EXPLORING THE ROLE OF L1 LITERACY SKILLS IN L2 READING COMPREHENSION AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT AMONG SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN GHANA

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Abstract:

This study investigated the relationship between first language (L1) literacy skills and second language (L2) reading comprehension and vocabulary development among students in Ghana. The study was grounded in Cummin's (1970) Linguistic Interdependence Theory (LIT). The qualitative approach was adopted, and three instruments- focus group discussions, interviews and classroom observations- were used to obtain data from the sample of 300 secondary school students and 40 teachers. The researcher assessed participants' views in L1 literacy domains (phonological awareness, orthographic knowledge, and reading fluency) as well as their views on L2 (English) reading comprehension and vocabulary. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between students' L1 literacy skills and their achievement in L2 reading comprehension and vocabulary. Those with more advanced abilities in their native language consistently demonstrated higher levels of reading comprehension and broader English vocabulary knowledge. This underscores the critical role of strong foundational literacy in the first language as a precursor to successful second language acquisition. The study also identified key instructional strategies that could help bridge the gap for ESL learners, such as explicit instruction in L1 literacy, structured opportunities for cross-linguistic transfer, and the incorporation of culturally relevant, mother-tongue materials into the curriculum. The implications of these findings for policymakers, curriculum designers, and teachers working to improve educational outcomes for linguistically diverse student populations are discussed.

Keywords: L1 literacy skills, reading comprehension, vocabulary development, ESL students, cross-linguistic transfer

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1. Introduction

In Ghana, the National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) emphasizes bilingual education with the aim of promoting proficiency in both local Ghanaian languages (L1) and English by primary three (Kwawukumey, 2023; Soma & Zuberu, 2021). This educational approach recognizes the importance of maintaining strong literacy skills in students' first language while simultaneously developing English language proficiency (Kofinti, 2023). As English serves as the primary medium of instruction in schools, the role of L1 literacy skills in developing vocabulary and improving reading comprehension among ESL students in Ghana becomes an issue of utmost significance and exploration (Appiah & Owusu, 2023).

In his study, Nyamekye (2022) looked into the role of L1 in ESL learning and established that L1 serves as the foundation upon which new language skills are built. The study confirmed that when students possess strong L1 literacy skills, they can transfer and apply knowledge from their first language to their second language learning. In the Ghanaian context, where indigenous languages are prevalent, leveraging L1 literacy skills can significantly contribute to vocabulary development and reading comprehension in English.

Recent studies such as Bretuo (2021), Soma and Zuberu (2021) and Yekple *et al.*, (2022) have also shown that L1 literacy skills can significantly influence second language acquisition, including vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Yekple *et al.* (2021) assert that L1 serves as the foundation upon which new language skills are built. When students possess strong L1 literacy skills, they can transfer and apply knowledge from their first language to their second language learning. Understanding the dynamics of one's L1 can support vocabulary acquisition by identifying cognates and making connections between related words in L1 and English (Soma & Zuberu, 2021). Vocabulary forms the building blocks for effective communication and understanding. ESL students in Ghana face the challenge of acquiring an extensive English vocabulary, which requires not only memorization but also an understanding of word usage, context, and nuances (Bretuo, 2021). When the similarities between L1 and English vocabulary are established, students can identify cognates, make connections between related words, and accelerate their lexical acquisition process (Appiah & Owusu, 2023).

L1 literacy skills can positively impact reading comprehension by providing students with a framework for understanding text structure, identifying main ideas, and making inferences (Reilly *et al.*, 2023). Comprehending complex texts in English can be challenging due to limited vocabulary, unfamiliar cultural references, and unfamiliar text structures (Schroeder & Nindow, 2022). In such instances, L1 literacy skills can play a significant role in improving reading comprehension because an understanding of the structure and conventions of one's first language can provide a framework for understanding text structures in English (Sheriff & Pittas, 2020). Additionally, Kwawukumey (2023) contends that L1 literacy skills can aid in localizing and contextualizing texts and drawing connections, thereby enhancing overall reading

proficiency among ESL students. However, the relationship between L1 literacy skills and ESL learning outcomes is complex and multifaceted, which requires further investigation in the Ghanaian context.

