

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Critical Analysis of Reading Comprehension Questions in Grade 12 English Textbook: with particular reference to literary texts

Berhanu Matthews, PhD ¹

Abstract

The impetus for this study emerged from the problem in comprehension questions this researcher observed in the preparatory school English textbooks. The main objective of the paper is to examine the nature of this problem with reference to comprehension questions in the textbook in relation to the types of questions recommended in the literature on the subject. The intention is to find out whether the comprehension questions are organized in such a way as to facilitate continuous and communicative learning that can promote students' intellectual and linguistic skills. In order to achieve this objective, the paper has used evaluation as its basic method. Primary data used to substantiate the arguments in the paper were drawn from comprehension questions based on literary reading materials presented in student's English textbook for grade 12. Then, the current state of comprehension questions has been described and evaluated in view of the categories and structures of comprehension questions proposed by Davies and Stratton(1981). The results have shown that the comprehension questions provided in the textbook under investigation are predominantly fact questions. The finding in the paper is that fact questions should not be used as ends in themselves because they are usually limited to identification of textual facts and do not provide a potential for extended reflection and discussion required for the development of intellectual and linguistic skills in students. On the basis of the findings, the paper has also practically demonstrated these theoretical considerations by presenting a proposed questioning model that can be more realistic and closer to the experiences of curriculum designers, teachers.

Keywords: *comprehension questioning, academic literacy, model of questioning, structure of questioning*

Introduction

The development of academic literacy in students can perhaps be regarded as one of the most important factors in paving the way for quality in formal education. In this paper,

¹ Associate Professor of Literature and Folklore, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University
E-mail: berhanumatthews7@gmail.com



This journal is licensed under a creative common Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0. It is accredited to the University of Gondar, College of Social Sciences and Humanities.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/erjssh.v9i2.3>

the term academic literacy is used to refer to the processes and products pertaining to the development of academic reading and writing skills in students. In pedagogical settings, students are often engaged in academic reading and writing (Berhanu, 2005). One stage of formal education in the Ethiopian context where the development of academic literacy is crucially important is the preparatory school where students are preparing for college level reading and writing.

In this writer's view, the complex problem of developing academic literacy in education in general and in the preparatory school in particular has two dimensions, namely conceptual and linguistic. It should be noted that this writer is well aware of the philosophical inextricability of the notions of concept and language (Grellet, 1981). In the context of this paper, conceptual dimension relates to subject area knowledge of students. Similarly, linguistic dimension denotes students' proficiency in English language arts or skills needed to listen, speak, read and write in English in formal education settings. In brief, linguistic dimension relates to the ability of students to use the English language as an instrument to process information from academic writing.

It can be stated that academic activities done by students in the classroom or out of class are often based on reading. This is true not only about teaching and learning language and literature but also about teaching and learning in most subject areas. This is because in most subject areas teachers usually ask students to read and do various tasks on the basis of the insights they have developed from reading. The basic argument in this paper is that reading comprehension skill or the ability to process information from reading materials depends on the type and structure of questions that are presented in learning resources or instructional materials (Davies and Stratton, 1981). To this end, this paper aims to examine the type and sequence of questions presented to teach reading comprehension in grade 12 English textbook in view of the theoretical principles of comprehension questioning recommended in the literature on the subject presented in the framework for questioning section later in this paper.

Statement of the Problem

According to the literature on questioning, questions have a central place in verbal interaction in the classroom. Studies such as (Austin, 1989) have shown that questioning is one of the factors that affect the quality of classroom interaction and the effectiveness of instruction. In other words, effectiveness of instruction and the quality of interaction in the classroom are, by and large, determined by the types of questions presented and the sequence in which the questions are structured. However, discussions on classroom interaction and effectiveness of instruction in the Ethiopian context, according to this writer's experience, seem to focus on mode of delivery, classroom management and class-size and seem to show relatively little concern about the type and sequence of questions in textbooks used in the teaching learning process.

