

Instructional Challenges in Teaching English Reading Comprehension in Tanzanian Public Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the status of teaching and learning English reading comprehension skills in public primary schools in Tanzania, focusing on instructional approaches, teachers' preparedness, and assessment practices. A mixed-methods case study design was employed. Data were collected from ten public primary schools in Morogoro Municipality. Participants included 10 English subject teachers who participated in semi-structured interviews, a cohort of 1,324 Standard Six pupils who completed reading comprehension tests, and a subset of 100 pupils who participated in focus group discussions (10 pupils per school). Qualitative data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, while test scores were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) via SPSS version 25. Pupils demonstrated low reading comprehension ability, with mean test scores ranging from 3.56 to 4.15 out of 10 across all ten schools. No school achieved a mean score above 4.15, indicating consistently poor performance. Qualitative findings revealed three major thematic challenges: (1) persistent use of teacher-centred, passive instructional approaches with minimal pupil interaction; (2) limited teachers' pedagogical preparedness and lack of regular in-service professional development opportunities; and (3) significant difficulties among teachers in designing and implementing effective reading comprehension assessments. Current instructional practices are insufficient for developing foundational reading comprehension skills among Tanzanian public primary pupils. Regular school-based in-service training focused on learner-centred strategies and authentic assessment design is urgently needed. The study contributes empirical evidence from a previously under-researched region to the growing literature on reading instruction in East African public primary schools.

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1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is widely recognised as a cornerstone of academic success and lifelong learning. It involves not merely decoding written symbols but constructing meaning through the interaction between reader, text, and context (Harmer, 2021). Despite its importance, reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge in Tanzanian

public primary schools. National assessments consistently show that many pupils struggle to understand grade-appropriate texts (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2021, 2022, 2023). This deficit has cascading effects: poor reading comprehension undermines performance not only in English but also in subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies, where understanding written instructions and word problems is essential.

The Tanzanian government has implemented various literacy initiatives over the past decade, including the Big Results Now (BRN) education reform and the School Reading Programme (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2017). However, conventional teaching methods continue to dominate classrooms, and their effectiveness in addressing comprehension challenges remains limited (MoEST, 2017). This persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities motivated the present study.

1.1. Global Perspectives on Reading Comprehension Instruction

Globally, reading comprehension is understood as a complex cognitive process involving multiple simultaneous operations: word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic parsing, inferential reasoning, and metacognitive monitoring (Elleman & Oslund, 2019). The ultimate goal of reading comprehension is extracting and constructing meaning from text. This process begins before a pupil can read independently, as early as an adult reads a picture book aloud. During this stage, children listen to words, observe pictures, and gradually associate spoken words with their written forms and the concepts they represent (Erlita, 2021).

Research from various international contexts has identified effective comprehension instruction practices. In Ethiopia, Nurie (2019) found that classroom reading instruction often focuses narrowly on factual recall, with teachers expecting students to provide correct responses and brief descriptions of topics rather than engaging deeply with text meaning. This finding resonates with broader international research showing that many teachers lack training in evidence-based comprehension strategies (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011).

Effective reading comprehension instruction, according to a meta-analysis by the Institute of Education Sciences (Foorman et al., 2016), includes explicit teaching of vocabulary, guided practice in using comprehension strategies (e.g., summarising, questioning, predicting), opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning, and gradual release of responsibility from teacher to students. Despite this evidence, many classrooms in low- and middle-income countries continue to rely on rote learning and teacher-centred recitation (Gove & Cvelich, 2011).

1.2. The Tanzanian Context

In Tanzania, reading comprehension is a core component of the English subject in Kiswahili-medium primary schools, taught from Standard III to Standard VII (Tanzania Institute of Education [TIE], 2019). English is taught as a compulsory subject, but it is not the medium of instruction until secondary school. This creates a unique challenge: pupils have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and instructional time for English is constrained (Qorro, 2013).

The national English syllabus for primary schools outlines specific reading comprehension objectives, including the ability to read and understand short passages, answer literal questions, and identify main ideas (TIE, 2019). However, the Candidates Item Response Analysis (CIRA) for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) reveals persistent weaknesses. Table 1 presents performance data for the critical competency "Reading and comprehending text" alongside related language competencies.

