

Short-term gains, long-term losses? A diary study on literacy practices in Ghana

Dr. Lieke Stoffelsma 

Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, University of South Africa (UNISA), South Africa and Centre for Language Studies, Faculty of Arts, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Background: This study explores the English literacy practices of students in Ghana, in particular their time spent on reading, the availability of reading resources and their use in the curriculum, and the importance of reading from the perspectives of students and lecturers.

Methods: Student diaries (6,364 reported hours) and interviews (12 students/14 lecturers) were used for data collection.

Results: Students spend many hours on academic work, but little time on processing academic texts. Their low reading proficiency is maintained at university due to the following factors: little time spent on reading, the type of reading students engage in, institutional values and poor resources.

Conclusion: Universal mechanisms that determine literacy practices from the more affluent Western world are prevalent in Ghana. These mechanisms, in combination with contextual factors, especially poor resources and low reading levels, make the Ghana case distinct.

Highlights

What is already known about this topic

- The amount of reading that students do for school and for personal enjoyment has a positive effect on their comprehension skills and academic knowledge development.
- There is an international trend seen among university students revealing a lack of compliance with reading assignments and overall decline in time spent on reading. Within this international trend, a perspective on reading behaviour from African English Second language (ESL) countries is missing.
- Reading levels of university students from African ESL contexts are generally lower than those of students in more affluent Western contexts.

What this paper adds

- A detailed report on the reading behaviour of ESL students in a non-Western academic context based on 6,364 hours of diary reporting and interviews with 12 students and 14 academic staff members.

- Identification and analysis of factors that influence and maintain low reading levels at university level in this particular non-Western context.
- Universal mechanisms that determine literacy practices from the more affluent Western world are prevalent in Ghana. These mechanisms, in combination with contextual factors, especially poor resources and low reading levels, make the Ghana case distinct.

Implications for theory, policy or practice

- The paper adds to our understanding of mechanisms that determine literacy practices and confirms some are existing in non-Western ESL contexts.
- Improving students' reading behaviour in non-Western ESL contexts requires an enhancement of their institutional frame of reference, by underlining the importance of reading in the academic curriculum, clear and frequent reading assignments, proper access to literacy resources, and teachers leading by example.
- The diary method in a context where diaries are often not used as a research tool can be a useful instrument especially when combined with additional research methods such as interviews.

Literacy practices vary from one context to another. People are socialised into these practices through societal values and behavioural norms, functional values of literacy, role modelling and social economic status (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2000; Street, 1984). Literacy practices in higher education institutions are generally characterised by a strong focus on expository texts, which form an integral part of higher education curricula worldwide. Consequently, assigned reading of those texts is a universal feature of academic studies. Not only do these texts provide the necessary content knowledge to students, they also initiate students into the world of academic discourse and help develop their language skills in numerous ways. The amount of reading that students do for school and for personal enjoyment has a positive effect on their comprehension skills and academic knowledge development (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007), their oral language skills (Mol & Bus, 2011), their knowledge of the world (Long, Johns, & Morris, 2006) and vocabulary growth (Nation, 2001; Stanovich, 2000). Exposure to print enhances the efficiency of phonological word recognition processes (Chateau & Jared, 2000) which in turn improves reading fluency.

The benefits of reading for university students are numerous, but obviously these benefits only occur when the actual process of reading takes place. An important question is therefore: To what extent do university students engage in reading for study purposes? Research has demonstrated that reading and processing expository texts is a challenge for many students in higher education institutions (Livingston, Klopper, Cox, & Uys, 2015; Starcher & Proffitt, 2011). It also shows a trend in lack of students' compliance with reading assignments (Berry, Cook, Hill, & Stevens, 2011; Brost & Bradley, 2006; Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004). This behaviour fits in a trend of reading decline among college and university students (Lyengar, 2007; Mokhtari, Reichard, & Gardner, 2009; Sikorski et al., 2002).

Although this evidence implies that students' lack of reading assigned texts is a universal problem in academia, most studies in the field reflect institutions from the more affluent developed world. There is a paucity of research into reading behaviour of university students from low-income and middle-income countries, especially from Sub-Saharan

Africa, which are often English second-language (ESL) contexts. A better *understanding* of reading practices in institutions of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa is needed. Over the past 40 years, Sub-Saharan Africa has been the focus of major educational interventions to improve quality, access and equity. The majority of the interventions targeted primary and secondary education (cf. UN, 2001). Recent evidence suggests that higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa have a far stronger role to play in promoting economic growth and poverty reduction than was previously assumed (Bloom, Canning, Chan, & Luca, 2014). Attention to quality improvement at tertiary level is therefore urgently needed.

A thorough understanding of the local educational and linguistic context is vital for further improvement of tertiary institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the knowledge that we have about reading comes from Western contexts, and it cannot automatically be assumed that this knowledge is universal. The empirical basis for theory building is inadequate, and investigating the concept of reading in various African contexts is therefore necessary.

It is generally accepted that literacy has social, political and economic benefits for societies. Literacy has a positive impact on people's political participation, health promotion, life expectancies and gender equality, and it is assumed to contribute to sustainable development, peace and democracy (Mullis et al., 2007; UN, 2002; UNESCO, 2005). Moreover, the world of today is a knowledge society that requires human capital capable of processing large amounts of print. It goes without saying that mastery of language skills and reading proficiency are indispensable for students in higher education, the human capital of tomorrow. This is especially true for students in multilingual contexts who are not being taught in their mother tongue. The current exploratory study is an attempt to better understand the complex interplay of factors that underlie literacy development on an everyday basis in higher institutions of learning in a sociocultural, linguistic and socioeconomic context that differs from those of the more affluent western world.

