



Exploring the Reading Culture of Students in Pre-tertiary Technical Institutions in Ghana

Cecilia Agyeiwah Agyemang Owusu Debrah
University of Energy and Natural Resources

Johnson Baah
University of Energy and Natural Resources

ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the reading culture of students in pre-tertiary technical institutions from two Municipalities in Ghana. The study adopted a descriptive observational cross-sectional study design to understand the phenomenon under study. The population of the study consisted of two hundred respondents who were purposively sampled from a cross-section of the study population. A research survey and observation were used as research instruments for data collection. The analysis of the data revealed that respondents preferred to read among the four macro skills. Respondents' preference in terms of genres was mostly limited to course-related reading materials that could aid academic work, although, it was observed that students have access to other reading materials. It also emerged from both the survey and observation data that although students engage in reading activities regularly, the duration for such activities is relatively short. Thus, students should be encouraged to read longer for the needed impact. It also emerged that students access more reading materials online, although internet accessibility is not always promised. It is recommended for the creation of more opportunities that will allow students to engage in reading including giving them adequate online access with the needed supervision from school and home for greater impact.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the four macro skills crucial in language learning (Nguyen, 2016). Reading promotes language development, especially in a second language situation (Day & Bamford, 1998). It is deemed one of the essential skills learners are required to obtain in their education to be successful in the academy (Oyewole, 2017; Iheakanwa, Obro & Akpochafo, 2021). Reading is an evolving skill requiring a sentient attempt in a life-long learning process (Hornby, 2000), which develops a person's creativity and improves one's ability to understand concepts and ideas, making learning easier and critical thinking possible (Owusu, 2008).

Automated reading is a pivotal part of any balanced literacy endeavour because it builds readers' fluency and develops their confidence to read more challenging materials. The reader is intrinsically motivated to read for recreation or information, and it is also a good way of learning

and understanding other cultures (Akyea, 2007). It is like the magic of living in another universe (Nmecha & Horsfall, 2019), although it requires a “great deal of experience” (Duke, Ward & Pearson, 2021, p. 668) on the part of the reader to facilitate success in this endeavour.

Therefore, developing a reading culture is pertinent to success in life (Sotiloye & Bodunde, 2018). However, reading thrives in a culture where learners cultivate the right attitudes and skills to willingly and constantly engage in reading for learning and leisure.

The reading habits of learners are the nature of a reading culture. The more learners are exposed to the world of books, the more knowledgeable they become. An essential goal of reading is the conception of knowledge (Duke, Pearson, Strachan & Billman, 2011). The knowledge one gains from reading is a powerful tool that cannot be taken away from the reader. However, reading does not occur in a vacuum; it is a complex construct between the reader, purpose, setting and text (Snow, 2002). Thus, meaning in reading is built through the interaction with the text, context and the reader. Developing the right attitudes in students promotes positive reading culture among students. The love for reading does not suddenly occur in an individual; rather, it develops gradually depending on context, purpose, time and reading resources. The context could include the experience of the reader, among other things.

The purpose for reading could be varied depending on the reader; thus, for leisure, knowledge, information or interest. Students who read extensively find it easier to communicate as it is a form of exposure to the English language especially in a second language situation (Fujii, 2022). Still, in recent times, there seems to be a global decline in the reading habits of learners (Kamalova & Kaletvinova, 2015), and this may be due to the exponential growth in digital technologies and advancement in the entertainment industry (Owusu Nsiah, 2020).

Studies relating to reading problems and the reading culture in the African context have recounted the reasons for the appalling performance of learners (Masabo, 2015; Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2014; Pobi, 2016). According to Owusu Nsiah (2020), most Ghanaians use sophisticated devices for messaging rather than reading materials. He argues that this behaviour has exposed young students to orality (in the name of civilization), poor use of grammatical structures and poor writing skills. So, a poor reading culture does not affect only the students’ academic lives; it permeates every aspect of their economic, sociocultural, and spiritual lives.

