

Examination of Text-Related Factors that Impede Students' Reading Comprehension Practice in English Language Classrooms: The Case of Tora Secondary School Grade 11

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Article history: Published: August 2026 Keywords: EFL Reading Comprehension Text-Related Factors Lexical Density Syntactic Complexity Readability Level Reading Strategies Tora Secondary School	This study examined the text-related factors that impede Grade 11 students' reading comprehension practice in English language classrooms at Tora Secondary School, Silte Zone, Central Ethiopia. A descriptive convergent parallel mixed-methods research design was employed to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative instructional nuances. The target population comprised Grade 11 EFL students and English teachers. Data were gathered from a sample of 160 students (selected via simple random sampling) and 6 EFL teachers (selected through comprehensive sampling) using student questionnaires, semi-structured teacher interviews, 12 classroom observation sessions, and textbook readability assessments using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level and Gunning Fog Index formulas. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages), while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The readability analysis revealed that the prescribed Grade 11 English textbook passages operate at high readability levels (Flesch-Kincaid average = 11.68; Gunning Fog Index = 13.18). Survey and interview findings demonstrated that unfamiliar/technical vocabulary density ($\bar{X} = 4.38, SD = 0.68$) and complex sentence structures ($\bar{X} = 4.21, SD = 0.74$) serve as the primary text-internal impediments hindering student comprehension. Furthermore, strategy analysis showed a heavy reliance on lower-level coping mechanisms, with 78.75% of students defaulting to word-for-word L1 translation and 73.75% depending on dictionary lookups rather than applying metacognitive or contextual decoding strategies. Classroom observations corroborated these results, indicating that reading instruction focuses predominantly on checking comprehension products rather than explicitly teaching comprehension processes during pre-, while-, and post-reading phases. Based on these findings, it is recommended that EFL teachers incorporate explicit strategy instruction (such as contextual vocabulary guessing and sentence parsing), while curriculum developers calibrate textbook text difficulty and provide structured scaffolding to enhance readability and learner engagement.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

According to Ethiopian educational policy, secondary school students must interact communicatively with written texts to build functional literacy, critical thinking, and academic performance. The curriculum designers at the Ministry of Education (MoE) recognize that reading comprehension is not merely an isolated sub-skill, but a fundamental vehicle for general language acquisition, cognitive growth, and cross-disciplinary achievement. The Grade 11 English textbook incorporates diverse text genres designed to provide students with modeling, practice, and awareness of complex text structures (Berhanu, 1999).

Reading comprehension is an interactive, process-driven activity (Gebremedhin, 1993). While past regional studies (e.g., Ayalew, 2011; Berhe, 1989) examined broader environmental factors or general textbook readability levels, limited empirical research directly examines how specific text-internal factors—such as vocabulary density, syntactic complexity, text structure, and cohesion—disrupt the actual reading comprehension practices of Grade 11 EFL students during real-time classroom instruction. This study was conducted to fill this gap within the specific context of Tora Secondary School.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The role of language in education extends beyond passive decoding; it involves active meaning-making, processing complex concepts, and synthesizing written information (Cain & Oakhill, 2007; Marland, 1977). When teaching Grade 11 English at Tora Secondary School, the researcher observed a noticeable gap between students' expected reading competence and their actual performance during reading tasks. Students frequently struggled to answer high-order comprehension questions, summarize passages, or follow textual arguments.

While instructional and learner-centered variables contribute to these difficulties, internal features of the prescribed texts often act as immediate barriers to comprehension. This study systematically examines the primary text-related factors that impede Grade 11 students' reading comprehension practice and documents how both students and teachers navigate these challenges in the classroom.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1.3.1 General Objective

The primary objective of this study was to examine the text-related factors that impede Grade 11 students' reading comprehension practice in English language classrooms at Tora Secondary School.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

The study seeks to:

- Identify and quantify the key text-related factors (e.g., vocabulary difficulty, complex sentence structure, cohesion issues, passage length) that hinder students' reading comprehension practice.
- Identify the reading comprehension strategies utilized by teachers and students to overcome these text-related impediments.
- Describe how students and teachers actively cope with and manage text-related barriers during classroom instruction.

1.4 Research Questions

The study intends to address the following research questions

- What are the key text-related factors that impede Grade 11 students' reading comprehension practice at Tora Secondary School?
- What reading comprehension strategies do EFL teachers and students employ to mitigate text-related reading barriers?
- How do students and teachers deal with text-related reading obstacles during classroom reading instruction?