The study targets the reading behaviour of ESL students in Ghana, West Africa, where English is used as language of instruction in all primary schools from Grade four onwards, and thereafter in all secondary and tertiary education institutions. In spite of the early introduction of English in the curriculum, the English reading proficiency of students in Ghana has been found to be low at primary and secondary level (Leherr, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2010) as well as at tertiary level (Stoffelsma & De Jong, 2015). This study focusses on the only two institutions in Ghana that offer teacher training (Bachelor of Education or B.Ed.) programmes at tertiary level. Both institutions play a major role as a provider of teachers to almost all levels of the Ghanaian educational system. As future role models, these B.Ed. graduates need to have proficient English language skills, including reading proficiency, in order to offer quality education to their learners.

Reading behaviour

What factors affect reading behaviour and the amount of reading that students engage in? Research shows that higher education students' engagement with reading, or lack thereof, is a highly complex field in which both lecturers and students have a role to play. A number of factors that influence students' reading engagement have been established in the literature: teachers' expectations, classroom pedagogy, student motivation and language preparedness (Brost & Bradley, 2006; Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine, Malmström, & Mežek, 2012; Starcher & Proffitt, 2011).

A reading culture will be fostered in academic environments that present clear reading expectations to their students, in which lecturers act as reading role models and in which sufficient resources such as libraries and access to books are available. Research has shown that academic students are more likely to read texts if course assignments are set frequently, and if their purpose is explained clearly. Also, the message that completing reading assignments is necessary for success in the course should be accurate and aligned with the reality (Pecorari et al., 2012). Brost and Bradley (2006) emphasise the reciprocal nature of students' compliance with reading and argue that it is important that teachers clearly communicate the pedagogical role of assigned reading and that reading texts is essential to academic success (Brost & Bradley, 2006).

Besides mastering reading skills, students need to be motivated to engage in the reading process in order to achieve effective reading. Research confirms a positive relationship between students' reading motivation on the one hand and reading comprehension and amount of reading on the other, to the effect that the more people read, the better they become at it (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997; Mullis et al., 2007; Nuttall, 2005).

Naturally, students need to have a sufficient reading proficiency to process academic texts. However, Brost and Bradley (2006) caution against viewing language preparedness as the key problem to reading compliance, because this might cultivate the wrong kind of solutions, such as adjusting reading amount or level. They therefore argue that language preparedness as an obstacle to reading compliance needs to be better understood before finding solutions. This understanding is especially needed for second language context, as targeted in the current study.

Purpose of study

This study investigates the type of reading that ESL students engage in (e.g., reading for school or reading for enjoyment), the type of resources they use (e.g., textbooks, novels, newspapers) and the amount of time they spend on reading activities. The latter is often referred to as 'reading amount' (cf. Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999) or 'print exposure' (cf. Mol & Bus, 2011; Stanovich, 2000). It also explores the use of reading resources and the role that reading proficiency plays in the curriculum. Since English is the language of instruction at tertiary level, the study only concentrates on the English language. The study was undertaken at two universities in Ghana offering B.Ed. programmes and seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How much time do first year B.Ed. students in Ghana spent on their academic studies, in particular on reading for academic purposes?
- RQ2: What kind of reading resources are available to students and how are they being used in the curriculum?
- RQ3: How important is it for university students to be proficient readers of English?

Methods

In the present study, the diary method was employed to investigate students' time spent on reading and studying [RQ1]. Asking students to report experiences every day minimises the occurrence of errors in the retrospective reporting of events (Bolger, Davis, & Raffaelli, 2003). Diaries provide information over a longer period of time rather than a temporary

recall, as for example surveys do, which increases the reliability of the instrument (Carp & Carp, 1981). The use of the daily-diary method has proven to provide a more accurate measurement of daily activities than traditional questionnaire measures (Fuligni & Masten, 2010). Diary studies have seldom – if ever – been used in the African context, so the current study is an opportunity to apply the methodology in this context. RQ2 and RQ3 were investigated through semi-structured interviews, which were held with students and lecturers.

Student sample

Thirty first-year B.Ed. students from both universities were approached and invited to participate in the current study. Random sampling was used, stratified by gender and academic programme. Twenty-two students agreed to take part in the activity diary project. The average age of the diary keepers was 21.3 years old. All were ESL learners, with some reported to use English in the home environment (see Table 1). Twelve students were available for follow-up interviews. The students were not paid to participate in the experiment but received a usb-stick at the end of the project. All students gave permission for the recording of the interviews for research purposes.

Lecturer sample

A sample of 14 lecturers (three female, nine male) was taken from both universities. Only lecturers that taught in B.Ed. programmes were approached. Lecturers from the following B.Ed. programmes were available: Science (7), Mathematics (2) Social Science (3), Communicative skills (1) and Educational Psychology (1). Participation was voluntary and unpaid. All lecturers gave permission for the recording of the interviews. Lecturers' average age was 46.6 years and their average teaching experience 19.5 years.

Diaries

Students in the current study kept diaries over a 3-week period. The students received a hard-copy diary with preset dates from an external researcher who was not a lecturer at their institution. During a face-to-face group instruction, it was explained that the purpose

Table 1. Background details of student sample

B.Ed. programme	Nr of students	Female	Male	Average age	Home languages spoken most of the time
Social Sciences	8	5	3	20.7	Akan, English ^a , Ewe, Fante, Twi
Biology	3	2	1	20.3	English, Fante, Twi
Chemistry	2	0	2	25.0	Ewe, Fanti
Physics	1	0	1	20.0	Ewe
Mathematics	8	2	6	21.4	Akan, English, Twi
Total	22	9	13	21.3	

^aFive students reported to speak English at home most of the time; however, this does not mean English is their mother tongue. In a recent study, targeting the same students, only 0.3% of the student population reported English as their mother tongue (Stoffelsma & Spoooren, 2013). In line with these findings, the students in the current study are considered to be ESL learners.

of the research project was to get a better understanding of their academic workload and their use of time. Students were instructed to follow the example provided, report daily and specifically on the following categories:

1. Study: How much time did you spend on study-related activities, such as going to lectures or group work, laboratory practice, working on assignments, preparing for exams, doing assessments, etc.? Please be as specific as possible about the amount of time you spent on reading for academic purposes.
2. Leisure: How much time did you spend on activities that are not related to studying, such as playing sports, shopping, cooking, watching television, reading novels, newspapers, choir or theatre practice, church, etc.? If you don't feel comfortable writing down the details of your leisure activities, just write down 'leisure'.
3. Work: Some students may have jobs that they combine with their studies: work-related activities fall into this category.
4. Other: There might be activities that we did not think of that you can include as well.