While the relationship between L1 literacy skills and ESL learning outcomes is complex and multifaceted, investigating this connection in the Ghanaian context has become imperative for advancing ESL pedagogy (Glandon, 2022; Schroeder & Nindow, 2022). Indeed, a holistic understanding of the influence of L1 on ESL learning outcomes can inform evidence-based practices and contribute to the academic success of ESL learners. Having identified this gap, this study aims to determine how L1 literacy skills contribute to reading and vocabulary development, reveal the challenges faced by students in leveraging their L1 literacy in ESL learning and identify the instructional approaches and interventions that can be implemented to mitigate the issues.

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following questions;

1) How do L1 literacy skills contribute to reading comprehension and vocabulary development among ESL students in Ghana?
2) What are the challenges faced by ESL students in Ghana in leveraging their L1 literacy skills for reading comprehension and vocabulary development in English?
3) What instructional approaches and interventions can be implemented to effectively utilize L1 literacy skills for reading comprehension and vocabulary development among ESL students in Ghana?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework
The theory adopted for the study is Cummin's (1970) Linguistic Interdependence Theory (LIT). The Linguistic Interdependence Theory posits that there is a positive relationship and transfer of language skills from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2) (Talebi, Fallahi & Amjadi, 2023). It suggests that proficiency in the L1 can support and enhance the development of L2 skills, including reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Al-Ahdal & Aljabr, 2023). LIT was developed as a response to the idea that the L1 is a hindrance to L2 learning (Guo, 2020). Cummin argued that rather than being a barrier, the skills and knowledge acquired in the L1 could actually facilitate and positively influence the acquisition of language skills in the L2 (Komilova, 2022).

In the Ghanaian context where this study applies, students often have strong foundations in their indigenous languages while English is taught as a subject, and in fact, all lessons are instructed in English as well. The LIT framework provides insights into how L1 literacy skills can positively influence L2 reading comprehension and vocabulary development (Al-Ahdal & Aljabr, 2023; Talebi *et al.*, 2023). It helps in understanding the potential transfer of skills, such as understanding text structures, making inferences, and identifying main ideas, from the L1 to English.

By adopting the LIT framework, the study is able to investigate the extent to which L1 literacy skills impact second language reading comprehension and vocabulary

development, and how these skills can be effectively leveraged in instructional practices (Masyitha *et al.*, 2021). The framework also allows for the exploration of factors that may facilitate or hinder the transfer of L1 skills to the L2 context, which provides a fair understanding of how L1 literacy skills impacts ESL learning outcomes in Ghana.

2.2 Empirical Review
2.2.1 L1 Literacy Skills and ESL Education in Ghana
The relationship between first language (L1) literacy skills and English as a second language (ESL) education in Ghana is a complex interplay that significantly affects educational outcomes. Recent studies have highlighted the implications of language policies, classroom practices, and teacher beliefs on the literacy development of learners in multilingual settings.

For instance, Owu-Ewie and Eshun (2019) examined the role of language representation in Ghanaian lower primary classrooms, emphasizing that the use of local languages alongside English can enhance comprehension and engagement. Their findings suggest that students who develop L1 literacy skills are better equipped to transition to ESL, as they can leverage their understanding of linguistic structures and vocabulary. This aligns with Anani's (2019) review of language choice debates, which emphasizes the necessity of a bilingual approach in instruction to improve literacy rates and academic success.

Also, Addo (2019) investigates the effects of Ghana's language policies, revealing that inconsistent implementation hampers effective ESL education. Policies that favour English as the sole medium of instruction often neglect the foundational role of L1 literacy. This is further supported by Agbozo and Rescue (2020), who advocate for translanguaging practices that allow students to draw from their L1 during ESL instruction, thereby fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

Torto's (2020) study on student engagement in English classrooms highlights that when students are encouraged to use their L1, they exhibit higher levels of participation and motivation. This finding is critical as it underscores the importance of engaging students' linguistic backgrounds to support ESL learning. Additionally, Appiah and Ardila (2020) address the challenges faced in multilingual classrooms, arguing that recognizing and incorporating L1 literacy skills is essential for effective ESL teaching.