Table 1: Pupils' Performance by Competency in PSLE (2021–2023)

Competency	2021 (%)	2022 (%)	2023 (%)	Status
Listening and comprehending orally	39.15	36.16	35.09	Weak
Using vocabulary appropriately	35.81	25.69	30.62	Weak
Writing simple ideas	34.67	34.76	35.79	Weak
Reading and comprehending text	32.51	17.08	24.57	Weak

Source: URT (2021, 2022, 2023)

As shown in Table 1, performance in reading comprehension declined dramatically from 32.51% in 2021 to 17.08% in 2022, with a modest recovery to 24.57% in 2023 still far below acceptable standards. This three-year pattern of "weak" performance indicates a systemic problem rather than temporary fluctuation. Notably, reading comprehension is the lowest-performing among all tested English competencies.

1.3. Problem Statement and Rationale

The persistent low performance in reading comprehension has serious implications. Pupils who cannot comprehend grade-level texts by Standard Six are at high risk of academic failure (Snow, 2010). They struggle to access content in other subjects, lose motivation for schooling, and are more likely to drop out (Gove & Cvelich, 2011). Furthermore, weak reading comprehension in primary school creates a foundation of failure for secondary education, where English becomes the medium of instruction for most subjects (Qorro, 2013).

While previous studies have examined literacy challenges in Tanzania (e.g., Kadege, 2018; Mlilo, 2016), most have focused on early-grade reading (Standards I–II) or on Kiswahili rather than English reading comprehension. Few studies have specifically investigated instructional practices for English reading comprehension at the Standard Six level, and no published research has focused on Morogoro Municipality. This study addresses these gaps by providing empirical evidence on the status of teaching and learning English reading comprehension in ten public primary schools in Morogoro.

1.4. Research Objectives and Questions

This study was guided by the following objective: to explore the status of teaching and learning English reading comprehension skills in public primary schools in Tanzania, specifically examining instructional approaches, teachers' pedagogical preparedness, and assessment practices. The research questions were:

(1) What is the current level of reading comprehension ability among Standard Six pupils as measured by a standardised test? (2) What instructional approaches are used to teach reading comprehension? (3) What challenges do teachers face in teaching reading comprehension? (4) How do teachers assess reading comprehension in their classrooms?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism

This study was guided by Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory of Learning. According to Amineh and Als (2015), social constructivism rests on three core assumptions: (1) reality is socially constructed through human activity; (2) knowledge is a human product that is socially and culturally constructed; and (3) learning is inherently a social process, not an individual endeavour.

Social constructivism is particularly relevant to reading comprehension instruction for several reasons. First, reading comprehension is not a solitary act of decoding but a meaning-making process that is enhanced through dialogue and collaboration. Vygotsky argued that cognitive development occurs first in social interaction (interpsychological) and then is internalised by the individual (intrapsychological). Applied to reading, this means that pupils learn to comprehend texts by participating in discussions, hearing others' interpretations, and gradually internalising comprehension strategies (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010).

Second, the theory emphasises the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with guidance from a more knowledgeable other (teacher or peer). Effective reading comprehension instruction, therefore, involves teachers providing scaffolding within pupils' ZPD: modelling strategies, asking probing questions, and gradually releasing responsibility as pupils become more proficient.

Third, social constructivism highlights the role of language as a mediational tool. In reading comprehension lessons, classroom talk teacher questioning, pupil responses, peer discussion mediates the development of comprehension skills. This implies that teacher-centred approaches where pupils listen passively are theoretically inadequate; active participation and dialogue are essential.

2.2. Empirical Studies on Reading Comprehension Instruction

Previous research has documented various factors affecting reading comprehension instruction in primary schools. In a study conducted in Tanzania, Ngonyani, Matete, and Kashaigili (2025) found that interactive strategies such as group reading and collaborative discussions significantly enhanced reading comprehension among Standard Six pupils. However, they noted that such strategies were rarely used in typical classrooms, where teacher-centred methods predominated.

Internationally, Duke et al. (2011) synthesised decades of research and identified essential elements of effective comprehension instruction: (1) building background knowledge; (2) teaching vocabulary; (3) providing explicit instruction in comprehension strategies; (4) engaging students in extended discussion of text meaning; and (5) using multiple texts on similar topics. They concluded that teacher-centred read-aloud approaches, without active student engagement, are largely ineffective for developing comprehension.

In the Ethiopian context, Nurie (2019) observed that teachers commonly administered assessments expecting only correct responses and brief topic descriptions, indicating a focus on literal recall rather than deeper comprehension. This finding aligns with observations from other African countries, suggesting a continent-wide challenge in reading pedagogy (Piper, Zuilkowski, & Ong'ele, 2016).

A key gap in the literature is the lack of studies specifically examining English reading comprehension instruction at the Standard Six level in Tanzanian urban public primary schools. The present study addresses this gap.