Students were instructed that the diary should only contain activities that they had actually done during the day and to report as realistically as possible. A reporting day started at the time students woke up and ended when they went to sleep (see Exhibit 1). During the reporting period, they received weekly personal text messages and e-mail messages from the researcher to motivate them. In week one, a research assistant checked whether students followed the format correctly.

Interviews

Twelve students (five female and seven male) were interviewed, in small groups of two or three students. Fourteen lecturers were interviewed individually. A semi-structured interview approach (Bryman, 2004) was used. The interview guide contained questions in two categories: (1) Reading resources, homework and assessment, (2) Reading proficiency (see Table 2). The interview questions were pretested during a pilot interview, after which the formulation of some questions was slightly adjusted. The length of the student

Exhibit 1. Diary page, 20-year-old male Mathematics student.

Sunday February 6	
Time (hours)	Activity
05.30 – 07.30	Leisure: devotion, bathing, breakfast and ironing of my shirt
07.30 – 10.00	Leisure: church services
10.00 – 13.00	Study: studying calculus 122 for test
13.00–14.30	Leisure: siesta
14.30 – 16.00	Leisure: cooking, dinner
16.00–19.30	Leisure: watching television, supper
19.30–22.30	Study: studying ICT121 for the next day lecture
22.30 –	Leisure: sleep

Table 2. Interview guide

Interview guide students	Interview guide lecturers
Reading resources, homework and assessment	
1) How do you prepare for class?	1) What kind of teaching materials do you use?
2) What kind of homework do you get?	2) What kind of homework do you give to students?
3) Are reading assignments part of your homework?	3) Are reading tasks part of the homework?
4) Do you find reading easy or difficult?	4) How do they perform on their homework?
The role of English reading proficiency in the curriculum	
5) Is it important to be a good reader for the courses that you take?	5) In what way do academic reading skills play a role in your courses?
6) What does it mean if students have good reading skills?	6) How would you describe the reading level of first-year B.Ed. students?
7) How can the university help students to improve their English reading skills?	7) What is your role as a lecturer to motivate students in their reading process?

interviews varied from 18 to 35 minutes; the length of the interviews with lecturers varied from 25 to 45 minutes.

Data analysis

The student diaries were analysed, and reported activities were placed in two categories: time spent on study-related activities and time spent on non-study-related activities. Sub-themes were identified (see Tables 3 and 4 in results section). The average time spent on each category per student was calculated in minutes per day, using an Excel spreadsheet. Four categories related to reading were identified: reading (textbook/unspecified), reading lecture notes,¹ reading for pleasure (novels) and reading for pleasure (magazines, journals, newspapers). In order to differentiate between time spent on academic work and reading as a separate activity, 'reading' was only included in one of the four reading categories if it was specifically mentioned in a diary. Examples include: 'reading on (topic)', 'reading in library', 'reading books/materials for lecture' and 'complete reading assignment'. Because students also reported study-related activities during weekend days, a workweek was considered to contain 7 days.

Interviews with both lecturers and students were recorded and transcribed. Responses to the questions for lecturers and students were analysed separately. For each question, the responses were categorised into occurring themes. During the analysis, some of the same themes reappeared under different questions. A cross-sectional data analysis was applied, whereby the data were analysed as a whole, rather than studying parts separately (Ritchie & Lewis, 2012). Themes that occurred were grouped and analysed according to frequency. The following key themes were identified: importance of reading, lecture notes, resources, reading proficiency, reading behaviour, reading motivation, cheating, assessment and reading development at primary/secondary schools. The coding frame is presented in Annex 1.

A central feature of descriptive analysis is the language of the interviewees (Ritchie & Lewis, 2012). Therefore, quotes form part of the reporting. Since the quotes are transcriptions of colloquial speech, they may contain grammatical inaccuracies. For both students and lecturers, each quote is reported *in italic*, and for each quote the source is reported.²

Results

Diaries

All students completely filled in their diaries; no days were left blank. A total of 6,364 hours were reported, with an average time reported per day of 13 hours and 50 minutes. The student with the highest average reported 17 hours and 44 minutes per day, and the student with the lowest average reported 10 hours and 15 minutes per day.

Time spent on study-related activities. The outcomes of the student diaries show us that, on average, students reported spending 6 hours and 56 minutes per day on study-related activities, based on a 7-day workweek, which equals an average workweek of 48 hours and 37 minutes. Of this time, 44.6% was reported on activities *inside* the classrooms and 55.4% *outside* the classroom (see Table 3).

Time spent on non-study-related activities. Students reported spending 6 hours and 53 minutes on average per day on non-study-related activities. This equals 48 hours and 14 minutes per student per week, which is similar to the amount of time spent on study-related activities. The various non-study-related activities are presented in Table 4.

During the reporting period, a total of 15 students reported to read for pleasure, and 16 used the internet either for leisure or study purposes. All students reported to be resting during daytime; most frequently, this was reported after lunch. All students reported spending time on cooking and eating, and being engaged in religious activities. Two students fell ill during the reporting period.