The challenges of teacher beliefs in ESL instruction are explored by Osei (2024), who notes that many teachers feel unprepared to effectively integrate L1 literacy strategies into their lesson plans. This lack of confidence can lead to a diminished focus on students' L1, ultimately affecting their ESL proficiency. Osei's findings resonate with those of Lomotey and Debrah-Amofah (2021), who analyze communicative strategies in tertiary ESL classrooms, revealing that a strong L1 foundation is crucial for achieving communicative competence in English.

In the context of teacher identity, Anku (2024) discusses how non-native English teachers in Ghana navigate their roles in promoting L1 literacy while teaching ESL. The tension between maintaining language identity and fulfilling curricular demands can

impact teaching effectiveness. Kofinti (2024) adds a personal perspective through autobiographical reflection, illustrating the real-life challenges faced by ESL educators in balancing L1 literacy with English language instruction.

Clearly, the studies elaborated above suggest that L1 literacy skills are integral to the successful acquisition of ESL in Ghana. To enhance educational outcomes, it is essential to adopt a more inclusive language policy that recognizes the significance of L1 in fostering ESL proficiency. As the studies illustrate, integrating L1 literacy into ESL education not only aids comprehension but also promotes greater student engagement and motivation.

2.2.2 L1 Literacy Skills and Reading Comprehension & Vocabulary Development

Studies that have focused on the relationship between first language (L1) literacy skills and reading comprehension, as well as vocabulary development, underscore the vital role that L1 proficiency plays in second language (L2) learning. A range of studies highlight how foundational literacy in L1 influences L2 outcomes.

For instance, Morvay (2014) explores the relationship between L1 reading ability, L2 proficiency, and non-verbal intelligence, concluding that strong L1 reading skills significantly enhance L2 reading comprehension. This suggests that learners who possess robust literacy skills in their native language are better positioned to understand and engage with texts in a second language. Edele and Stanat (2016) further investigate this connection, emphasizing the importance of first-language listening comprehension in second-language reading comprehension. Their findings indicate that strong listening skills in L1 facilitate better decoding and comprehension in L2, reinforcing the idea that L1 literacy forms the bedrock for successful language acquisition.

Srisang (2016) also examines inferential skills among adult learners, demonstrating that those with developed inferential reasoning in their L1 are more adept at reading comprehension in English (L2). This correlation highlights the transfer of cognitive skills from L1 to L2, which is essential for understanding nuanced texts.

In their study, Li and Clariana (2019) propose an integrative approach to reading comprehension across languages, indicating that proficiency in L1 impacts L2 reading processes significantly. Their work suggests that strategies to enhance L1 literacy can lead to improvements in L2 reading skills, thereby advocating for a holistic view of literacy development.

Quezada *et al.* (2019) reflect on the implications of L1 reading comprehension skills in academic settings, and highlights that students with strong L1 literacy tend to achieve higher grades in L2 courses. This correlation suggests that enhancing L1 skills can have a direct positive impact on academic performance in a second language.

Indeed, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that L1 literacy skills significantly influence reading comprehension and vocabulary development in L2 learning contexts. Strengthening L1 literacy not only aids in reading comprehension but also fosters vocabulary growth, which emphasise the need for integrated literacy programs that address both L1 and L2 skills.

3. Methodology

3.1 Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative approach and specifically adopts the case study design to explore the role of first language (L1) literacy skills in reading comprehension and vocabulary development among English as a Second Language (ESL) students in Ghana. The qualitative case study design allows for an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of participants, which aligns with the objective of providing detailed reports on the relationship between L1 literacy and ESL outcomes (Yosuke, 2021; Debout, 2016).