As will be further discussed in the section on review of related literature, studies on the subject of comprehension questions in our EFL context are somewhat scanty. Studies like (Zerihun, 1985) and (Seime, 1999), for instance, focus on teacher questioning and student questioning in the classroom. Zerihun's study explored the kinds of questions asked by teachers and students in the secondary school English classroom. His findings showed that questions asked by both teachers and students were, by and large, limited to facts in the comprehension passage. Seime's paper, on the other hand, explored the relationship between student understanding and the nature of questions that teachers ask. The study revealed that there is direct relationship between the nature of questions teachers ask

and learner comprehension of the subject. The present study is different from these studies in the sense that it focuses on the type of questions drawn from literary comprehension texts. This researcher has not come across studies on the subject of comprehension questioning in primary or secondary school English textbooks in the Ethiopian context. This is the gap that the present study intends to address.

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to examine the nature of the problem with reference to comprehension questions based on literary reading materials presented in the English textbook for grade 12 in view of the types of questions recommended in the literature on the subject. The study also has a specific objective of assessing the relevance of the reading comprehension questions in the textbook in the light of learners' intellectual and linguistic development.

Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the discussion of the current state of comprehension questioning and the findings and recommendations of the study can be of vital importance to textbook writers and language teachers. This is to say that it gives insights into designing different types of questions in the light of linguistic and intellectual development of learners. The study can also underline the value of imaginative literature as a resource in designing well-conceived questions that can promote students' reading comprehension skills. This is because literary communication is implicit in its nature and provides opportunities for close reading and exploration.

Delimitation

The paper limits itself to assessing the type and sequence of reading comprehension questions presented in English textbook for grade 12. It should also be noted that this study is limited to reading comprehension questions based on literary materials used as resources for English language teaching. The main reason for focusing on grade 12 English textbook is that in comparison with grade 11 English textbook, there are more literary reading comprehension texts in 12th grade English textbook that can provide ample data for the study. Another reason for focusing on the English textbook for grade 12 is to emphasize the fact that this is a stage where students' academic reading skills should be well-developed so as to prepare them to face the challenges of academic reading at college level.

Methodology

The study is essentially evaluative. The primary data for the study are drawn from comprehension questions based on literary reading materials presented in students' English textbook for grade 12. There are 9 literary reading materials in the textbook. Out of these, 5 are taken from prose fiction and 4 from poetry. In order to maintain genre representation in relation to questioning, the entire sample has been used in the study. Then the current state of comprehension questioning has been described in view of the categories and structures of comprehension questions proposed in the literature on comprehension questioning. On the basis of this, the relevance of the mode of questioning in the textbook to learners' intellectual and linguistic development has been evaluated in the light of the framework for questioning used to analyze the questions in the selected textbook. A more detailed discussion of the framework is presented later in this paper.

Review of Related Literature

The aim of this section is to review related studies and published works on the subject of questioning so as to show the available knowledge in the field, the gap in this area of research, and to provide conceptual basis and analytic framework for the paper. Research on the subject of comprehension questions in our EFL context is quite scanty. The studies available in the area of questioning mainly focus on teacher questioning and student questioning in the classroom. One such study is Zerihun Mekonnen's(1985) MA thesis entitled 'The Nature and Kinds of Questions Teachers and Students Ask in the English Classroom in the Secondary School'. Zerihun's work is related to the present study in the sense that it concerns itself with the subject of questioning in the secondary school English classroom. However, it does not consider the state of comprehension questioning in the English textbooks. Another study related to the subject of questioning is Seime Kebede's(1999) PhD dissertation entitled 'An Exploration of the Relationship Between Uptake and Classroom Questioning: A Case Study'. Since this study like that of Zerihun, deals with the nature of questions that students ask in the science classroom, its concern is different from the concern of the present paper. This writer has not come across any research on the subject of comprehension questioning in primary or secondary school English textbooks in the Ethiopian context.

As noted earlier in this section, this review will also consider published theoretical works on the subject of classroom questioning. One important work on this subject is a book by Austin (1979) entitled *The Art of Questioning in the Classroom*. According to Austin, the skill of questioning has a central place in the teaching learning process. He writes, "The success and efficiency of our teaching depends more on the skill and judgment with which we put questions than on any other single circumstance" (Austin, 1979: p.23). Austin dwells on issues related to the uses and misuses of questioning, but does not provide a sequence for comprehension questioning.