A further indication of reading-related challenges is in the Chief Examiners’ report of the National Board for Technician and Professional Examination (NEBPTEX, 2019) and the West African Examination Council (2018). These reports indicate that students have poor reading habits and a lack of interest in reading, which influence their performance, especially in the English Language paper. They recommend that students be encouraged to read wide to enrich their language.

Another report by the Ghana Education Service (GES, 2014) also indicates that only twenty-nine-point nine per cent (29.9%) of students passed the English Language paper to qualify for tertiary education. According to this report, a major reason for this abysmal performance of students could be attributed to the poor reading culture resulting in poor reading habits. Zuberu (2010) also attributes part of the blame to the decline in students’ reading to parents and teachers.

Research on reading in tertiary and main stream Senior High Schools abound in the literature in Ghana (Zuberu, 2010; Afenyo, 1999; Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2014; Pobi, 2016) but there seems to be a lack of focus on technical schools context in the Ghanaian setting. Meanwhile, training these students is critical in the current world economy. Teachers are expected to guide students in the learning process as students explore for knowledge. Working knowledge of the use of language is important for all students, whether for professional or academic

progression. The professional sector is increasingly getting interested in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates, most importantly graduates who are competent communicatively in addition to their technical knowledge and skills.

Reading is one language skill that enhances students' communication competence. So, to meet the increasing demand for such professionals in the world of work, it has become imperative to examine the reading culture influencing their reading habits. Therefore, this current study appraises the reading culture in selected Pre-tertiary technical institutions in the Sunyani West and East municipalities in the Bono Region of Ghana.

Problem Statement

It is a known fact that one of the effective mediums for learning a language is by reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). A deliberate and well-planned reading habit is essential to succeed in every aspect of life. The success story of an individual in the education franchise depends on the individual's reading culture. Several scholars have been noted to influence the reading culture of students in different contexts. There is a growing number of studies on reading habits, reading culture, and school performance in the Ghanaian context (Pobi, 2016). However, there seems to be a dearth of such studies in the Pre-tertiary Technical institutions in this same context.

Meanwhile, students' reading abilities in pre-tertiary technical institutes are equally essential in meeting the demands of professional development and tertiary education. One's reading ability is important, whether for professional or academic progression. However, without the required reading literacy skills, it would be extremely difficult for students in pre-tertiary institutions to obtain the appropriate qualification to gain admission to tertiary institutions and the job market (Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013).

It is worthwhile to explore the reading culture of learners in pre-technical institutions in the two Municipalities in the Bono Region of Ghana. The findings will help language teachers and the management of such institutions adopt the appropriate measures to promote reading in schools and inculcate students' reading habits.

Factors that Impact Reading Culture

Reading culture refers to developing a progressive approach to reading for education and pleasure (Olasehinde, Akanmode, Alaiyemola & Babatunde, 2015). It is a scholarly pursuit of knowledge, information, or entertainment through the written word, such as books, magazines, and journals (Sandars, 2007). It is considered a situation where reading is placed on a pedestal and considered a catalyst for national development. Reading culture could determine the success of a person and a nation. Exploring opportunities to develop a reading culture will benefit individuals who acquire literacy skills and the community (Wema, 2018).

One needs knowledge on using available resources to develop and promote a reading culture in any community. Such a community values and actively encourages reading. A person's reading culture enhances their reading habits (Ruterana, 2012). Extensive reading promotes stronger reading culture among learners. Gbadamosi (2007) states that an individual's reading culture changes when s/he regularly and habitually reads books and reading materials necessary to advance professional or personal goals (Baffoe & Okae-Anti, 2020). Thus, reading is a lifelong activity, and one's reading ability is connected to academic and career success.

Several factors impact the reading culture of students both in the school and home environments. Though a suitable environment is needed to enhance students' reading culture, the

family background may also impact the reading culture. Students who are encouraged at home to read have higher phonemic awareness and decoding skills than their counterparts who are not. The role of the home in cultivating reading habits is very important (Baffoe & Okae-Anti, 2020). Jakalia (2008) states that teachers and opinion leaders should organize reading and writing camps for children in their communities by promoting literacy. The classroom practices and experiences also affect students reading. Research attests that students' experiences at home and school affect their reading.