3.2 Sampling

The purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select participants who could provide rich, relevant data. The sample consists of 300 high school students and 40 teachers from various educational institutions across Ghana. This sample size is deemed adequate to ensure diversity in experiences and perspectives while allowing for manageable data collection and analysis (Iqbal & Khan, 2018).

3.3 Instruments

Data were collected using three primary instruments: focus group discussions, interviews, and classroom observations. Focus group discussions were conducted with groups of students to facilitate dialogue about their experiences with L1 literacy and its impact on their reading comprehension and vocabulary development. This instrument gave the platform to participants to share and reflect on their views collectively.

In addition, interviews were conducted with selected students and teachers to obtain information about their observations and beliefs regarding the influence of L1 literacy on ESL learning. These interviews provided a platform for teachers to share their professional experiences and pedagogical strategies in supporting students' literacy skills.

Classroom observations were also carried out to contextualize the findings from discussions and interviews. The observations focused on teaching practices, student engagement, and the integration of L1 literacy in ESL instruction. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the credibility and richness of the findings.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from focus groups, interviews, and observations. This analytical approach allows for the identification of recurring themes and patterns related to L1 literacy skills and their influence on reading comprehension and vocabulary development. The process involved coding the data, generating themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions.

3.5 Data Analysis Process

The thematic analysis process involved several key steps:

- Familiarization: The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading through transcripts and observation notes multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content.
- Coding: Initial codes were generated based on recurring themes and significant concepts related to L1 literacy and ESL outcomes. This process was iterative, allowing for refinement and adjustment of codes as more patterns emerged.
- Theme Development: Codes were grouped into broader themes that encapsulated key findings related to L1 literacy skills, reading comprehension, and vocabulary development. Each theme was defined and described in detail.
- Interpretation: The final step involved interpreting the themes in the context of the research questions and existing literature. This was aimed at contextualizing the findings within the broader educational landscape in Ghana.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 How do L1 literacy skills contribute to reading comprehension and vocabulary development among ESL students in Ghana?

The significance of first language (L1) literacy skills in enhancing English as a Second Language (ESL) students' reading comprehension and vocabulary development in Ghana is well-documented. Through interviews with teachers and students, four primary mechanisms emerged that elucidate this relationship.

4.1.1 Transfer of Cognitive Skills

L1 literacy skills facilitate the transfer of cognitive skills essential for reading comprehension and vocabulary development. According to Masyitha *et al.* (2021), the ability to apply cognitive strategies developed in the first language, such as phonological awareness, significantly aids second language acquisition. One English teacher observed:

> *"Students who have strong literacy skills in their L1 can often apply cognitive strategies, like phonological awareness and metacognitive reading skills, to their L2 learning."*

This indicates that cognitive skills acquired through L1 literacy—such as breaking down words and utilizing contextual clues—make the transition to English smoother. A student corroborated this:

> *"Because I was already familiar with breaking down words and using context clues in my local language, I found it much easier to do the same when reading in English."*

This aligns with Guo (2020), who emphasized that the positive transfer of cognitive skills from L1 to L2 can enhance comprehension.

4.1.2 Conceptual Knowledge

The activation of conceptual knowledge from L1 also plays a critical role in enhancing reading comprehension. As observed by Sheriff and Pittas (2020), students who can draw upon their existing knowledge when engaging with new content in a second language experience improved comprehension. An experienced teacher noted:

> *"ESL students who are proficient in their L1 can draw upon their existing knowledge and schemas when engaging with content in English. This allows them to make connections, draw inferences, and activate their prior understanding, all of which enhance their reading comprehension."*

A student echoed this sentiment:

> *"When I read about a new topic in English, I could relate it to what I already knew from my studies in my native language, which really helped me understand the material better."*

This connection between prior understanding and new information allows ESL students to construct meaning more effectively, thereby improving their overall comprehension. This is consistent with Nyamekye (2022), who found that students with a strong foundation in their native language could leverage their existing schemas to better understand English texts.