Table 3. Average time spent on study related activities, in minutes and percentages per student per day, based on a seven-day work week

Activity	Average time per student per day (minutes)	Average time per student per day (%)
Lectures (including quizzes)	169.4	40.7
Laboratory practicals	10.8	2.6
Tutorials	5.6	1.3
<i>Total time spent inside classroom</i>	185.8 (3 hours 6 minutes)	44.6
Preparation for lectures / laboratory practicals	21.4	5.1
Group work or group discussion	32.1	7.7
Library research / personal study	80.0	19.2
Online research	5.2	1.2
Reading (textbook/ unspecified)	16.5	4.0
Reading lecture notes or hand-outs, note review	41.5	10.0
Solving questions, examples, making assignments, writing notes, unspecified	33.8	8.1
Student association (formal position)	0.5	0.1
<i>Total time spent outside classroom</i>	231.0 (3 hours 51 minutes)	55.4
<i>Total study activities per day</i>	416.7 (6 hours 57 minutes)	100.0

Table 4. Average time spent on non-study related activities, in minutes and percentages per student per day, based on a seven-day work week

Activity	Average time per student per day (minutes)	Average time per student per day (%)
Browsing the internet, visiting an internet café	11.9	2.9
Reading for pleasure (novels)	8.1	2.0
Reading for pleasure (magazines, journals, newspapers)	5.2	1.3
General leisure ^a	123.6	29.9
<i>Leisure total</i>	148.8 (2 hours 29 minutes)	36.0
Religion: quiet time, church services/ activities, choir practice, prayers, choreography ministrations, visitation	88.8	21.5
Eating: breakfast, lunch, dinner or supper, incl. cooking	88.0	21.3
Resting during daytime	48.3	11.7
Household in campus halls: cleaning, washing/ folding clothes, shopping for groceries, ironing, sweeping	28.3	6.8
Travelling	7.2	1.7
Illness	4.0	1.0
<i>Non-study related activities</i>	264.6 (4 hours 24 minutes)	64.0
<i>Non-study related activities total (including leisure)</i>	413.4 (6 hours 53 minutes)	100.0

^aSports, watching television, listening to radio, chatting, texting, beach visit, theatre, music performance, bathing, hanging out with friends, relaxing, visit hairdresser, strolling, socialising, unspecified, watching sport and playing games.

Interviews

The importance of reading. All but one lecturer confirmed that reading of texts plays an important role in their courses. It was also noticed that frequent reading by students influences their academic performance and class participation positively:

Yes, English reading is important. Those skills will help them to go and do research. If you have to read about a topic that you have been taught, you need to read further [I5i14]. Those who achieve high grades are those who are really reading seriously or who do frequent reading [I5i6].

Most lecturers stated that they expect their students to prepare homework assignments before class on a regular basis. Homework can consist of assignments, exercises (sciences) or group work. These activities were also reported in the diaries. Reading assignments were only mentioned by six lecturers.

Eight lecturers suspected students of cheating in their classes. The main concern was that students copy homework from each other. Large class sizes encourage copying among students. Another concern was the marking of assignments by teaching assistants, who might favour certain students. Cheating was not raised during the student interviews.

All students agreed that students need to be proficient readers for their studies, even for courses that mainly concern calculations. To them, reading is important because it

helps to understand concepts, do research and to get an understanding of their content area:

*Even with those [courses] with calculations you still have to get some basic concepts and understand the terms in that topic. So if you don't read widely you would suffer [I5i4s].
[...] when you read a lot you get information that will help you to solve problems around you and make you understand how certain things happen and other things. So it helps you to research more [I5i10s].*

In spite the fact that they find reading important, half of the students reported that they find it boring and time consuming.

Following the students, a 'good reader' is someone who reads fluently, with understanding, who is good in language and communication, involved in research, who studies a lot, who reads often and widely, who can decipher texts and interpret tables and graphs well. This shows that their conceptual awareness of what the task of reading entails is quite accurate. Although they seem to know what the task of reading entails and are convinced that reading is important, their diaries show that on average students read textbooks during 4% of their study time. They read even less for pleasure: 1% of their total average reporting time was spent on reading novels, and 0.6% on reading magazines, journals or newspapers.

Lecture notes. The use of lecture notes is very strongly embedded in both Ghanaian institutions. Both lecturers and students confirmed that lecture notes prepare students best for the exam questions. Students reported using both lecture notes and textbooks to prepare for their classes. Most students reported that studying lecture notes is the best preparation for classes, quizzes and exams. There is no clear incentive for using the list of reference books that lecturers provide as part of the teaching materials; consequently, these reference books are hardly ever consulted.

At times the questions that they [lecturers] seem to ask have been answered in the hand-outs or the lecture notes. So if you really concentrate on the textbook, even though it will give you a broad understanding, you may not answer the question the way the lecturer wants you to [I1i4s].

Assessment was considered to be very important by all students. Some lecturers argued that students can pass their exams depending on lecture notes only:

*We have compiled lecture notes that we give to them and a reading list. Most of them wouldn't get all the books, but they will dwell on the lecture notes, because it is a summary from various books. [...] If students would confine themselves just to lecture notes, and will not be reading the textbook at all, I think he or she might be able to pass the test [I1i13].
Students will not go to the library to read, because they prefer to read from their notes, the teacher has said it, explained it and made much easier [I5i4].*

One lecturer explains that he encountered resistance when changing from giving his students lecture notes to making them read textbooks:

They thought it was too much work and that I am shifting my work to them. A student made a comment that I was lazy because I was not giving the [lecture] notes [I4i1].

The activity diaries confirm a strong emphasis on the use of lecture notes in the institutions. Not only is the number of students who read lecture notes higher than those who read textbooks, the average amount of time spent on reading lecture notes

(41.5 minutes per day) is more than double the amount spent on reading textbooks (16.5 minutes per day).

Resources. The majority of the lecturers stated they use textbooks and lecture notes as teaching resources. They reported that books can either be purchased or borrowed from the library. Anecdotal evidence from classroom observations showed that many students did not have their own textbook. In spite of this, only two lecturers indicated that access to textbooks is sometimes problematic.

