in a library. Those who are used to reading science fiction had no problems getting the answer right and 70,2% managed to do so. The next passage was entitled "Killfox," and we record the results in Table 5 below.

Table 5  
"Killfox."

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. The dog's reason for not fearing the gun.	83,3	9,3
2. Why author shot the fox.	74,1	13,0
3. What the dog did after the fox died.	55,6	37,0
4. The fox's "business" in the village.	88,9	9,3
5. Why writer suddenly began to feel cold.	57,4	22,2
6. Why writer came back next day.	72,2	22,2
7. The message the writer is trying to convey.	87,0	----*
8. (Open-ended): Would author kill another fox?	53,7	37,0

N = 54

\* = Answers were spread out, not concentrated on strongest distractor.

Questions 1 to 4, and 6 were on the literal level of understanding. The answers could be found in the passage without much trouble. Question 5, however, was on the interpretative or critical evaluative level. The *cold* referred to was not literal or physical. Thus, 22,2% of the students thought the author began to feel cold because it was starting to get dark while 20% thought he was cold because it began to snow. Meanwhile the question required pupils to think of cold on a metaphorical level in order to get the correct answer:...he began to feel cold because he realised he had killed an innocent animal needlessly. Question 7 was done particularly well as it called upon students to deduce the story's message. This is an exercise students often do in class. The open-ended question was not done as well as expected.

**Table 6**  
**"Mute."**

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. Meaning of Mute "screaming."	38,9	25,9
2. Meaning of "chromosomes did not get along well."	35,2	35,2
3. Reason for the Nutsville people's surprise.	29,6	38,9
4. Why school builders were in a hurry.	55,6	27,8
5. Meaning of Mute having "spirit and morale."	46,3	25,9
6. Word best describing author's style.	55,6	29,6
7. Meaning of "Designs are designs."	50,0	22,2

N = 54

All questions for this passage required higher order interpretative skills. Answers for all of them could not simply be lifted from the passage. Questions 1 to 5 and 7 needed students to interpret what was narrated in the passage to get the correct answer while question 6 required them to evaluate the author's style. A good example of such an interpretative question is number 2: what the writer meant by the statement "Cosme's chromosomes didn't get along well." The correct answer was "Fate had made communicative man mute." Thirty-five percent got it right, yet another 35% chose the strongest distractor which said, "Old Cosme's parents didn't get along well when discussing their son's fate." These students perhaps failed to understand the term *chromosomes* and just guessed that someone did not get along well with someone else and parents were the logical people to do so! The question, thus, required a clever

interpretation of the information presented. Overall, performance was very low on all items for this passage. Let us see how students fared on the next one.

**Table 7**  
**"Wishes."**

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. Magician's reason to go to rich man's house.	84,9	9,4
2. Reason for rich man's refusal to receive magician.	43,4	35,8
3. Why magician enjoyed his meal.	84,9	13,2
4. Why magician granted 3 wishes to poor couple.	84,9	9,4
5. Why rich man was cross next morning.	54,7	53,8
6. How the saddle got home.	68,5	18,5
7. Why rich man was granted 3 wishes.	79,6	11,1
8. Why rich man was not as kind as poor man.	61,1	18,5
9. (Open-ended): Main message of story.	24,1	64,8

N = 53

Among these items, numbers 1 and 4 were purely on a literal level. Number 6 was on a literal level but one got the answer through deduction. Questions 2,3,5,7, and 8 needed higher order interpretative skills. However, students tended to select the strongest distractors (except in question 3) which were on the literal level. For example on question 5, the rich man was angry next morning because "he had missed a chance to gain something" and not because "the poor man had been given a new house bigger than his," which would be literally what annoys him. This question required an answer beyond that literal, jealousy factor. Question 9 was open-ended and required students' evaluative skills to get the



correct answer which they needed to write in their own words to the question, "what is the main message of the story?" Only 24,1% managed to do that correctly. Yet previously when they were asked the same question in the multiple-choice format in "Killfox" (Table 5 item 7), 87% got the correct answer. So the difficulty here seems to be with the open-ended question format per se. We shall comment on this later on. For now, let us observe performance on the next passage. See Table 8.

**Table 8**  
"A Shark Makes Friends."

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. Why the shark was unhappy.	86,5	-- --*
2. Why Shark is swimming alone at the beginning of story.	80,8	17,3
3. Why sardine befriended Shark.	90,4	5,8
4. How Sardine family felt.	78,1	21,2
5. Which event happened <i>last</i> .	51,9	38,5
6. Reason for Shark's <i>uncomfortable</i> feeling.	82,7	9,6
7. Sentence that reveals Shark didn't understand his own nature.	26,9	42,3
8. What we can tell about Shark in the story.	67,3	23,1
9. If story were longer, what would happen to Pilchard?	65,4	19,2

N = 52

\* = Answers were spread out, not concentrated on strongest distractor.