2.3. Contemporary Global Perspectives on ESL Literacy Instruction

Recent scholarship in ESL literacy has moved beyond a narrow focus on decoding and comprehension strategies to embrace broader, more critical perspectives on how reading is taught and learned in multilingual contexts. Three interrelated concepts have gained prominence in global literacy debates: learner agency, multilingual pedagogy, and culturally responsive literacy instruction.

Learner agency refers to the capacity of learners to act independently and make choices that shape their learning experiences (van Lier, 2008). In reading comprehension instruction, learner agency manifests when pupils are given opportunities to select texts, pose their own questions, direct their own reading processes, and evaluate their own comprehension (Benson, 2011). Research has shown that when learners exercise agency in reading, they demonstrate greater engagement, deeper comprehension, and more sustained motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2019). However, in many classrooms, particularly in teacher-centred contexts, pupil agency is systematically suppressed, with teachers controlling all aspects of the reading process (Zhao & Zhang, 2022). This suppression of agency is not merely a pedagogical choice; it reflects deeper assumptions about the nature of learning and the role of the learner.

Multilingual pedagogy has emerged as a critical framework for literacy instruction in contexts where learners possess multiple linguistic resources. Rather than viewing pupils' home languages as obstacles to learning English, multilingual pedagogy treats these languages as cognitive and cultural assets that can support reading development (García & Kleyn, 2016). Strategies such as translanguaging the deliberate use of multiple languages in instruction have been shown to enhance reading comprehension by allowing learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). In multilingual classrooms, teachers who encourage pupils to discuss texts in their home languages, make cross-linguistic comparisons, and use translation strategically can significantly improve comprehension outcomes (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Despite these demonstrated benefits, many educational policies in sub-Saharan Africa continue to enforce strict language separation, limiting teachers' ability to leverage pupils' multilingual resources (Probyn, 2019).

Culturally responsive literacy instruction builds on the work of Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (2014), who argued that effective teaching must connect with learners' cultural knowledge, experiences, and identities. In reading instruction, culturally responsive practice involves selecting texts that reflect learners' lived experiences, using culturally familiar examples to explain abstract concepts, and creating classroom environments where diverse perspectives are valued (Compton-Lilly et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated that when learners see their own cultures reflected in reading materials, their comprehension improves, and they develop more positive attitudes toward reading (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). In the Tanzanian context, culturally responsive reading instruction could

involve using local stories, incorporating Kiswahili cultural references, and connecting texts to pupils' everyday experiences. However, many teachers lack training and resources to implement such approaches (Mushi, 2020).

These three frameworks; learner agency, multilingual pedagogy, and culturally responsive instruction offer powerful lenses for understanding and addressing reading comprehension challenges in Tanzanian public primary schools. They suggest that improving reading outcomes requires not only better teaching methods but also a fundamental reorientation of how teachers conceptualise learners, language, and culture in the reading classroom. This study draws on these global debates to interpret the findings and to propose pathways for instructional improvement.

3. Method

3.1. Research Approach and Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively investigate the status of teaching and learning reading comprehension. A case study research design was adopted because it allows in-depth, contextualised investigation of a phenomenon within a specific setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The case was defined as the teaching and learning of English reading comprehension in public primary schools in Morogoro Municipality.

The quantitative component involved administering reading comprehension tests to 1,324 Standard Six pupils to measure their comprehension ability levels. The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with 10 English subject teachers (one per school), focus group discussions (FGDs) with a subset of 100 pupils (10 per school), classroom observations of each participating teacher, and documentary analysis. Methodological triangulation using multiple data sources enhanced the validity of findings (Patton, 2015).

3.2. Study Area

The study was conducted in Morogoro Municipality, Tanzania. This area was selected because it represents a typical Tanzanian urban context with mixed socioeconomic characteristics. Public primary schools in Morogoro face similar challenges to those in other urban areas: large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and pupils from diverse home literacy backgrounds. No previous study had systematically examined English reading comprehension instruction in this municipality, making it a suitable and valuable research site.

3.3. Sampling Procedures

A multistage sampling strategy was employed. First, simple random sampling was used to select ten public primary schools from the total of 42 public primary schools in Morogoro Municipality. Each school was assigned a number, and ten numbers were drawn randomly. This approach minimised selection bias and enhanced the representativeness of the sample.

Second, purposive sampling was used to select participants within each school. Ten English subject teachers (one per school) were selected because they were directly responsible for teaching reading comprehension to Standard Six pupils. Standard Six pupils ($N = 1,324$) from each selected school were included as participants for the comprehension test. For focus group discussions, 10 pupils were purposively selected from each school (total $n = 100$), ensuring a mix of high, medium, and low performers based on teacher recommendations.