Almost all students indicated that access to books in the library and bookshops at both institutions is problematic. Students stated that many of the books are old and difficult to read. The lack of books and poor quality of the material cause delay and stress and makes it difficult to finish assignments on time:

At times I go to the library and finding books is very difficult; you may not get the books over there. I describe it as old books. Because if you read, you don't even understand because the language is old. At times you go to the bookshop, you request and you will not get it. So it's difficult. So we take what the lecturers give us. At times they write notes and when we go, you read them [I1i8s]. A class of maybe 50 students and then we are all going to the library for a book with only 3 copies. So we find it difficult [I2i4s].

Students compensate for the lack of access to textbooks by using information from the internet. The majority of the students reported using the internet to add information to their course materials or to clarify their lecture notes. Over half of the students stated that they found reading online easier than reading textbooks and used this as a coping strategy. Textbook reading was found to be boring, time consuming and requires a lot more reading.

From the net you get the straight point, straight away. But in a book you have to read, read, read [I4i3s].

In spite of students' preference for reading online, the diaries indicate that students only spend 11.9 minutes per day on average online for leisure-related activities (Google, browsing, Facebook, etc.) and another 5.2 minutes per day on online research for their studies. Only 16 out of the 22 students used the internet, during the 3 weeks of reporting, either for leisure or study purposes. It is highly possible that students are limited in their online access on campus.

Reading proficiency and behaviour. All but one lecturer stated that the academic reading proficiency of first-year students is insufficient and in need of improvement. The following problems were associated with students' poor reading proficiency: low reading speed, lack of (critical) reading skills and poor reading behaviour. For further details see Annex 1.

I don't know whether they are not used to it, or they don't like it or they don't want to. I don't know the right way to describe it, they just don't read [I6i3]. In the first place a lot of them are not reading. I have no figures on that but I can say that in a large class about 95% of them are not reading textbooks. [...] You go to the library and you see students reading their notes, not textbooks [I6i4]. They cannot read much. When you give them so many pages, they get bored. Where they think it is too difficult they will jump over it [I6i10]. They expect me to read and summarise for them, to lessen their work, because they haven't got the skills. It takes them a long time to read a piece of text [I6i1].

To help improve their reading skills, students suggested the following: a revision of the library and purchase of new books, hire good teachers to teach English and give more reading assignments tied to assessment. Some argued that they couldn't be motivated.

The majority of the lecturers (11) indicated that students' reading problems originate from primary and secondary schools. Particular problems that were mentioned include the following: the large difference in quality between schools, the lack of resources and books in the schools and the 'spoon-feeding' of students.

So, I would like to push some of the blame to teachers handling them at the lower forms, at the primary and senior high. Because here, we are not expected to teach the reading skills, it is not our job to teach reading skills. At the lower form it is in the curriculum. [15i8].

There they are spoon-fed. They [the teachers] are reading textbooks for them [16i4].

Motivation. Eight lecturers stated that they have a role to play in motivating their students to read. For example, by selecting exciting texts, using assessment, serving as a role model and promote library reading. Six lecturers argued that motivating students to read it is not their responsibility, but that of the language department:

I will not award any marks for good language. As I did say, we are not concerned with achieving good reading skills, it is not even part of it, we are not even thinking about it [17i2].

When asked about reading motivation by lecturers, all students confirmed that lecturers motivate them to read by giving them reading assignments as homework, although these assignments are not always discussed in class.

Discussion

The current study set out to investigate how much time first year B.Ed. students in Ghana spent on their academic studies, especially reading (RQ1); what kind of reading resources are available to them and how these are being used in the curriculum (RQ2); and how important it is for them to be proficient readers of English (RQ3). The results show that students come into the tertiary system with low literacy levels and poor reading skills, which have their origins in primary and secondary schools. Once students have entered the higher education institutions, their problems with academic reading proficiency are sustained because of the following contextual factors: little time spent on reading, the type of reading students engage in, institutional values towards reading and poor resources. See Figure 1.

Similar to previous findings (Stoffelsma & De Jong, 2015), the majority of the Ghanaian lecturers judged the reading level of their students to be poor. Readers who find it hard to understand what they read do not enjoy reading and will read as little as possible. Consequently, due to a lack of practice, they will not improve their reading skills. This 'cycle of frustration' (Nuttall, 2005) is clearly prevalent in the target population of this study. Students lack perseverance when reading long texts and seem to get 'bored' easily when reading. Their reading preparedness is low. As a consequence, the quantity of their reading is limited, and behaviour of non-compliance with reading prevalent. This confirms findings reported by Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2014), who found that students in higher education in Ghana find reading a boring activity and that they hardly ever read for pleasure. Reading for enjoyment is an important predictor of academic achievement, since it exposes students to rich vocabulary and words that are unlikely to encounter in speech (Mol & Bus, 2011). Consequently, lack of time spent on reading for enjoyment sustains low reading

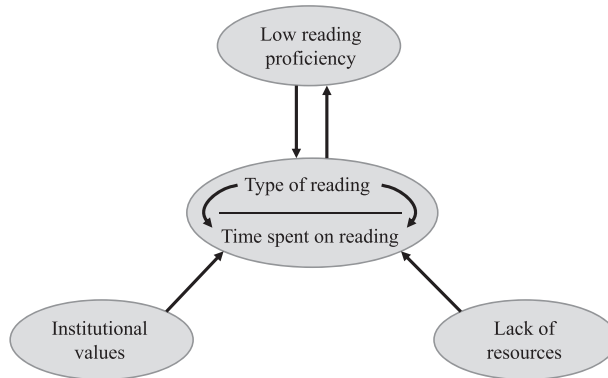


Figure 1. Contextual factors influencing students' reading practices.

levels. Students' cheating behaviour as reported by the lecturers should be considered a consequence of poor reading and study skills.