Beach and Marshall (1991) have also given some important observations on the subject of comprehension questioning. They underline the importance of well-conceived patterns for comprehension questions in order to enhance student reflection and discussion in the classroom. The structure of comprehension questioning they propose relates to the textual, social, cultural and topical dimensions of texts. They argue that if comprehension questions are organized under these perspectives, students can have a better understanding of reading materials. Beach and Marshall's work is quite related to the subject of this study in the sense that it relates to literary comprehension passages. However, their considerations are targeted on comprehension questioning in the classroom where literature is taught as a subject and hence are different from the concerns of the present paper which argues for comprehension questioning in the classroom where literature is used as resource for language teaching.

Framework for Comprehension Questioning

As noted earlier in the review section, one of the aims of this discussion is to consider the sequence and categories of comprehension questions proposed in the literature in order to promote students' intellectual and English language skills. It should be restated that literary reading texts are used as resources for English language development at the preparatory level. In other words, literature is not presented as a subject in its own right but as a resource for English language teaching purposes. Hence, this framework for questioning will look into various models of questioning proposed for using literary materials in the language classroom.

One model of questioning in using literary materials in the language classroom is a five-level model proposed by Gordon(1989). This model is based on the degree of abstraction that a comprehension question demands. The first level requires students to remember facts in a selected reading. The second level requires them to prove or disprove a generalization about the selection. The third level of questioning requires students to derive their own generalizations about the selected text. Similarly, the fourth level requires learners to generalize about the relation of the reading comprehension text to human experience. The final level requires students to explore the relation of the work to their own lives. The level of abstraction in this model can be summarized in table 1as follows:

Table 1: Gordon’s five-level model of questioning

First level	Second level	Third level	Fourth level	Fifth level
Remembering facts	Proving/disproving a generalization	Deriving a generalization about the whole text	Relating the text to human experience	Relating the text to the learner’s life experience

Another model of questioning in using literary texts in language teaching is a four-category model proposed by Davies and Stratton (1984).This model of questioning is quite similar to the model of comprehension questioning recommended by Gordon. Davies and Stratton contend that questions as learning activities should be organized in such a way as to facilitate continuous and communicative learning which builds upon one another. In this view, comprehension questions that are not clearly framed or asked in a haphazard manner can make little contribution to learners’intellectual and linguistic skills.

According to Davies and Stratton’s model, comprehension questions should be organized under four categories. These are fact questions, inference questions, generalization questions and extension questions. The four categories of questions are sequenced on the basis of the pedagogic principle of moving from simple to complex.This model of questioning seems to be promising for designing comprehension questions on literary materials for grade twelve students. The subsequent section will describe these categories of questions and their relevance for using literary materials for English language teaching in the preparatory school in the Ethiopian context.

Fact Questions

Fact questions are also called direct questions because they can be answered by direct reference to the comprehension passage that students are supposed to read. As noted in the foregoing section, these are questions based on a simple level of comprehension by requiring students to remember facts stated in the text. Fact questions are important in that they inspire confidence in slow learners, giving them a chance to present correct answers. They can also give the teacher some indication of whether or not students have comprehended the reading passage at the simplest level.

However, in developing comprehension skills students should not be limited to the mechanical identification of textual facts. Fact questions should be used to draw students’ attention to significant textual details from which inferences and generalizations can be made. In other words, fact questions should smoothly and meaningfully lead students to other categories of comprehension questions. In short, fact questions should not be used as ends in themselves but as means to other ends.

Inference Questions

An inference is a conclusion that one can draw about something from facts or reasoning. Thus, inference questions require students to make connections and deductions based on the factual details of the reading comprehension passage that has been explored in the course of answering fact questions. Inference questions are a very important category of questions because they make greater demands on the intellectual abilities of students because the answers to this category of questions are not stated explicitly in the reading passage. Inference questions are also important in the sense that their answers can sensitize students to the subject matter of the comprehension passage. The exploration of factual details and the making of inferences can prepare students for making generalizations about the passage. The next category of questions is concerned with this.