Table 2: Sample Size by School

School Code	Number of Pupils (Test)	Number of Pupils (FGD)	Number of Teachers
School A	165	10	1
School B	184	10	1
School C	155	10	1
School D	140	10	1
School E	75	10	1

School F	99	10	1
School G	116	10	1
School H	130	10	1
School I	87	10	1
School J	98	10	1
Total	1,324	100	10

Source: Field data (2025)

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

3.4.1. Reading Comprehension Test

A reading comprehension test was developed based on the Standard Six English syllabus and textbook. The test used a grade appropriate passage titled "Mazengo and Good Samaritans". Ten questions were designed to assess literal comprehension (e.g., identifying characters, places, events, and actions directly stated in the text). Each correct answer received 1 mark, for a maximum score of 10. Literal comprehension was selected as the focus because it is the foundational level of comprehension and aligns with the current syllabus emphasis on factual recall.

3.4.2. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed for teachers. Questions explored: (1) typical methods used to teach reading comprehension; (2) perceived challenges in teaching comprehension; (3) professional development opportunities attended; (4) approaches to assessing comprehension; and (5) suggestions for improvement. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in a private location at each school.

3.4.3. Focus Group Discussion Guide

A separate guide was developed for pupil FGDs. Questions focused on pupils' experiences of reading lessons: what teachers did during reading instruction, whether pupils enjoyed reading, what made reading easy or difficult, and what pupils wished teachers would do differently. Each FGD involved 10 pupils and lasted approximately 40 minutes.

3.4.4. Classroom Observation Checklist

An observation checklist was developed to document teaching practices during English reading comprehension lessons. The checklist recorded the following elements: lesson structure (opening, development, closure); teacher activities (e.g., reading aloud, questioning, explaining vocabulary); pupil activities (e.g., listening, reading aloud, responding to questions, working in pairs or groups); use of teaching and learning materials (textbooks, charts, supplementary readers); types of questions asked (literal, inferential, evaluative); and evidence of pupil engagement. Observers also took detailed field notes on classroom interactions, pupil behaviour, and any notable teaching practices.

Observation procedures: Each of the ten participating teachers was observed once during a complete reading comprehension lesson. All observations were non-participant; the researcher sat at the back of the classroom and took notes without intervening in the lesson. Observations were structured in the sense that the observation checklist guided the data collection, although field notes captured emergent and unanticipated phenomena. Prior to observations, teachers were informed of the purpose of the observation and were assured that the focus was on teaching processes, not on individual performance evaluation. Observations were scheduled at a mutually convenient time and were conducted during regular class periods.

3.4.5. Document Review

The following documents were analysed: English syllabus for primary schools (TIE, 2019), Standard Six English Pupil's Book, PSLE CIRA reports (2021–2023), and any available school level reading assessment records.

3.5. Validity and Reliability

Validity was ensured through several strategies. First, methodological triangulation involved collecting data from multiple sources (tests, interviews, FGDs, observations, documents) to cross validate findings. Second, the interview and FGD guides were reviewed by three experts in language education for content validity. Third, member checking was conducted: after initial analysis, preliminary findings were shared with five teacher participants to verify accuracy and interpretation.

Reliability was established through a pilot study conducted at a school not among the ten sampled schools. The pilot involved 30 pupils and 2 teachers and assessed the clarity of test questions, interview questions, and observation procedures. Based on pilot feedback, ambiguous test items were revised, and interview questions were reworded for clarity. Additionally, the test-retest method was applied with a two-week interval on a subsample of 30 pupils; the correlation coefficient was $r = 0.87$, indicating acceptable stability.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data from the reading comprehension test were entered into SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum) were calculated for each school and for the total sample.

Qualitative data from interviews, FGDs, and observation field notes were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Two researchers independently coded 20% of the data to check inter-coder reliability; agreement reached 89%, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Research Ethics Committee. Research permits were secured from the Regional Administrative Secretary in Morogoro and from each participating school. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. For pupils, parental consent was obtained via letters sent home, and pupil assent was obtained verbally. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms are used in reporting qualitative data to protect participant identities.

4. Results

The findings are presented in two main sections: quantitative results from the reading comprehension test, followed by qualitative findings organised around the three major themes that emerged from the analysis.