1.5 Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study was delimited to Grade 11 EFL classrooms at Tora Secondary School, located in Tora Town Administration, Silte Zone, Central Ethiopia. Conceptually, the investigation focused specifically on text-internal factors:

- Low frequency/technical vocabulary density
- Complex/compound syntactic structures
- Text organizational structure and coherence/cohesion markers
- Passage length and overall topical interest/elaboration

1.6 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study offer insights into:

- EFL Teachers: Providing actionable insights into text-level friction points and effective scaffolding strategies.
- Students: Enhancing metacognitive awareness of the structural and lexical barriers they face while reading.
- Syllabus Designers & Curriculum Developers: Informing future revisions of Ethiopian Grade 11 English textbooks to ensure developmental appropriateness and clear text organization.
- Researchers: Serving as an empirical reference point for future studies on L2 reading comprehension and text readability in secondary schools.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework of L2 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is an interactive processing activity between the reader's prior knowledge (schema) and the visual/linguistic input from the text (Anderson & Pearson, 2003; Grabe, 1991). Efficient comprehension requires the integration of bottom-up decoding skills (recognizing words, parsing syntactic structures) with top-down processing (using background knowledge and context to infer meaning) (Carrell & Eskey, 1988).

2.2 Text-Related Impediments in L2 Reading

Text-internal properties significantly impact L2 readers' processing capacity:

- Lexical Density & Low-Frequency Vocabulary: Unfamiliar words force readers into frequent, conscious decoding pauses, draining working memory resources needed for higher-level integration (Nation, 2001).
- Syntactic Complexity: Passages featuring heavy embedding, passive voice, or long relative clauses increase parsing difficulty (Alderson, 2000).
- Cohesion and Coherence: Inconsistent use of discourse markers, ambiguous reference words, or poor rhetorical organization obscure relationships between propositions (Nuttall, 2005).
- Length and Text Structure: Long passages with dense layouts often degrade motivation and exceed processing capacity if clear organizational cues (e.g., headings, signposts) are lacking.

2.3 Comprehension Strategies and Instructional Phases

Effective readers rely on metacognitive monitoring, questioning (QAR), graphic organizers, and summarization to repair comprehension breakdowns (Block, 2001; Lee, 1999). In the L2 classroom, reading instruction is typically structured across three operational phases:

- Pre-reading: Schema activation, vocabulary previewing, and establishing purpose (Hedge, 2000).
- While-reading: Active text navigation, tracking main ideas, and applying "fix-up" strategies (Atkins et al., 1995).
- Post-reading: Consolidating meaning, summarizing, evaluating, and critically responding to the text (Williams, 1986).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive convergent parallel mixed-methods research design. Quantitative data (questionnaires and readability assessments) and qualitative data (classroom observations and semi-structured interviews) were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and merged during interpretation to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem.

3.2 Target Population, Sample, and Sampling Techniques

The target population comprised all Grade 11 students and English language teachers at Tora Secondary School.

Target Group	Total Population	Sample Size	Sampling Technique
Grade 11 Students	320	160	Simple Random Sampling (50% sample)
EFL Teachers	6	6	Comprehensive / Census Sampling (100%)

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

- Student Questionnaire: A 5-point Likert scale instrument (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) assessing student perceptions of lexical, syntactic, structural, and length-related text barriers, as well as strategy use.
- Teacher Interview Guide: Semi-structured interviews conducted with all 6 EFL teachers to gain qualitative insights into observed student reading difficulties and instructional coping mechanisms.
- Classroom Observation Checklist: A structured scheme used over 12 observation sessions (2 per teacher) to observe real-time interactions with textbook reading passages across pre-, while-, and post-reading phases.
- Textbook Readability Analysis: Quantitative evaluations of 5 randomly selected Grade 11 English reading passages using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level and Gunning Fog Index formula.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26) to compute descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations). Qualitative data from interviews and open classroom observations were transcribed, coded, and categorized into thematic areas aligning with the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Readability and Structural Analysis of Selected Reading Texts

To establish an objective baseline of text difficulty, 5 representative reading passages from the Grade 11 English textbook were analyzed. The readability metrics demonstrate that the textbook passages average a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of 11.68 and a Gunning Fog Index of 13.18. These scores indicate that the texts align with upper-secondary to early tertiary reading levels, presenting high structural and lexical complexity for EFL learners.

4.2 Key Text-Related Factors Impeding Reading Comprehension

Table 4.2 presents student survey responses regarding text-internal barriers ($N = 160$).

Item #	Text-Related Impeding Factor Statement	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std. Dev. (SD)	Agreement Level
TRF-1	Unfamiliar/technical vocabulary occurs frequently in reading passages.	4.38	0.68	High
TRF-2	Long and syntactically complex sentences (embedded clauses) confuse me.	4.21	0.74	High
TRF-3	Inadequate background information/elaboration in the text makes it hard to understand.	3.95	0.82	Moderate-High
TRF-4	Excessive passage length causes loss of concentration during reading.	4.12	0.79	High
TRF-5	Unclear transitions and cohesive markers make connecting ideas difficult.	3.84	0.88	Moderate-High
TRF-6	Reading passages lack interesting or locally relevant topics.	3.65	0.96	Moderate
Overall	Composite Text-Related Factors Mean	4.03	0.81	High Impact

Note: Mean interpretation key: 1.00–2.49 = Low; 2.50–3.49 = Moderate; 3.50–5.00 = High.