Generalization Questions

As the name suggests, these are questions that enable learners to put together all the knowledge gained from the exploration of factual details, and to draw conclusions from a given number of specific facts and inferences. In other words, this category of comprehension questions can help students to construct the overall meaning of the reading passage from facts and inferences they may have discovered in the process of answering the previous categories of questions.

According to Davies and Stratton (1984), after students have answered generalization questions, another category of questions that can give them opportunities to go beyond the confines of the reading comprehension passage should be designed. The next category of questions can offer such opportunities.

Extension Questions

In reading a text, students bring to the classroom not only knowledge of textual form but also their own experiences about language and life. As Widdowson(1975)puts it, “A reading text can provide the means by which students can relate a piece of writing with their experience and so extend this experience (p.116).”

Extension questions encourage students to relate their understanding of a comprehension passage under consideration to other situations with which they are familiar. For example, they might relate the experience described in the passage to world events, or to their personal experiences, or they might make inter-curricular links with other subjects they are studying. Hence, extension questions have several advantages. First, such questions extend the knowledge of students by enabling them to go beyond the confines of the passage and the classroom. Secondly, they create opportunities for reinforcing or modifying the generalizations that had been made earlier and for re-examining their attitudes and values. Thirdly, extension questions can help students see the relevance of the passage they are reading to their daily experiences and to life in general. As Hall, (1983) observes, “Texts do not exist in isolation from either life or language (p. 23).” In short, through such questions, students’ understanding of the reading comprehension passage can be enriched.

The basic argument in this paper is that unless comprehension questions are carefully graded and organized into such a structure or sequence, they would not make satisfactory contribution to the development of intellectual and linguistic skills of students. In view of

the categories of questions discussed in the foregoing section, the subsequent section provides an overview of the English textbook for grade 12 currently in use in the preparatory school and makes a critical assessment of the type of comprehension questions based on literary reading materials presented in the textbook in the light of Davies and Stratton's (1984.) theoretical model.

ABrief Overview of Grade 12 English Textbook

The English textbook for grade 12 by Webb (2003) has 12 units and 36 reading comprehension texts. Out of the 36 reading comprehension passages, 9 (25%) are taken from imaginative literature. This literary input constitutes 5 texts from prose fiction and 4 texts from poetry. This shows that due attention is given to literary materials in the curriculum as resources for the development of reading comprehension skills in students. All the nine reading texts and associated comprehension questions were analyzed.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The aim of this section is to show the proportion of comprehension question categories in relation to the total number of questions presented under the literary reading texts in the textbook. The intention is to show what the current situation of questioning looks like in view of the models for questioning considered earlier. Table 2 below presents this proportion. The table also indicates the units in the textbook where these reading texts and comprehension questions are found.

Table 2: Proportion of comprehension question types in the textbook

Unit in the textbook	Total number of comprehension Questions	Number of fact questions	Number of inference questions	Number of generalization questions	Number of extension questions
1	5	3	1		1
2	4	4			
3	10	8	2		
4	9	6	3		
4	9	6	3		
4	8	8			
8	8	7	1		
9	5	2	3		
9	9	6	3		
Total	67	50	16		1

As can be seen from the table above, the current situation of comprehension questioning in grade 12 English textbook is dominated by fact questions. Out of a total of 67 comprehension questions, 50 questions (74.6%) are based on first level questions that require simple identification of facts. It can be concluded from this finding that in this textbook fact questions are used as ends in themselves rather than as means to other ends. The expression 'other ends' in this context implies issues pertaining to inference, generalization and extension questions.

The pedagogical implications of this category of questions should be reconsidered in this connection. Fact questions are important for drawing students' attention to significant textual details and for inspiring confidence in slower learners. However, the central argument in this paper is that comprehension questioning should not overemphasize this category of questions because such questions are limited to identification of facts directly stated in the reading texts and hence make little contribution to the development of students' intellectual and linguistic skills. This is because fact or direct questions do not give students opportunities for exploring connections, making logical deductions and for reflection and discussion which are important activities for the development of such skills.