4.1. Reading Comprehension Test Results

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the reading comprehension test scores across the ten schools.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Reading Comprehension Test Scores by School

School	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
School A	165	0.00	9.00	3.65	1.86
School B	184	0.00	8.00	3.56	1.97
School C	155	0.00	10.00	3.85	2.05
School D	140	0.00	10.00	3.84	2.03
School E	75	0.00	10.00	4.15	2.26
School F	99	0.00	10.00	4.00	2.25
School G	116	0.00	10.00	3.93	2.26
School H	130	0.00	10.00	4.01	2.37

School I	87	0.00	10.00	3.63	2.06
School J	98	0.00	10.00	3.74	2.20
Total	1,324	0.00	10.00	3.81	2.14

Source: Field data (2025)

As shown in Table 3, mean scores across all ten schools were consistently low, ranging from 3.56 (School B) to 4.15 (School E) out of a possible 10. The overall mean was 3.81 (SD = 2.14), indicating that the average pupil answered fewer than four out of ten questions correctly. Notably, in every school, some pupils scored zero, while a few scored the maximum 10, showing wide variability in reading ability within classrooms.

These results confirm that the majority of Standard Six pupils in Morogoro Municipality public primary schools have not achieved basic reading comprehension proficiency. A score of 4 out of 10 (40%) is far below the acceptable proficiency benchmark of 60% commonly used in Tanzanian schools.

4.2. Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts, FGD transcripts, and observation field notes yielded three major themes: (1) poor instructional approaches characterised by teacher-centred methods; (2) limited teacher competence and inadequate professional development; and (3) ineffective assessment practices coupled with teacher anxiety about assessment.

4.2.1. Theme 1: Poor Instructional Approaches

Observations across all ten classrooms revealed a consistent pattern of teacher-centred instruction. In every observed lesson, the teacher read the passage aloud while pupils listened passively. Teachers rarely paused to ask comprehension-checking questions, nor did pupils read aloud or discuss the text in pairs or groups. The typical lesson structure was: teacher reads passage, teacher asks 3 to 4 yes/no or factual recall questions, pupils respond chorally.

This pattern was confirmed in interviews. One teacher explained:

"I know that pupils should participate, but when I ask them to read, they struggle. It takes too much time. So I just read for them and explain the hard words. That is what we are supposed to do, I think." (Teacher, School C)

However, a different perspective emerged from some teachers who acknowledged the problem. Another teacher stated:

"In fact, some teachers fail to integrate questioning and discussion into their teaching of reading comprehension. I admit I also struggle with this. We keep doing the same thing year after year, and pupils still cannot comprehend. In my opinion, this leads to difficulty for students in achieving reading comprehension." (Teacher, School A)

Pupils corroborated these observations. In focus group discussions, pupils consistently reported that they rarely read aloud themselves or discussed passages with classmates. One pupil said:

"Our teacher reads the story for us. Sometimes we follow in our books, but sometimes we just listen. She asks questions at the end, but only the clever students answer. The rest of us just keep quiet." (Pupil FGD, School D)

Another pupil added:

"I see that some teachers fail to manage and guide reading during comprehension lessons. For example, they are interested in using a teacher-centred approach rather than letting us try to read and figure out meaning together." (Pupil FGD, School B)

These findings are consistent with international research showing that teacher-dominated instruction limits opportunities for pupils to develop active comprehension strategies (Duke et al., 2011). In contrast, a study conducted in a neighbouring Tanzanian district found that interactive strategies such as group reading and collaborative discussions significantly enhanced reading comprehension (Ngonyani et al., 2025). However, such strategies were entirely absent in the classrooms we observed.

4.2.2. Theme 2: Limited Teachers' Pedagogical Preparedness and Professional Development

The second major theme concerned teachers' pedagogical knowledge, confidence, and professional development experiences. Several teachers expressed uncertainty about how to teach reading comprehension effectively. One teacher was notably candid:

"Honestly, I did not learn how to teach reading comprehension in my teacher training. We learned general English teaching methods, but not specific strategies for comprehension. I want to help my pupils, but I am not sure what I should be doing differently." (Teacher, School H)

This lack of initial training was compounded by minimal in-service professional development. Teachers reported that workshops and seminars were rare, and when offered, they often focused on administrative topics (e.g., exam record-keeping) rather than pedagogical content knowledge. A teacher stated:

"I think that few in-service training opportunities among English subject teachers affect our mastery of reading comprehension strategies. For example, this year I have not attended any seminar or workshop on teaching reading. Also, poor attitude and motivation of some teachers affect pupils' ability to acquire knowledge and skills." (Teacher, School C)

Another teacher added:

"The last training I attended was three years ago. It was about the new syllabus, not specifically about reading comprehension. We need practical training like demonstration lessons so we can see what good comprehension teaching looks like." (Teacher, School F)

These findings align with the social constructivist framework: without adequate pedagogical knowledge and ongoing professional learning experiences, teachers cannot effectively scaffold pupils' comprehension development within their ZPD (Shabani et al., 2010). The finding also echoes broader research from sub-Saharan Africa showing that teacher professional development is often scarce, one-off, and disconnected from classroom realities (Hardman et al., 2012).