One thing hindering reading motivation among students is children's previous experiences, specifically their failures. In such a situation, a student can develop a belief that they are not good at reading, which can hinder their progress (Guthrie & Solomon, 1997). Students' cooperative and collaborative reading habits are important in promoting a healthy reading culture. Students who read collaboratively with peers achieve significantly higher in non-recall related tests than those who study individually (Opare, 2002). Mere membership of a group is not an end in itself; it becomes an end only if the context makes the participant efficacious. The choice of books for reading activities seems very challenging, even though research indicates that when students choose their books, they become more engaged in reading. Thus, allowing a reader a choice virtually ensures that everyone becomes interested.

Text factors contribute greatly to students' willingness to read. To some extent, getting students to read lengthily depends on the materials read. Reading resources are expected to be easy and stimulating to read. Such materials are expected to be within learners' linguistic competence, but this is not always true (Zuberu, 2010). As some readers struggle to get reading materials, others are faced with unappealing reading materials or very difficult-to-read texts. Studies show that most students choose not to read because the reading materials are uninteresting and tend to be about subjects that do not interest them or about characters to which they do not relate (Mercurio, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive observational cross-sectional study. This design is conducive to describing and observing students' reading habits and attitudes at a given period. This type of design is considered most effective when researchers intend to take a snap of an occurrence (Rezigalla, 2020 & Mash, et al., 2021). The study was situated in three participating pre-tertiary institutions from the Sunyani East and West Municipalities of the Bono Region of Ghana-West Africa.

Participants

The target population was drawn from three pre-tertiary technical institutions in two municipalities from the Bono region of Ghana. Two of the institutions are from the Sunyani East Municipality, while the remaining institution is from the Sunyani West municipality. The first-year students of the three institutions were yet to report to school for the academic year, so they did not form part of the study sample. The three institutions were given the codes MT, SV and DB to represent the three institutions which were sampled for data collection.

Two hundred students were purposively sampled from the study population. This number is deemed to be suitable since the aim of the study is to explore the reading culture of students. This also corroborates Creswell's (2014) assertion about the intentionality criteria of researchers

who choose purposive sampling to study a phenomenon. The choice of the sampling technique is due to its time efficiency and its tendency to be unbiased. The respondents for this research were randomly selected from second and third-year students who were available in school to respond to the survey.

Instruments

A survey and observation were used as research instruments for gathering data. The survey instrument was made up of two sections. The first part was concerned with demographic information of the participants including their literacy profile information. The second section contained information on students' reading preferences, reading habits and practices and the reading environment and resources available in the school. The instrument was developed by researchers based on the literature. The survey was made up of multiple-choice questions which allowed participants to choose options most suitable to them.

The observation aspect had both structured and participant protocols. With the structured observation scheme, a checklist was created to systematically record participants' habits and practices. Researchers engaged in participant observation for active involvement and to gain unswerving experience in the school environment. To determine active behaviour and practices in the research environment, participant observation is crucial (Cohen, et al., 2018). The combination of these instruments was used to gather comprehensive data on the reading culture in the study's institutions.

Procedure

Before the data collection, we obtained research permission from the appropriate authorities in the three institutions. Researchers had the opportunity to discuss a suitable date for both researchers and participants of the study.

On the appointed dates we went to the schools to administer the questionnaire. After explaining the purpose of the exercise to participants, those who were willing to participate were purposively sampled to cater for the levels as representative of the population. Participants were given the chance to respond to the questionnaire. Participants were given enough time to respond to the questionnaire. At the end of the administration of the questionnaire, one hundred and fifty-eight questionnaires were completed and returned. The observation aspect was conducted using varied strategies. We visited each institution twice to observe participants' reading habits and attitudes in the school environment. Because we used a combination of observation strategies, we had a checklist to systematically record specific events and habits to better understand the phenomenon. We also recorded our observations on our writing pads.

Each session of the observation lasted for about three hours each day. The three hours were to help the researchers have enough time to go around to observe the various activities participants engage in the institutions both in the classrooms and outside the classrooms. The observation yielded six hours for each school making eighteen hours for the observation.