As shown in the table above, it is worth noting that some consideration has been given to inference questions which constitute 23.8% of the total number of questions. As discussed earlier, this class of questions is important for the development of intellectual skills in students and the inclusion of such questions should be further strengthened. The data in the table also show that very little attention has been given to extension questions. Even worse, no attention has been accorded to generalization questions. The undermining or exclusion of these classes of questions can hamper the improvement of students' intellectual and linguistic skills.

To further support these arguments with actual data from the textbook, two sample literary reading texts and comprehension questions based on the texts are provided below. The first sample is a poem entitled *Under a Telephone Pole* by Carl Sandburg in unit 2 of the textbook, whereas the second one is an extract from a novel entitled *No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe in unit 4. Then a possible model for questioning has been proposed for demonstration.

Sample Reading Text 1

Under a Telephone Pole
I am a copper wire slang in the air,
Slim against the sun I make not even a clear line of shadow,
Night and day I keep singing – humming and thrumming:
It is love and war and money; it is the fighting and the tears, the
Work and want,
Death and laughter of men and women passing through me,
Carrier of your speech.
In the rain and the wet dripping, in the dawn and the shine
Drying,
A copper wire.

Comprehension questions

1. Who does the poem seem to be written by?
2. Why doesn't the wire make a clear shadow?
3. What does the poet mean when he talks about the wire 'singing'?
4. What kinds of message does the wire carry?

The argument is that the activity should include some questions on the reading text that require students to go beyond mere identification of facts. The model of questioning proposed at the end of this section demonstrates the essence of this argument practically.

Sample Reading Text 2

“It was again the season for scholarships. There was so much work now that Obi had to take some files home every day. He was just settling down to work when a new model Chevrolet pulled up outside. He saw it quite clearly from his writing desk. Who could it be? It looked like one of those prosperous Lagos businessmen. Whom could he want? All the other occupants of the flat were unimportant Europeans on the lower rungs of the Civil Service. The man knocked on Obi’s door, and Obi jumped up to open it for him. He probably wanted to ask him the way to somewhere else. Non-residents of Ikoyi always got lost among its identical flats.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

“Good afternoon. Are you Mr. Okonkwo?”

Obi said yes. The man came in and introduced himself. He wore a very expensive *agbada*.

“Please have a seat.”

“Thank you.” He brought out a little towel from somewhere in the folds of his flowing gown and mopped his face. “I don’t want to waste your time,” he said, mopping one forearm and then the other under the wide sleeves of his *agbada*. “My son is going to England in September. I want him to get a scholarship. If you can do it for me here is fifty pounds.” He brought a wad of notes from the front pocket of his *agbada*. Obi told him it was not possible. “In the first place I don’t give scholarships. All I do is go through the applications and recommend those who satisfy the requirements to the Scholarship Board.”

“That’s all I want,” said the man. “Just recommend him.”

“But the Board may not select him.”

“Don’t worry about that. Just do your own ...”

Obi was silent. He remembered the boy’s name. He was already on the short-list. “Why don’t you pay for him? You have money. The scholarship is for poor people.” The man laughed. “No man has money in this world.” He rose to his seat, placed the wad of notes on the occasional table before Obi. “This is just small kola,” he said. “We will make good friends. Don’t forget the name. We will see again. Do you ever go to the club? I have never seen you before.

“I am not a member.”

“You must join,” he said. “Bye-bye.”

The wad of notes lay where he had placed it for the rest of the day and all night. Obi placed a newspaper over it and secured the door. “This is terrible,” he muttered. “Terrible,” he said aloud. He woke up with a start in the middle of the night and he did not go to sleep again for a long time afterwards.”

Comprehension Questions

1. What is Obi's job?
2. What did the man want?
3. How did the man make it difficult for Obi to refuse his request?
4. Why do you think Obi Kept silent about the fact that the man's son is already on the list?
5. What do you think Obi is going to do with the money?
6. What issue do both texts (the poem and the prose passage above) have in common?