Quantitative findings highlight unfamiliar vocabulary ($\bar{X} = 4.38$) and complex sentence structure ($\bar{X} = 4.21$) as the primary text-related impediments. Excessive text length ($\bar{X} = 4.12$) also significantly contributes to cognitive overload.

During interviews, Teacher 3 (T3) noted:

"The main issue is vocabulary load. When students meet three or four unknown academic words in a single sentence, they stop processing the meaning of the paragraph and focus entirely on translating individual words."

4.3 Strategies Used by Teachers and Students to Overcome Text Barriers

Table 4.3 summarizes student reporting on their strategy usage when encountering text difficulties ($N = 160$).

Strategy Classification	Reported Strategy	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Primary Phase
Lexical Repair	Using bilingual dictionary / phone lookup	118	73.75%	While-reading
Lexical Repair	Contextual guessing from surrounding clues	34	21.25%	While-reading
Syntactic Repair	Translating sentences word-for-word into L1	126	78.75%	While-reading
Metacognitive	Re-reading difficult sentences multiple times	102	63.75%	While-reading
Organizational	Summarizing or highlighting key sentences	28	17.50%	Post-reading
Collaborative	Asking peers or teachers for instant explanation	110	68.75%	While-reading

The data reveals a heavy reliance on lower-level coping mechanisms: 78.75% of students default to word-for-word L1 translation, and 73.75% rely on dictionary lookups. High-order reading strategies—such as structural summarization (17.50%) or contextual guessing (21.25%)—remain underutilized.

4.4 Observation Results: Dealing with Text Barriers in Classroom Practice

Observations across 12 English reading sessions evaluated how teachers and students managed text-related barriers across instructional phases. Classroom instructional phase analysis results are given below.

- Pre-Reading Phase

Out of the total class time 10-15% of Instructional Time spent for pre-reading phase

Observed: Teachers limited pre-reading to brief topic introductions.

Gap: Key vocabulary pre-teaching and schema building were omitted in 66.7% of observed classes.

- While-Reading Phase

Out of the total class time 60-70% of Instructional Time spent for while reading phase Observed: Predominantly round-robin oral reading or silent reading.

Barrier Interaction: Students frequently stopped at complex clauses.

Teachers defaulted to immediate word translation rather than modeling contextual decoding or structural parsing strategies.

- Post-Reading Phase

Out of the total class time 5-20% of Instructional Time spent for pre-reading phase

Observed: Focus was almost exclusively on checking answers to textbook comprehension questions.

Gap: Minimal explicit instruction was provided on text organizational structures, cohesive devices, or text-summarization techniques.

Observation data indicates that classroom practice relies heavily on checking comprehension outputs rather than explicitly teaching comprehension processes. When students encountered text-related obstacles, instruction shifted toward immediate L1 translation, providing short-term assistance without building independent text-processing strategies.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

- Dominance of Lexical and Syntactic Impediments: High lexical density (unfamiliar academic vocabulary) and complex clause structures are the primary text-related barriers preventing Grade 11 students at Tora Secondary School from successfully comprehending English passages.
- Readability Disconnect: Readability metrics confirm that textbook passages operate at high readability levels (Flesch-Kincaid average 11.68), presenting a level of complexity that exceeds many students' current L2 reading proficiency.
- Over-Reliance on Surface Coping Mechanisms: Students primarily rely on word-for-word translation and dictionary lookups when encountering text friction, rarely utilizing higher-level metacognitive or contextual strategies.
- Instructional Focus on Products Over Processes: Classroom practices prioritize answer verification over explicit strategy instruction. Scaffolding during pre-reading and systematic strategy modeling during while-reading remain underutilized in daily instruction.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on these empirical findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- For EFL Teachers:
 - Explicit Strategy Instruction: Transition from immediate translation to modeling contextual vocabulary deduction, sentence-parsing techniques, and the use of graphic organizers.
 - Enhanced Pre-Reading Support: Dedicate sufficient instructional time to pre-teaching key vocabulary and activating background knowledge before introducing complex passages.
- For Textbook Designers and Curriculum Developers:
 - Text Calibration and Scaffolding: Graduate the difficulty of reading passages across Grade 11 units, incorporating visual aids, marginal glossaries, and clear formatting cues (e.g., subheading structures).
 - Balanced Text Length: Include varied text lengths and ensure passage themes incorporate locally relevant context to improve engagement.
- For Educational Administrators and MoE:
 - Targeted Professional Development: Provide training workshops for secondary school EFL teachers focused on explicit reading strategy instruction and interactive reading methodologies

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