4.2.3. Theme 3: Ineffective Assessment Practices

The third theme concerned assessment. Teachers reported significant difficulty in designing and implementing assessments that accurately measure reading comprehension. Unlike testing factual recall (e.g., "What is the name of the main character?"), constructing questions that require inferential thinking or summarisation was perceived as challenging.

One teacher explained:

"On my side, I get challenged when I teach the reading comprehension topic more than other topics. Sometimes, I invite my friend from the neighbouring school to help me. I find it more challenging to compose questions that measure reading comprehension skills, not just memory." (Teacher, School F)

A different teacher shared a similar concern:

"I give my pupils questions from the textbook. I do not create my own because I am not confident that my questions would be good. But the textbook questions are all very simple: who, what, where. I know that is not enough, but what else can I do?" (Teacher, School I)

Observations confirmed that classroom assessment of reading comprehension was rare. In none of the observed lessons did teachers use formative assessment strategies such as exit tickets, think-pair-share, or comprehension checks during reading. The only assessment observed was end-of-lesson oral questioning, which involved only a few high-achieving pupils.

Pupils also perceived limited feedback on their reading. One pupil remarked:

"When we answer questions in class, the teacher says 'good' or 'wrong'. She does not explain why our answer is wrong or how to find the right answer in the story." (Pupil FGD, School A)

These findings are concerning given that assessment practice is an essential pedagogical tool for improving teaching and learning. Research has shown that varied assessment tasks enhance both student reading comprehension and teacher responsiveness (Madani, 2016; Hueynova, 2023). Tests and quizzes that target multiple levels of comprehension (literal, inferential, evaluative) are particularly effective (Al-Jamal, Al-Hawamleh, & Al-Jamal, 2013). However, the teachers in this study lacked the knowledge and confidence to create such assessments.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

This study investigated the status of teaching and learning English reading comprehension in ten public primary schools in Morogoro Municipality, Tanzania. The findings reveal a concerning picture: pupils' reading comprehension ability is extremely low (mean score 3.81/10), instructional practices are overwhelmingly teacher-centred and passive, teachers lack adequate initial training and ongoing professional development experiences, and assessment practices are limited to factual recall rather than genuine comprehension.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's social constructivism, the observed practices are theoretically inadequate for developing reading comprehension. Social constructivism emphasises that learning occurs through social interaction, dialogue, and collaboration; yet classrooms were characterised by teacher monologue and passive pupil listening. The theory emphasises scaffolding within the ZPD, but teachers were not observed modelling comprehension strategies, providing guided practice, or gradually releasing responsibility to pupils. The theory highlights the mediational role of language and discussion, yet classroom talk was minimal and dominated by teacher recitation. In essence, the observed practices represent what Vygotsky would consider instruction at an individualistic, transmission-based level rather than a socially mediated, developmental level. Teachers are not acting as "more knowledgeable others" who guide pupils through the ZPD; instead, they are performing a one-way transmission of information that bypasses the very social processes through which higher-order cognitive skills develop (Shabani et al., 2010).

These findings are consistent with prior research in Tanzania and similar contexts. For example, Kadege (2018) found that early-grade reading instruction in Tanzania focused heavily on decoding with little attention to meaning-making. Mlilo (2016) documented similar teacher-centred practices in rural Tanzanian primary schools. At the international level, a large-scale study of reading instruction in sub-Saharan Africa found that "chorus reading" and teacher read-aloud were the dominant methods, with little evidence of comprehension strategy instruction (Piper et al., 2016).

However, this study extends previous research in several important ways. First, it specifically focuses on English (rather than Kiswahili) reading comprehension at the Standard Six level, which has received less attention than early-grade reading. Second, it provides detailed qualitative data from Morogoro Municipality, a context not previously studied systematically. Third, by examining instructional approaches, teachers' pedagogical preparedness, and assessment practices as an interconnected system, the study reveals how multiple factors simultaneously constrain comprehension development.

5.2. Interpreting Findings Through Global ESL Literacy Frameworks

The findings of this study take on additional significance when interpreted through the frameworks of learner agency, multilingual pedagogy, and culturally responsive literacy instruction discussed in the literature review. From the perspective of learner agency, the observed teacher-centred practices represent a systematic denial of pupil autonomy in the reading process. When teachers read aloud and ask only factual recall questions, pupils are positioned as passive recipients of information rather than active meaning-makers. This suppression of agency is particularly concerning given research demonstrating that agency is a crucial predictor of reading engagement and comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2019). The absence of opportunities for pupils to choose texts, pose questions,

or direct their reading processes likely contributes to the consistently low comprehension scores observed across all ten schools.