RESULTS

Demography of respondents

Responses were taken from second and third-year students from these institutions as first-year students were yet to report to school for the academic year. Two hundred (200) questionnaires were distributed, and out of this number, one hundred and fifty-eight (158) were returned, of which

one hundred and twenty-seven (127) responses were deemed to be valid for analysis. Seventy-three (73) respondents representing 57.5%, were from two students, while fifty-four (54), representing 42.5%, were from three students.

Table 1: demographic data

Form	MT	SV	DB	Frequency	Percentages
Two	41	5	27	73	57.5
Three	27	11	16	54	42.5
Total	68	16	43	127	100

Again, in Table 2, most respondents came from MT (53.5%) and DB (33.9%) because of their population, which could result from the fact that these two institutions are public institutions where the cost of education is free compared to SV, a private institution.

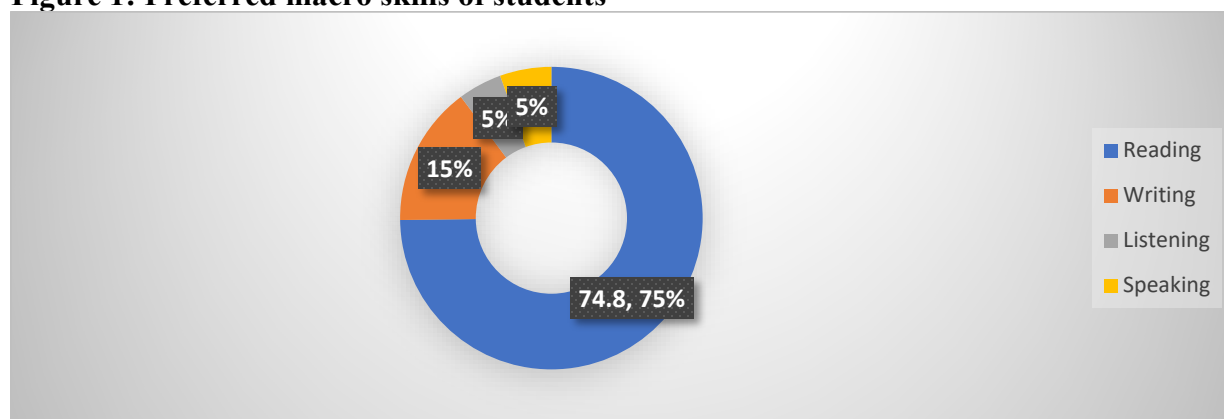
Table 2: institutional representation

Institution	Frequency	Percentages
MT	68	53.5
SV	16	12.6
DB	43	33.9
Total	127	100

Reading culture of students

Students were asked to indicate their preferred skill among the four macro skills in literacy. Most (95) of the respondents, constituting 74.8%, chose reading as their preferred activity. This is followed by writing, which constituted 15% of the respondents. According to the data, the least preferred skills are listening and speaking. The chart below illustrates the distribution of respondents according to their preferred macro skills.

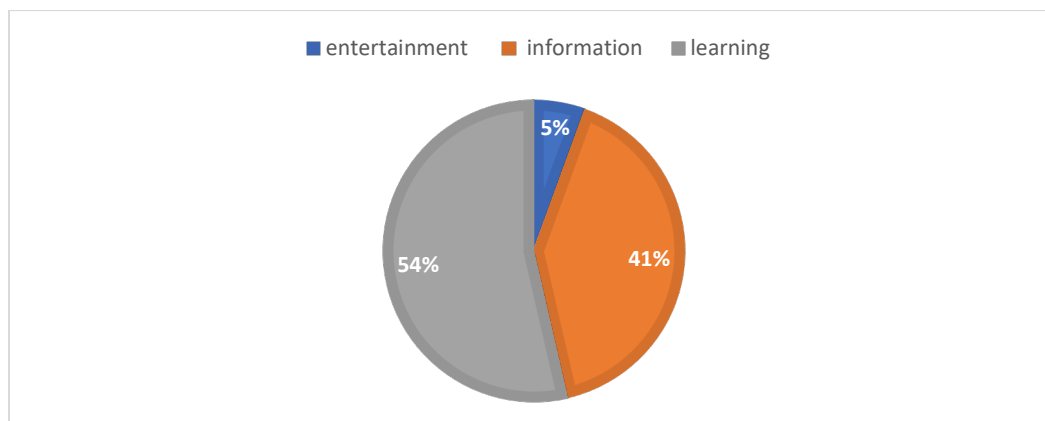
Figure 1: Preferred macro skills of students



Students were asked to indicate some of the reasons why they engage in reading activities.