Another variable that sustains low reading levels is the way reading is valued in the institutions. One major contradiction found in the data is that both lecturers and students claim that reading is important, but their behaviour does not support their claims. Not only do lecturers allow students to pass courses based on lecture notes and oral discourse only, almost half of them argue that motivating students to read or teaching reading is not their task. Students' resistance to reading textbooks is likely to be related to reading ability and to normative frameworks in the larger (academic) community. Why should they engage in a practice if they don't really *have* to do it – and can get by another way? The importance of reading in the academic curriculum should be enhanced by giving clear and frequent course assignments that include reading, proper access to literacy resources, teachers leading by example and realising they do have a responsibility for the reading development of their students. The message that completing reading assignments is necessary for success in the course should be accurate and aligned with the reality (cf. Pecorari et al., 2012).

The strong emphasis on lecture notes as a way to prepare students for tests, narrows students' exposure to written academic discourse and content knowledge. Students' preference for reading texts online instead of textbooks adds to this narrow type of reading, which limits the opportunities to develop reading skills. In terms of knowledge development, students will obtain a limited perspective on the subject matter when depending solely on the teacher as a source of information.

The lack of access to and poor quality of books are problematic because it influences students' motivation to undertake reading assignments and limits the types of reading they engage in. This prevents them from developing a conceptual knowledge base, critical thinking skills and reading proficiency.

This study fits within the tradition of studying academic literacies or approaches to learning among university students (cf. Richardson, 1995; Taillefer, 2005). Richardson (1995) distinguishes between a meaning orientation to studying (deep approach), and a reproducing orientation to studying (surface approach). The literacy practices in Ghana, as reported in the current study, fit Richardson's description of a 'reproducing' approach. This profile is not unique to university students in Ghana; studies from different contexts have shown students' preference for a reproducing orientation to studying (Clump et al., 2004; Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2014; Sikorski et al., 2002; Taillefer, 2005). Although the detailed manifestations of this approach will vary from one context to another, some of the

underlying mechanisms are universal. Four key mechanisms identified in the current study mirror findings from the more affluent Western world.

Firstly, instead of exposing already weak English language users to a rich print environment, lecturers are inclined to follow a more language limited pedagogical approach. This fits within the deficit framework as identified by Callahan (2005), who argues that adjusting content to the language level of the learners affects academic achievement. Secondly, the reciprocal nature of students' noncompliance with reading, whereby both teachers' expectations and students' behaviour contribute to the problem, has been identified by other scholars (Brost & Bradley, 2006; Starcher & Proffitt, 2011). Thirdly, the contradictory finding that students claim to find reading important while this is not reflected in their reading behaviour has been reported among future teachers in South Africa (Rimensberger, 2014) and the United States (Applegate & Applegate, 2004). A similar contradiction, where students claim to value their textbooks but prefer to learn course content from lecture notes, has also been found in both Western and non-Western contexts (cf. Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2014; Pecorari et al., 2012). Researchers have explained this phenomenon by suggesting that even if students claim to attach a high value to reading, this does not necessarily mean they will be more motivated to read, simply because they might not find any pleasure in it (Yamashita, 2004) or because the appropriate external motivators (e.g., norms, incentives) are missing (Mathewson, 2004). Finally, the strong focus on assessment resembles test preparation strategies found in schools in the USA and Britain, developed in reaction to national high stakes testing. The consequence is a narrowing of curricula, which impacts negatively on students' development of reading skills, higher order thinking skills and reasoning skills (Berliner, 2011). What seems a short-term gain will inevitably become a long term loss.

Limitations

Social desirability may influence students' reporting, and the outcomes should be interpreted in light of this restriction. To safeguard reliability, the activity diaries were checked for completeness by research assistants. Students' truthfulness in reporting is indicated by their almost equal time reported on non-study and study-related activities. Furthermore, the diaries include a lot of (personal) details on both study and non-study related activities ('*eating breakfast and washing dishes*', '*going to the hairdresser*', '*visiting friends, watching movies and going out to have fun*'), which indicates that students were serious and honest in their reporting. Finally, the time reported inside classrooms seems high, but is in accordance with the study programmes at both universities.

It could be argued that there is a fine line between the reported categories of library, reading and preparation for classes. However, due to students' very precise reporting it was possible to distinguish as much as possible between these categories.

Conclusion

This study shows that universal mechanisms that determine literacy practices from the more affluent Western world are prevalent in the Ghanaian context, thereby confirming their existence in non-Western contexts. At the same time, the prevalence of these mechanisms in combination with specific contextual factors, especially poor resources and low

English reading proficiency levels, make the Ghana case distinct and compounds the problems associated with the universal mechanisms.

Overall, the study shows that Ghanaian students reported spending a lot of time on their academic work. However, in terms of reading behaviour, they do not spend many hours on reading textbooks nor do they read a lot for enjoyment. More than anything, they are spending their time on attending lectures, group work or reading lecture notes. These are not the kind of activities that train students to develop critical reading skills, lead to deeper learning or develop their reading proficiency.

The key question is how the institutions can break out of this cycle and whether they will be able to produce students that can compete at a global level if they continue to go for short term gains. Students' institutional frame of reference clearly impacts on their reading behaviour, and therefore lecturer and institutional responsibility should be clearly identified. Measures that could be taken include the following: educating lecturers about the importance of reading motivation and modelling, offering reading development and study skills courses in alignment with the already existing Communication Skills courses; and establishing bridging courses for students with poor English proficiency.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The author would like to extend sincere thanks to the students in Ghana for their participation in the study as well as to their institutions for accommodating the research. The author would also like to thank Professor Elizabeth J. Pretorius from UNISA and the Journal's reviewers for their valuable suggestions and feedback in the preparation of this article.