The findings also highlight missed opportunities for multilingual pedagogy. Tanzania's language policy, which mandates Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in primary schools and English as a taught subject, creates a unique multilingual context. Yet, in the observed classrooms, teachers made no use of pupils' Kiswahili resources to support English reading comprehension. No teacher encouraged pupils to discuss texts in Kiswahili, make cross-linguistic comparisons, or use translation strategies. This represents a significant missed opportunity: international research has consistently shown that leveraging learners' home languages can enhance comprehension of texts in additional languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Probyn, 2019). The strict language separation observed in these classrooms is not pedagogically optimal but is likely reinforced by teachers' perceptions of policy requirements and their limited professional development in multilingual strategies.

Perhaps most striking is the absence of culturally responsive literacy instruction in the observed classrooms. The reading passages used were generic and disconnected from pupils' lived experiences in Morogoro. Teachers did not connect texts to local contexts, use culturally familiar examples, or create classroom environments that validated diverse perspectives. This is a significant weakness: culturally responsive instruction is not merely a pedagogical preference but a research-supported approach that enhances comprehension and engagement (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). The absence of culturally responsive practices may help explain why pupils appear disengaged during reading lessons and why comprehension scores remain stubbornly low. When reading materials and teaching practices do not connect with pupils' cultural worlds, reading becomes an abstract and meaningless exercise.

5.3. Understanding the Persistence of Teacher-Centred Approaches

A crucial question arising from these findings is why teachers continue to rely on teacher-centred approaches despite national policy reforms emphasising learner-centred pedagogy (MoEST, 2017). This study's findings suggest several interrelated explanations, which extend beyond simple teacher resistance to encompass systemic and institutional factors.

First, inadequate initial teacher education leaves teachers unprepared for learner-centred instruction. As Teacher H candidly stated, "I did not learn how to teach reading comprehension in my teacher training." Pre-service programmes appear to provide general pedagogical knowledge rather than specific, practical training in evidence-based comprehension strategies. Without this foundational preparation, teachers default to the approaches they experienced as learners themselves.

Second, minimal in-service professional development perpetuates the status quo. The teachers in this study reported attending no relevant training in the past year. When training does occur, it often focuses on administrative procedures rather than pedagogical content knowledge. This finding aligns with broader research showing that one-off workshops without ongoing support rarely change teaching practice (Hardman et al., 2012).

Third, assessment pressures create powerful incentives for teacher-centred approaches. The Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) questions on reading comprehension predominantly target literal recall, as confirmed by the CIRA reports (URT, 2021, 2022, 2023). Teachers understand that their professional standing and their pupils' progression depend on PSLE performance. Consequently, they teach to the test, prioritising factual recall over deeper comprehension. This creates a perverse cycle: national assessments emphasise surface-level reading skills, so teachers focus on these skills, which further entrenches teacher-centred approaches and limits pupils' development of authentic comprehension abilities.

Fourth, resource constraints and large class sizes make learner-centred instruction logistically challenging. Teachers in Morogoro Municipality face overcrowded classrooms, limited textbooks, and minimal supplementary reading materials. In such conditions, conducting group work, facilitating discussions, or implementing individualised instruction becomes practically difficult, if not impossible. Teachers therefore resort to whole-class instruction, which they perceive as more manageable.

Fifth, and perhaps most fundamentally, teachers' professional identities and beliefs may not align with learner-centred pedagogy. International research has shown that teachers' beliefs about learning, knowledge, and authority

are deeply rooted and resistant to change (Borg, 2006). In the Tanzanian context, where traditional hierarchical relationships between teacher and pupil are culturally embedded, adopting learner-centred approaches may require teachers to fundamentally reconceptualise their professional role. Without sustained, collaborative professional development that addresses these underlying beliefs, surface-level policy mandates are unlikely to produce meaningful change.

In summary, the persistence of teacher-centred approaches in Tanzanian public primary schools cannot be attributed to teacher deficits alone. Rather, it reflects a complex interplay of systemic factors including inadequate initial training, insufficient ongoing professional development, assessment pressures, resource constraints, and deeply rooted cultural beliefs about teaching and learning. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach that goes beyond policy pronouncements to address the structural and professional development needs of teachers.