4.1.3 Linguistic Awareness

The development of linguistic awareness through L1 literacy is another critical factor. As noted by Bretuo (2021), students with strong L1 literacy skills demonstrate a better understanding of language structure, grammar, and syntax. A teacher explained:

> *"Students with strong L1 literacy have a better grasp of language structure, grammar, and syntax. They can then use this metalinguistic awareness to better navigate the linguistic features of English, which in turn supports their vocabulary acquisition and overall reading comprehension."*

A student added:

> *"Understanding the rules and patterns of my first language made it much easier for me to recognize and apply similar structures when learning English."*

This transfer of linguistic knowledge enables ESL students to identify and comprehend the grammatical elements of English, which is essential for vocabulary development. This finding is supported by Ankrah *et al.* (2022), who emphasized that linguistic knowledge from the L1 enhances the ability to recognize grammatical features in English.

4.1.4 Motivation and Confidence

Finally, the impact of L1 literacy on motivation and confidence cannot be overlooked. According to Yekple *et al.* (2022), students who are confident in their L1 literacy are more willing to engage with challenging academic tasks in English. A student shared:

"Because I was already a confident reader and writer in my native language, I felt more capable and eager to tackle academic tasks in English. This drove me to take more risks and persist when faced with challenges."

A teacher elaborated:

"ESL students with strong L1 literacy skills often demonstrate greater engagement, resilience, and a willingness to experiment, all of which are crucial for effective language learning and reading development."

This confidence empowers students to take on challenging tasks and actively participate in their learning, ultimately enhancing their vocabulary and comprehension skills. This connection between strong L1 literacy skills and increased self-efficacy was highlighted by Agbofa (2022), which suggests that confidence fosters resilience and engagement in language learning.

In summary, the interplay between L1 literacy skills and various cognitive, conceptual, linguistic, and motivational factors significantly enhances ESL students' reading comprehension and vocabulary development in Ghana.

4.2 What are the challenges faced by ESL students in Ghana in leveraging their L1 literacy skills for reading comprehension and vocabulary development in English?

The interviews conducted with ESL students in Ghana reveal several significant challenges they encounter when attempting to leverage their L1 literacy skills for reading comprehension and vocabulary development in English. These challenges primarily stem from differences in grammar and syntax, lack of direct translations, cultural references, and an overall increase in cognitive load.

4.2.1 Differences in Grammar and Syntax

One of the foremost obstacles highlighted by students is the structural differences between their native language (L1) and English. Many participants expressed that the grammatical frameworks and sentence structures of their L1 do not align well with those of English. As Talebi *et al.* (2023) discuss, such syntactic differences can create significant cognitive demands on learners.

One student stated:

"The way sentences are constructed in my language is very different from English. The grammar and the order of the words just doesn't translate directly."

This discrepancy necessitates a mental reconfiguration of English texts, which can hinder comprehension. Another student added:

"Even if I know all the individual words in an English passage, sometimes I still struggle to follow the overall logic and flow of the text because the sentence structure is so different from what I'm used to in my own language."

The additional cognitive load of translating between linguistic structures can lead to student fatigue and frustration, ultimately impacting their reading fluency, as highlighted by Morvay (2014).

4.2.2 Lack of Direct Translations

Another significant challenge is the absence of direct translations between L1 and English. Many students noted that certain English words lack equivalents in their native language, complicating their vocabulary acquisition. This aligns with findings from Owu-Ewie and Eshun (2019), who emphasize the role of linguistic differences in the learning experiences of multilingual students.

As one participant shared:

"There are many English words that just don't have an equivalent in my language. When I come across those, it's really hard for me to figure out the meaning and remember the new vocabulary."

This situation forces students to rely heavily on context clues and inferential reasoning to derive meaning. A student further explained:

"Sometimes I can relate a new English word to something similar in my language, but other times there's just no direct translation, and I have to work much harder to understand and retain that vocabulary."