A Possible Proposed Type of Questioning on the Sample Texts Above:

The purpose of this section is to practically demonstrate how the different categories of questions could be set on the reading texts from grade 12 English textbook presented above. It is hoped that this will make the arguments in this paper more realistic and closer to the experiences of curriculum designers, teachers and students. Since fact questions have been quite well-conceived and presented in the textbook, this demonstration will be limited to presenting two questions proposed for the other three categories of comprehension questions.

Inference questions on sample reading text 1

1. Can you identify the speaker in the poem by gathering facts in the text?
2. What can you deduce from line 3: "Night and day I keep singing, humming and thrumming" about the speaker in the poem?

Generalization questions on sample reading text 1

1. What is your impression about the content of telephone conversation according to this poem?
2. What lessons do you get about life from this poem?

Extension questions on sample reading text 1

1. What do you feel when you see copper wires that carry your speech?
2. Can you write a similar poem about wires that carry your electric power using the poem above as a model? What would the title of your poem be?

Inference questions on sample reading text 2

1. Does this passage give you an impression about workers in the lower rungs of the Civil Service in Nigeria? Explain.
2. What can you infer from Obi's condition in the last paragraph of the passage?

Generalization questions on sample reading text 2

1. Which paragraph in the passage contains the general message of the text?
2. What is the central message of the passage?

Extension questions on sample reading text 2

1. Have you read or heard this kind of story before?
2. What would you do if you were in Obi's shoes?

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this paper, attempts have been made to look into the problem of comprehension questioning in the preparatory school with reference to literary reading materials in grade 12 English textbook and to find ways of tackling the problem. As the findings have indicated, the comprehension questions provided in the textbook under investigation are dominantly fact questions. The basic argument has been that fact questions should not be used as ends in themselves because they are usually mechanical in their very nature and do not have a potential for extended reflection and discussion required for the development of intellectual and linguistic skills in students. It has been argued that fact questions should be used to lead students to inference, generalization and extension questions which can enable them to make connections and deductions and to draw conclusions. This skill, in turn, extends learners' understanding of the literary comprehension texts to other situations beyond the classroom.

In view of the findings and discussion in this paper, the researcher recommends that the comprehension questions based on literary reading texts in the English textbook for grade 12 should be revised in order to include inference, generalization, and extension questions that have better potentials for extended reflection and discussion that can promote learners' intellectual and linguistic skills.

References

- Austin, M. (1989). *The Art of Questioning in the Language Classroom*. London: University of London Press.
- Beach, W. & D. Marshall. (1990). *Teaching Literature in the Secondary School*. New York: Harcourt.
- Berhanu Matthews. (1997). "Developing Paradigms for Questioning in the Literature Class, A Paper Presented at the 15th May Educational Seminar of Bahir Dar Teachers' College", Bahir Dar.
- _____. (2005). "Writing About Reading: The State of Theme Writing at the Initial Stage of the Literature Program at Addis Ababa University, Proceedings of the 17th Annual Conference of Institute of Language Studies, Addis Ababa, 12-20."
- Davies, Z. & F. Stratton. (1984). *Questioning in the Language Classroom*. London: Heinemann.
- Gordon, E. J. (1989). *Levels of Teaching and Testing*. London: Longman.
- Grellet, Francoise. (1981). *Reading Skills: A practical guide to reading comprehension*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, L.(1983). *Questioning in the Poetry Classroom*. London: Cassell.
- Seime Kebede. (1999). "An Exploration of the Relationship Between Uptake and Questioning: A Case Study." PhD Dissertation, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University.
- Webb, B. (2003). *English Textbook for Grade 12. Ministry of Education, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*. England: Pearson Education Limited.
- _____. *English Textbook for Grade 11. Ministry of Education, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*. England: Pearson Education Limited.
- Widdowson, H. (1975). *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*. London: Longman.
- Zerihun Mekonnen. (1985). "The Nature and Kinds of Questions Teachers and Students Ask in the English Classroom in the Secondary School." MA thesis, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University.