The information from Figure 2 reveals the reasons why students read.

Figure 2: reasons for reading



Respondents were most interested in reading for learning (54%) and information (41%) than reading for pleasure. As seen from the figure above, 5% of respondents revealed that they read materials other than the required textbooks for coursework.

Respondent's reading schedules were considered as this impact on the reading culture. This was done to determine where respondents mostly engage in reading. Students were required to indicate yes or no to this question. One hundred and four (104), representing 82% of the respondents, said they read outside the normal school schedule; on the other hand, twenty-three (23), representing 18%, did not read after the normal school schedule.

Also, students reading regularity was assessed. This was to ascertain the frequency of their reading activities. Table 3 gives the details of students reading routines.

Table 3: Reading regularity

Regularity of reading	Frequency	Percentages
Daily	87	68.5
Weekly	34	26.8
Rarely	6	4.7
Total	127	100

The data revealed that the majority of the respondents engaged in reading regularly. Accordingly, eighty-seven (68.5%) of respondents revealed that they read daily. Thirty-four (26.8%) of students read every week.

The duration of respondents' continuous reading engagement at a particular time was also investigated. The data revealed that fifty-nine respondents representing 46.5%, spend less than one hour reading. Sixty-three respondents representing 49.6%, spend more than an hour reading. However, only five (3.9%) respondents spend more than two hours engaging in any reading activity. The respondents were questioned on the types of reading materials they normally read. The table below provides details of the reading materials respondents read.

Table 4: reading materials

Reading materials	Frequency	Percentages
Textbooks	48	37.8
Religious books	32	25.2
Novels	36	28.4
Magazines	3	2.3
Newspapers	8	6.3
Total	127	100

Forty-eight (37.8%) of respondents read prescribed textbooks, thirty-two (25.2%) read religious books, and thirty-six (28.4%) read novels. The least-read material is the magazine.

Respondents were asked to indicate where they got the materials to read. The data revealed diverse sources.

Table 4: source of the reading materials

Source	Frequency	Percentages
School Library	27	21
Teachers	25	20
Mates	19	15
Internet	39	31
Parents/guardians	17	13
Total	127	100

From the table majority (31%) of the students have indicated that they sourced their reading material from the Internet. It was, however, observed that students have access to the internet mostly from the computer room, where their internet usage is done under the supervision of instructors. Twenty-one percent (21%) of participants also indicated that the school library was their main source of reading materials.

The data also revealed that literary clubs were functional in the institutions. Respondents were asked to indicate the existence of literary clubs in the schools. Out of the one hundred and two responses, seventy-seven (76.2%) indicated the existence of a literary club. In contrast, twenty-four (23.8%) respondents indicated no literary clubs in the institution.

DISCUSSION

The data highlighted in this study suggest that 74.8% chose reading as their most preferred among the four macro literacy skills. This indicates that most of these students engage in reading, which is positive for language development, according to Day and Bamford (1998). This corroborates what Oyewole (2017) says about reading being fundamental skill students are expected to acquire. Although the preference for reading by students is encouraging, the other language skills, such as writing, may not receive similar attention. However, this may not be challenging since reading is presumed to impact writing directly. As seen from the data, 54% of

respondents' main reason for reading is for learning. This is also evident in respondents' reading materials; 37.8% read textbooks, 28.4% read novels and 25.2% read religious materials.