Notes

1. Notes drafted by the lecturers for distribution among students, also called 'hand-outs'.
2. For example: [I3i8] stands for Interview question number 3, interviewee number 8. The addition 's' refers to students: [I3i8s]

References

- Applegate, A.J. & Applegate, M.D. (2004). The Peter effect: Reading habits and attitudes of pre-service teachers. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(3), 554–563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2014.898719>.
- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (2000). Chapter 1: Literacy practices. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton & R. Ivani (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.
- Berliner, D. (2011). Rational responses to high stakes testing: The case of curriculum narrowing and the harm that follows. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(3), 287–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2011.607151>.
- Berry, T., Cook, L., Hill, N. & Stevens, K. (2011). An exploratory analysis of textbook usage and study habits: Misperceptions and barriers to success. *College Teaching*, 59(1), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2010.509376>.
- Bloom, D.E., Canning, D., Chan, K.J. & Luca, D.L. (2014). Higher education and economic growth in Africa. *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 1(1), 22–57. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ijahe.v1i1.5643>.
- Bolger, N., Davis, A. & Raffaelli, E. (2003). Diary methods: Capturing life as it is lived. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54(1), 579–616. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.54.101601.145030>.

- Brost, B.D. & Bradley, K.A. (2006). Student compliance with assigned reading: A case study. *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 6(2), 101–111.
- Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Callahan, R. M. (2005). Tracking and high school English learners: Limiting opportunity to learn. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42(2), 305–328. Doi: Abs/https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312042002305
- Carp, F.M. & Carp, A. (1981). The validity, reliability, and generalizability of diary data. *Experimental Aging Research*, 7(3), 281–296.
- Chateau, D. & Jared, D. (2000). Exposure to print and word recognition processes. *Memory & Cognition*, 28(1), 143–153. https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03211582.
- Clump, M., Bauer, H. & Bradley, C. (2004). The extent to which psychology students read textbooks: A multiple class analysis of reading across the psychology curriculum. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 31(3), 227–232.
- Fuligni, A. & Masten, C.L. (2010). Daily family interactions among young adults in the United States from Latin American, Filipino, East Asian, and European backgrounds. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 34(6), 491–499. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025409360303.
- Gee, J.P. (2000). The New Literacy Studies; from “socially situated” to the work of the social. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton & R. Ivancic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*, (pp. 180–196). London: Routledge.
- Guthrie, J.T. & Wigfield, A. (1997). Relations of children’s motivation for reading to the amount and breadth of their reading. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(3), 420–432. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.89.3.420.
- Guthrie, J.T., Wigfield, A., Metsala, J.L. & Cox, K.E. (1999). Motivational and cognitive predictors of text comprehension and reading amount. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 3(3), 231–256. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532799xssr0303_3.
- Leherr, K. (2009). *National Literacy Acceleration Program (NALAP) Baseline Assessment Ghana*. Washington, D.C.: Education Development Center.
- Livingston, C., Klopper, B., Cox, S. & Uys, C. (2015). The impact of an academic reading programme in the Bachelor of Education (intermediate and senior phase) degree. *Reading and Writing*, 6(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v6i1.66.
- Long, D.L., Johns, C.L. & Morris, P.E. (2006). Comprehension ability in mature readers (Chapter 20). In M. Traxler & M. Gernsbacher (Eds.), *Handbook of psycholinguistics*. (second edn). Amsterdam: Elsevier/Academic Press.
- Lyengar, S. (2007). To read or not to read a question of national consequence. Research Report #47. In D. Ball (Ed.). Washington: Office of Research & Analysis, National Endowment for the Arts.
- Mathewson, G.C. (2004). Model of attitude influence upon reading and learning to read. In R.B. Ruddell & N.J. Unrau (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading*, (pp. 1431–1459). Newark, DE: IRA publishers.
- Ministry of Education, G (2010). Report on 2009 administration of national education assessment primary 3 and primary 6, English and Mathematics. In *Basic Education Comprehensive Assessment System (BECAS)*. Accra: Ministry of Education, Ghana.
- Mokhtari, K., Reichard, C.A. & Gardner, A. (2009). The impact of internet and television use on the reading habits and practices of college students. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 52(7), 609–619. https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.52.7.6.
- Mol, S.E. & Bus, A.G. (2011). To read or not to read: A meta-analysis of print exposure from infancy to early adulthood. *Psychological Bulletin*, 137(2), 267–296. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021890.
- Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Kennedy, A.M. & Foy, P. (2007). *PIRLS 2006 International Report; IEA’s Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in Primary Schools in 40 Countries*. Boston: International Association for the Evaluation of educational achievement (IEA), Lynch School of Education, Boston College.
- Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nuttall, C. (2005). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language (3rd edition)*. (3rd edn). Macmillan ELT.
- Owusu-Acheaw, M. & Larson, A.G. (2014). Reading habits among students and its effect on academic performance: A study of students of Koforidua polytechnic. *Library Philosophy and Practice, Paper*, 1130, 1–22.
- Pecorari, D., Shaw, P., Irvine, A., Malmström, H. & Mežek, S. (2012). Reading in tertiary education: Undergraduate student practices and attitudes. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(2), 235–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2012.706464.
- Richardson, J. (1995). Cultural specificity of approaches to studying in higher education: A comparative investigation using the approaches to studying inventory. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 55(2), 300–308. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164495055002014.