Research conducted by Zhang (2022) supports these observations, indicating that cross-linguistic influences can create barriers to effective vocabulary acquisition, particularly when students cannot draw clear connections between L1 and L2 lexical items.

4.2.3 Cultural References and Context

Cultural references embedded in English texts also pose significant challenges for students. Many participants expressed difficulty in understanding idiomatic expressions and cultural nuances that are foreign to their native context. According to Owu-Ewie and Eshun (2019), cultural familiarity is crucial for effective language comprehension.

One student articulated:

"Sometimes, the English passages talk about things or make references that are specific to Western culture. Without that background knowledge, it's difficult for me to fully understand what the text is saying."

This lack of shared cultural context necessitates additional cognitive effort to infer meaning. Another student remarked:

"I have to pause and think really hard about what certain phrases or examples in the English text are trying to convey because they just don't make sense to me based on my own cultural experiences."

These findings echo Talebi *et al.* (2023), who argue that cultural context plays a critical role in reading comprehension and engagement.

4.2.4 Cognitive Load and Effort

Collectively, these challenges contribute to a high cognitive load during reading activities. As one participant described:

"I have to concentrate so hard when reading in English, constantly comparing it to my own language and trying to make connections. It's tiring and can be frustrating at times."

The continuous need to mentally translate and infer meaning can quickly deplete cognitive resources. A student observed:

"Sometimes I just get so worn out from having to work so hard to understand everything in English that I lose my focus and motivation. It's a lot of mental effort compared to reading in my own language."

These experiences resonate with Morvay (2014), who discusses the impact of cognitive load on L2 reading comprehension. Overcoming these challenges requires students to develop metacognitive skills, allowing them to monitor their comprehension and adjust their learning strategies. As one participant noted:

"I've had to learn to be really patient with myself and keep trying different ways to make sense of the English text, even when it feels overwhelming at first."

This adaptive approach is critical for navigating the complexities of language learning, as highlighted in the studies by Li and Clariana (2019), which argue for the importance of metacognitive awareness in enhancing language proficiency. Additionally, the work of Anani (2019) underscores the necessity for instructional strategies that account for these cognitive demands in multilingual classrooms.

4.3 What instructional approaches and interventions can be implemented to effectively utilize L1 literacy skills for reading comprehension and vocabulary development among ESL students in Ghana?

Given the significant linguistic and cultural barriers that ESL students in Ghana face when transitioning from their native Twi language (L1) to English, it is crucial to implement instructional approaches that actively build upon and utilize students' existing L1 literacy skills. Several research-backed strategies can help ESL learners overcome these challenges and effectively transfer their L1 competencies to English.

4.3.1 Contrastive Analysis

One key approach is to engage students in contrastive analysis activities that systematically compare and contrast the grammatical structures, syntax, and linguistic conventions between Twi and English. As one teacher explained:

> *"One activity I've found very effective is having students analyze sentence structures side-by-side in their native language (Twi) and English. For instance, we'll look at a simple Twi sentence like 'Abena reba fie,' which follows a subject-verb-location order. Then I'll have them translate that to English, where the structure is subject-verb-object."*

By explicitly highlighting the similarities and differences, teachers can help students develop a deeper metacognitive awareness of the relationship between the two languages. This aligns with Morvay (2014), who emphasizes the importance of understanding structural differences to enhance reading comprehension.

The teacher further noted:

> *"We'll discuss the differences in word order and syntax, have them practice transforming the Twi structure into proper English. This really helps them understand the underlying patterns and apply that knowledge when reading and comprehending English texts."*

Students tend to respond well to this contrastive analysis, as it sparks engaging discussions. One teacher shared:

> *"The students enjoy the opportunity to draw connections between the two languages, and it gives them that crucial metacognitive awareness. I find they're more motivated to master the English structures when they can see how it differs from their native Twi."*

4.3.2 Vocabulary Bridging

Another crucial instructional strategy is vocabulary bridging, which involves explicitly linking new English words to their closest Twi equivalents. Research by Edele and Stanat (2016) supports this approach, highlighting the role of L1 comprehension in facilitating L2 learning.