Items 1 to 6 in this passage were on the literal level and so quite easy except for question 5 which, though literal, required students to know the meaning of *terrified* and then equate it to *frightened*. Questions 7 to 9 were on the evaluative level requiring reasoning skills in order to come up with the correct answer. Number 7 though, appeared to be the most difficult.

Table 9  
"Antonia."

Question	% Obtaining Correct ans.	% Opting for strongest distractor
1. Major theme of story.	63,5	21,2
2. Reason why Antonia liked it at Grandma's.	73,1	13,1
3. Best description of Antonia.	59,6	17,3
4. How Antonia helped her Grandma.	61,5	17,3
5. What we learn about Antonia from her behaviour.	76,9	---*
6. How Antonia solves her problem.	55,8	19,2
7. Best description of Grandma's & Antonia's relationship.	50,0	28,8
8. What mother would probably do.	80,8	7,7
9. Most important sentence for summary.	59,6	21,2
10. Experience which would help understand Antonia's feelings.	73,1	17,3
11. (Open-ended): Why Antonia had to visit Grandma.	36,5	51,9

N = 52

\* = Answers were spread out, not concentrated on strongest distractor.

All items for this passage were on the higher evaluative order of skills. No literal question was set. Students had to understand the passage globally to answer the questions. On the whole, performance was satisfactory except for the last open-ended question requiring pupils to write the answer in their own words instead of choosing it from the given ones. Only 36,5% managed to write acceptable answers.

### **Summary Of Observations**

There is a pattern that emerges from the above evidence of the 1989 selected form two students' performance in the reading literacy pilot test given using narrative passages. Generally, students performed highest on those questions requiring the literal skill of understanding. They performed lower on questions requiring interpretative and evaluative skills and they performed lowest on the open-ended questions requiring them to write the answers in their own words to questions on the evaluative level of understanding. The only passage where students did well in spite of the questions being on the evaluative reasoning skill level is "Antonia." Therefore, we can conclude that students generally need more training and practice in dealing with the questions which require interpretative, reasoning, selection and evaluation skills since these are the more enriching skills that enable any person to gain more from his/her reading experience. After all, "Reading is [really] a constructive process" (Binkley, 1989, p. 7).

The National Research Co-ordinators from all countries participating in this study have been debating the issue of open-ended versus multiple-choice questions for use in this international research study, with the majority arguing that open-ended questions allow the students to express themselves more freely. Warwick Elley and Francis Mangubhai carried out empirical research in Australia in 1989 to determine whether students, indeed, perform better when given the opportunity to express themselves freely in open-ended type questions. They discovered that besides taking students a longer time "to generate and write out their answers than it does to place a cross on one of four options,...the multiple-choice test...produced higher means than the open-ended form on the same passage" (Elley & Mangubhai, 1989, p. 4). Furthermore, "when students who took the open-ended test were asked which format they preferred, 80% opted for the multiple-choice mode" (p. 5). This finding seems to

be consistent with the performance of the Zimbabwean students who wrote the IEA Reading Literacy Study pilot test, especially when we remember the case of item 9 in "Wishes" (Table 7 above) and item 7 in "Killfox" (Table 5) where the same information was asked for using the two different formats and students performing better in the multiple-choice format. Generally, students performed lowest on the open-ended type questions: "Revenge," 8,5%; "Killfox," 53,7%; "Wishes," 24,1%; and "Antonia," 36,5%.

Zimbabwean educationists therefore, might want to think seriously about the comprehension test format for final exams at form two and other levels, especially that we expected our students to score relatively high on these items since we tend to emphasise open-ended type questions after grade seven. At primary school level, pupils are trained to answer multiple-choice questions especially in preparation for the grade seven examination. They seem to master that skill particularly well. It may be worth our while to train students in both the open-ended and multiple-choice formats and then to test them in the multiple-choice format in order to achieve better reading literacy results in English and other subjects. So far as this Reading Literacy Study test is concerned, because students across countries tended to perform in a similar trend, the main test version of this study has made open-ended questions optional. There is not doubt, however, that the above results are an eye-opener to us on the reading literacy skills of those students selected to take the pilot test at form two level in the Ministry school types chosen, with specific reference to the narrative passages for which they would have employed the faster-reading and other reading techniques.

At this point it would be fruitful to compare this performance with performance on Documents and Expository passages which they also had to do. That subject has been discussed in separate articles (Moyana, 1991; Jaji, 1991).

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