5.4. Comparison with Previous Research

These findings are consistent with prior research in Tanzania and similar contexts. For example, Kadege (2018) found that early-grade reading instruction in Tanzania focused heavily on decoding with little attention to meaning-making. Mlilo (2016) documented similar teacher-centred practices in rural Tanzanian primary schools. At the international level, a large-scale study of reading instruction in sub-Saharan Africa found that "chorus reading" and teacher read-aloud were the dominant methods, with little evidence of comprehension strategy instruction (Piper et al., 2016).

However, this study extends previous research in several important ways. First, it specifically focuses on English (rather than Kiswahili) reading comprehension at the Standard Six level, which has received less attention than early-grade reading. Second, it provides detailed qualitative data from Morogoro Municipality, a context not previously studied systematically. Third, by examining instructional approaches, teacher competence, and assessment practices as an interconnected system, the study reveals how multiple factors simultaneously constrain comprehension development.

5.5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have several implications for educational policy and practice. First, initial teacher education programmes must be reformed to include specific, practical training in evidence-based reading comprehension instruction. Current programmes appear to provide only general English teaching methods, leaving teachers unprepared for the specific demands of comprehension instruction.

Second, the government should provide regular, school-based in-service training focused on reading comprehension. Teachers in this study reported attending no relevant professional development in the past year. However, training must be ongoing, job-embedded, and focused on practical classroom strategies not one-off workshops on administrative topics. Research from other low-income contexts shows that sustained, school-based coaching is more effective than episodic workshops (Piper et al., 2016).

Third, the national English syllabus and textbooks require revision. The current syllabus (TIE, 2019) emphasises factual recall and literal comprehension, which likely contributes to teachers' narrow focus on surface-level questioning. The syllabus should be revised to include explicit competencies for inferential, critical, and evaluative comprehension. Textbooks should be redesigned to include authentic texts, diverse genres, and questions targeting multiple levels of comprehension.

Fourth, assessment practices must be improved. Teachers need training on how to design and use formative reading comprehension assessments, including practical strategies like comprehension checklists, retelling rubrics, and question-answer relationship (QAR) frameworks. National examinations (PSLE) should model good assessment by including inferential and critical comprehension questions, sending a signal to teachers about valued instructional goals.

5.6. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in only one municipality (Morogoro), so findings may not be generalisable to rural areas or other urban centres with different characteristics. Second, the sample included only ten schools and ten teachers; a larger sample might have revealed more diverse practices. Third, the reading

comprehension test measured only literal comprehension; we do not have data on pupils' inferential or critical comprehension abilities. Fourth, the study did not include pupil reading fluency measures, which would provide additional insight into reading development. Finally, as a cross-sectional study, we cannot determine whether pupils' comprehension scores improve over time or in response to specific interventions.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that teaching and learning of English reading comprehension in public primary schools in Morogoro Municipality, Tanzania, is severely inadequate. Pupils demonstrate very low levels of comprehension ability, with mean test scores below 40% across all ten schools. The quality of instruction is a central factor: teachers rely on passive, teacher-centred methods that do not align with social constructivist principles of active, collaborative learning. Furthermore, teachers lack both adequate initial training and ongoing professional development experiences in comprehension instruction, and they struggle to design assessments that measure genuine comprehension beyond factual recall.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered. For the Ministry of Education: mandate and fund regular, school-based in-service training for all English subject teachers focused on evidence-based reading comprehension strategies; revise the national English syllabus to include explicit competencies for inferential and critical comprehension; and support the development and dissemination of supplementary reading materials. For teacher education institutions: reform pre-service English teaching methods courses to include dedicated modules on reading comprehension instruction with opportunities for practice teaching, thereby strengthening teachers' pedagogical preparedness before they enter the classroom. For school administrators: establish professional learning communities within and across schools where teachers can collaboratively plan comprehension lessons and share effective practices. For future research: conduct a longitudinal study following a cohort of pupils to understand comprehension development trajectories; develop and test an intervention design for enhancing reading comprehension; and extend this research to rural areas and other regions of Tanzania.

Without significant intervention, cohorts of pupils will continue to progress through primary school without developing the reading comprehension skills necessary for academic success in secondary school and beyond.

Declaration

Use of AI Tools

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Deep Seek to assist with editing and refining the wording of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final content of the publication

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Competing Interests

None.

Ethical Approval

This study was granted ethical approval by the University of Dodoma Research Ethics Committee. Research permits were secured from the Regional Administrative Secretary in Morogoro and from each participating school. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. For pupils, parental consent was obtained via letters sent home,

and pupil assent was obtained verbally. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Author's Contribution

Author1: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing original draft.

Author2: Supervision, Investigation, Writing review and editing.

Author3: Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing review and editing.

Data availability

The data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions protecting participant confidentiality. However, anonymized data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with institutional approval.

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