This corroborates previous studies on the reading culture in the African context being linked mostly to educational purposes (Louise, 2008), cited in (Sotiloye & Bodunde, 2018; Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2018). However, there seems to be quite a gap in the percentage scores of previous studies such as Sotiloye and Bodunde (2018), whereas 62% of respondents read prescribed textbooks. Again, in the same study, the percentage scores for other reading materials were much lower than in this current study. The difference in percentage scores could be attributed to the difference in contexts (Ghana and Nigeria) and the study respondents' levels (senior high and undergraduates). It is also evident from the data that 68.5% of respondents frequently read daily. However, the duration of the reading activity was minimal, as 46.5% spent less than an hour reading. Respondents (49.6%) who read more than an hour, however, read every week, which is not encouraging if the reading is expected to have the needed impact on respondents. This has implications for the promotion of reading culture among students to become well-rounded learners, who think critically and analytically.

Moreso, thirty-one percent (31%) of the reading resources are sourced from the internet, indicating the popularity and availability of e-books to students more than the traditional hardcopy of reading materials supplied to schools by the government. This could also be due to the challenges in securing adequate prescribed textbooks in the educational sector due to Ghana's curriculum changes among other issues. However, in Wema's (2018) study, respondents' engagement in using the Internet to read was irregular due to technological issues. An interesting observation is respondents' preference for e-books since pre-tertiary institutions prohibit using personal technological gadgets such as phones and iPads during instructional hours in schools. It was observed a majority (76.2) of the participants were either involved in or aware of the activities of the literary clubs in the institutions. This is a positive indicator of students' involvement in literacy activities since it is essential in creating a congenial atmosphere for students to thrive in schools.

CONCLUSION

The study evaluated the reading culture of students in pre-tertiary technical institutions of Sunyani East and West Municipalities of the Bono region of Ghana. The study aimed at examining the nature of reading culture among students. The findings from this study revealed that the reading culture in the pre-tertiary technical institutions in the two municipalities is encouraging due to the availability of reading materials on the Internet. This may also be one of the reasons why students prefer reading to other language skills. The duration and frequency of reading could be improved to yield more positive results when internet accessibility is improved.

The study has also established that technology impacts students' reading culture; therefore, more avenues could be created to improve students' reading habits in schools and at home. It also means that the education directorate of the country could find new ways to make electronic gadgets available for students of pre-tertiary educational institutions if the nation's digitalization drive is to impact Ghana's education positively. The announcement of the government of Ghana recently to replace textbooks with laptops in which the required reading and learning materials are embedded may minimize the paucity of reading materials in the preferred and accessible format to pre-tertiary students. With internet access, the students could be granted limited access to

relevant digital books to complement their reading tasks. Schools and town libraries need to be resourced with digital books which will be accessible to students when in school or on holidays to enhance continuous reading. The irony is that pre-tertiary students are not allowed to use mobile phones and tablets while in school, even though most of the students stay in boarding facilities. The government policy, when implemented, may offset the negative impact of the ban on using mobile phones and tablets on the reading of students while in school.

For the pre-tertiary students to value extensive reading and incorporate it into their daily lives for selves-improvement and better educational outcomes, we propose that schools create opportunities for students to be involved in literary club activities. These associations or clubs can periodically campaign and organize reading and writing competitions for prizes. The literacy activities will create awareness for reading and writing helping students to regularly engage in such activities. Again, teachers could give their students reading and writing challenges for each month or term where a target of a particular number of books is set for students to read for a prize. We believe such a competitive task will motivate students to read. Finally, students can engage in team reading and writing periodically since research has shown (Stevens, 2003; Fiol & Lyles, 1985) that working in teams improves learning outcomes.

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Cecilia Agyeiwah Agyemang Owusu Debrah holds a BEd, MEd and an MPhil in English. She is pursuing her PhD in English Language Education. Her research interests are in reading and writing development in the academy and teachers of English professional development practices.

Email: cecilia.owusudebrah@uenr.edu.gh

Johnson Baah holds a BA, MA and an MPhil in Linguistics from Bergen and NTNU, in Norway. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Applied Linguistics. He currently teaches Academic Writing and Critical Thinking at the University of Energy and Natural Resources, Sunyani. His research interests include Student writing and Academic Literacies.

Email: johnson.baah@uenr.edu.gh