One educator described:

"One strategy I use is providing Twi translations alongside new English words. For example, when introducing the English word 'proud,' I'll write the Twi equivalent 'Akoma' next to it. I also encourage students to volunteer Twi words that are semantically related, like 'Ahummobɔ' (self-esteem) or 'Ahoɔfɛ' (beauty)."

By establishing these conceptual connections, teachers can leverage students' prior knowledge and help them retain and apply novel English vocabulary more effectively. The teacher noted:

"Making those conceptual bridges really seems to help the students retain the new English vocabulary. They can anchor the unfamiliar words to something familiar in their native language. Then, as we use those words in context, they're better able to understand and apply them."

Students appreciate this vocabulary bridging approach, as it makes the English vocabulary feel more accessible and relevant to their existing Twi knowledge. As one student remarked:

"Without the Twi connections, the new words would just feel like isolated bits of information. But this way, I can integrate the English into my existing Twi conceptual frameworks."

4.3.3 Activating Cultural Schemata

To address the challenges posed by cultural references and contextual gaps, teachers should deliberately activate students' cultural schemata and background knowledge. This approach aligns with findings from Appiah and Ardila (2020), who argue that grounding language instruction in students' cultural context enhances comprehension.

One educator described:

"One thing I always do before diving into an English reading passage is provide some background on the cultural context. For instance, if the text references a traditional Ghanaian folktale, I'll take time to explain the key elements of that story—the characters, the moral, the significance within Ghanaian culture."

By making these cultural touchpoints explicit, teachers can minimize the cognitive load required for ESL learners to comprehend culturally embedded references. The teacher noted:

"I find that by grounding the English material in their existing cultural knowledge, the students are much better able to make meaning of the text. They can draw parallels to similar stories or beliefs they're familiar with in their native Twi culture. It gives them that crucial foundation to engage with the content on a deeper level."

This approach has had a transformative impact on student comprehension. The teacher shared:

"Before I started incorporating more explicit cultural scaffolding, I would often see students struggling to follow the references and context in the English passages. But now, they're much more engaged and able to connect the material to their own frames of reference. Their reading comprehension has improved dramatically, and I attribute a lot of that to activating those cultural schemata upfront."

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the role of L1 literacy skills in shaping the reading comprehension and vocabulary development of ESL students in Ghana. The findings highlight the importance of fostering strong foundational literacy skills in one's native language as a precursor to an efficient second language acquisition.

The data revealed that learners with more advanced skills in their first language, such as phonological awareness, orthographic knowledge, and reading fluency, consistently demonstrated higher levels of English reading comprehension and broader English vocabulary. This underscores the interdependent nature of literacy development across languages and the cognitive advantages that transfer from a student's stronger L1 skill set.

Furthermore, the study identified key instructional strategies that could help bridge the gap for ESL learners, such as explicit instruction in L1 literacy, structured opportunities for cross-linguistic transfer, and the incorporation of culturally relevant, mother-tongue materials into the curriculum. By intentionally nurturing L1 literacy alongside the target language, educators can empower ESL students to leverage their existing linguistic resources and build upon their strengths.

6. Recommendations

Policymakers should allocate resources to strengthen L1 literacy programmes and promote bilingual/multilingual education models that facilitate cross-linguistic transfer of skills. Also, curriculum planners should integrate L1 literacy instruction into ESL/EFL curricula, create materials that highlight connections between languages, and incorporate culturally relevant, mother-tongue resources.

Moreso, teachers should be trained to use strategies that build on students' existing linguistic knowledge, foster a classroom environment that values multilingualism, and adopt a flexible, asset-based approach to instruction. Stakeholders can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that enables linguistically diverse students to leverage their strengths and reach their full potential. Ultimately, there is a need for a comprehensive, multilingual framework for literacy development that supports the academic success of ESL learners in Ghana and beyond.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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