- Rimensberger, N. (2014). Reading is very important, but...: Taking stock of South African student teachers' reading habits. *Reading and Writing*, 5(1), 1–9. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v5i1.50>, Reading is very important, but...: Taking stock of South African student teachers' reading habits
- Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J. (2012). *Qualitative research practice. A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage Publications.
- Sikorski, J.F., Kelly Rich, K., Saville, B.K., William Buskist, W., Drogan, O. & Davis, S.F. (2002). Student use of introductory texts: Comparative survey findings from two universities. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29(4), 312–313. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15328023TOP2904_13.
- Stanovich, K. (2000). *Progress in understanding reading: Scientific foundations and new frontiers*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Starcher, K. & Proffitt, D. (2011). Encouraging students to read: What professors are (and aren't) doing about it. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 23(3), 396–407.
- Stoffelsma, L., & De Jong, J. H. A. L. (2015). The English reading proficiency of future teachers in Ghana. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 24(2), 94–117.
- Stoffelsma, L., & Spooen, W. (2013). Reading and knowledge transfer in Ghana: The behaviour, attitudes and self-concepts of first-year students in Bachelor of Education programmes. *Educational Psychology*, 33(6), 690–718. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2013.785047>.
- Street, B.V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taillefer, G. (2005). Reading for academic purposes: The literacy practices of British, French and Spanish law and economics students as background for study abroad. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 28(4), 435–451. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9817.2005.00283.x>.
- UN (2001). *Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations millenium declaration*. New York: United Nations.
- UN. (2002). United Nations Literacy Decade: Education for all; International plan of action; implementation of General Assembly resolution 56/116. Report of the Secretary-General: United Nations General Assembly, fifty seventh session.
- UNESCO (2005). *EFA global monitoring report 2006: Literacy for life*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Yamashita, J. (2004). Reading attitudes in L1 and L2, and their influence on L2 extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language* (<http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/April2004/yamashita/yamashita.html>) retrieved 11-12-2013

Annex

Annex 1. Coding frame

Teacher questions	Answer categories	Key themes
Q1)	Personal textbooks (6); reference books (6); course manual (6); library textbooks (4); lack of books (2)	Resources
	Lecture notes (5)	Lecture notes
Q2)	Assignments (7); solving problems (3); quizzes (2); no homework (1); group work (1)	Reading importance
	Cheating (3)	Cheating
Q3)	Reading homework (6)	Reading importance
Q4)	Students copy /cheat (5)	Cheating
	Perform good (4); perform poor (1); struggling (1); poor writing skills (1); well in groups (1); sometimes (1);	Study behaviour
	Perform well due to assessment (4); group work makes individual assessment difficult (3)	Assessment

(Continues)

Annex 1. (Continued)

Teacher questions	Answer categories	Key themes
Q5)	Reading is important (12); causes better performance (1); and active class participation (1); not important (1); lecture notes (1).	Reading importance
Q6)	Reading problems originate from primary and secondary schools (2)	Primary schools
	Reading problems originate from primary and secondary schools (9)	Primary schools
	Students don't read (5); 50% reads before class (3); prefer listening (1)	Reading behaviour
	Problems with: reading speed (7); general skills (3); identifying topics (1); pronunciation (1); contextualization (1); critical reading skills (1); vocabulary (1); reading amount (1); note taking (1); comprehension (2)	Reading proficiency
	Easily give-up (4); get bored (1); don't like reading (1)	Reading motivation
Q7)	Talking to them (3); provide role models (2); teaching mode (1); print exposure (1); provide interesting reading (1)	Reading motivation
	Assessment (2); reading competition (1)	Assessment
Student questions	Answer categories	Key themes
Q1)	Revising /reading lecture notes (9)	Lecture notes
	Reading textbooks (5); reference books not important if you have lecture notes (5); internet is easier (3); use a mix of internet, notes and textbook (1)	Reading behaviour
	Lack of books/old books in library (4); and bookshop (1)	Resources
Q2)	Individual and group assignments/solving questions (8); reading assignments (3)	Reading importance
	Compliance not checked (5)/ checked (3) in class; reading assignments presented in class (1)	Reading motivation
	Limited access to books (5); receive textbooks to read from (1)	Resources
Q3)	Yes (5)	Reading importance
	Access to books is easy (1); not easy (2); sometimes difficult (2)	Resources
	Reading textbooks time consuming (2); prefer internet over books (1); reading online is easy (1)	Reading behaviour
	Reading lecture notes to prepare for quizzes (4)	Lecture notes
Q4)	Reading is: difficult if topic is unknown/ not explained (5); easier online than reading textbooks (5); easy if topic is known (3); boring/ don't like reading (3); time consuming (3) sometimes easy, sometimes difficult (1); easy if you enjoy reading (2); difficult because language/ vocabulary used in the book is different from class discourse (2); online reading more expensive (2); no exposure to reading as child (2); easy when focussed (1); I read very good (1)	Reading behaviour/ motivation
Q5)	Important (12); for research (1), to understand concepts (2), to understand the content (1); to get information (1); not for mathematics but for other courses (1)	Reading importance

(Continues)

Annex 1. (Continued)

Student questions	Answer categories	Key themes
Q6)	Someone who can: read with understanding (3); communicate well (3); read fluently (2); decipher texts (1); interpret tables and graphs (1). Who: reads often (1); always studies (1); does research (1); reads widely (1); follows punctuation (1)	Reading proficiency
Q7)	Library outdated needs revision (5); purchase new books (3) Can't help us (2); not everybody likes going to library (1); reading books is tiring (1); lack of book causes stress (1); no time for reading because we must read lecture notes for quizzes (2). Good teachers who teach English (1); emphasise Communication Skills (1) More reading assessment (4)*; reading competitions (1) <i>* When asked if assessment was important all 12 students confirmed.</i>	Resources Reading motivation Reading proficiency Assessment

Dr Lieke Stoffelsma (the Netherlands, 1975) obtained her PhD (with cum laude distinction) at VU University Amsterdam (2014). Her field of expertise is academic literacy, vocabulary development and curriculum studies in non-western multilingual contexts. She is presently employed as a research fellow and external supervisor of PhD students at the Department of Linguistics of the University of South Africa (UNISA) and an affiliated researcher at Radboud University Nijmegen (the Netherlands). She is currently involved in literacy projects in South Africa, Ghana and Mozambique.

Received 24 January 2017; revised version received 18 January 2018.

Address for correspondence: Lieke Stoffelsma, Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria, South Africa.
E-mail: *l.stoffelsma@let.ru.nl*