

READING COMPREHENSION FOR ESL STUDENTS. PROCESSES OF PERCEIVING TEXTS

Maria-Miruna CIOCOI-POP

“Lucian Blaga” University, Sibiu, Romania
miruna.ciocoi-pop@ulbsibiu.ro

Abstract: *In an ever-increasing competitive academic setting, university students are striving for proficiency in their skills of foreign languages. This paper aims to highlight the significance of reading comprehension for students of English as a second language. Reading comprehension is a cognitive process, in other words, reading a text means processing and decoding it. Reading proficiency is linked to numerous aspects, such as age, cognitive processes, abilities, knowledge of the foreign language, etc. It goes without saying that the experience of reading a text, be it literary or non-literary, is more enjoyable without the need to constantly look up unknown words. This brief study also tries to show whether there is a direct connection between finding contentment in reading and comprehending the texts itself. Since reading is a key-skill verified in all major language exams, it is crucial for the ESL class, and not only, to include reading comprehension processes. Like any other skill, reading comprehension can be trained, as long as it is perceived as a procedure which requires the student's commitment. Reading comprehension is a mechanism of phrase and concept identification, as well as of decoding meanings. Thus, this paper tries to emphasize the implications of reading comprehension and of teaching reading comprehension methods in the overall linguistic knowledge of ESL learners.*

Keywords: ESL, reading, comprehension, skill, processes

1. Introduction

Discourse analysts and psychologists have offered numerous models of text comprehension along the years, from Kintsch's construction integration model (1998), through Myers' and O'Brien's memory-based resonance model (1994), to Graesser's constructionist model (1994) or the event indexing model developed by Zwaan and Radvansky (1998). Nowadays researchers focus their attention on the medium through which readers internalize texts, thus comparing the effects of reading on paper versus reading on electronic devices. Children get acquainted with e-readers and other forms of digital technology from a very early age. The

tactile experience offered by electronic devices, more often than not, surpasses the one given by reading off paper, especially in the case of what Ferris Jabr calls “digital natives” in an article published in “Scientific American” [1]; which does not mean that the two exclude one another. It goes without saying that e-readers have an undeniable advantage: portability. They allow readers to carry several books with them at the same time. But the more humanity gains access to technologies of mobile reading, though their advantages are undeniable, the more readers ask themselves if reading on paper does not mean reading more attentively and meticulously, without the distractions that

lurk around when reading online. This holds true especially for students of English as a second language. The obvious perks of studying online and, implicitly, of reading online texts include the ease of searching the meaning of unknown words in an online dictionary much faster than flipping through the pages of a classic dictionary or of quickly finding out and actually hearing the pronunciation of a term. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, reading skills lie at the foundation of any foreign language acquisition. The fact that any renowned international language examination tests the learners' reading skills is eloquent proof.

2. Steps towards attaining reading comprehension proficiency

The processes of reading comprehension, whether ESL learners are dealing with a literary or a non-literary text, should all encourage critical thinking. Reading is the most integrative skill, as it entails understanding the meaning of words in context, speaking exercises – as developing the understanding of a text through the exchange of ideas, and, as a natural effect, it entails listening comprehension – a discussion based on the comprehension of a written text can only be performed through the ability of listening. Last, but not least, reading comprehension entails writing skills, as one way of assessing reading comprehension can be answering questions about the text in written form. Thus, reading is an integrative process, very much linked to the individual, in other words, to whom is reading.

Kintsch's construction integration (CI) model shows that strategies exist, but comprehension is not necessarily based on them. As an alternative, comprehension relies on the text input into long-term memory and the incorporation of new ideas into the active memory. That is to say that, in Kintsch's opinion, reading comprehension strategy is simply knowledge reactivated through long-term memory. The CI model operates on four

levels: the surface level, which keeps the exact wording of a sentence, the textbase level, which contains propositions from the text in a way that conserves the meaning but not the surface level of the text, the situation model, which would be the micro-world described in the text, and which, in its turn requires additional background knowledge and text genre, which basically is the type of discourse the read text consists of, for instance, a given text could be a scientific article, a tale, an essay, a technical text, etc.

Another element in attaining reading proficiency as an ESL learner is being an active reader with a clear-cut goal. The ESL-reader needs to be active – to engage psychologically into the text, to search for lexical, grammatical and underlying meanings. Therefore it is more than helpful to have a goal when reading a text. This goal can range anywhere from enriching vocabulary, to improving pronunciation skills and the ability of analysing and synthesizing, practicing comprehension, enhancing one's ability to process written information and re-using it in real-life contexts or recognising grammar patterns and their use in certain frameworks. ESL readers can achieve their reading goal by skimming through the text beforehand, sectioning the text and memorizing key-concepts. A useful effect of this process is the ESL-reader's ability to make predictions about the content of the text.

Nell Duke and David Pearson list some of the most efficient steps towards achieving reading proficiency in their article "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension" [2]. One of them is constructing, revising and questioning the meanings they grasp within the text. The ESL reader should have a structured approach towards the text: understanding the meaning of each paragraph as he or she reads, revising all accumulated information and, in the end, questioning and analyzing inferred meanings.

As I select some of what I consider to be

essential elements in attaining reading proficiency as an ESL learner, I want to mention the technique of setting different goals to different types of text. For instance, when reading a literary narrative text, the reader focuses especially on the plot, the characters and the setting; whereas tackling a technical text, say, a scientific article on the evolution of military relations between member states of the EU, implies focusing on cultural specific terms, specialized vocabulary. This latter process is very much based on resorting to general and specific culture.

2.1. Aspects linked to reading comprehension proficiency

Reading proficiency is linked to numerous aspects, such as age, cognitive processes, background knowledge or an affinity with foreign languages. At this point I would like to come back to Kintsch's CI model which believes that the reading process is constituted by a connection of nodes:

"As a text is read, sentence by sentence or clause by clause, a set of word concept nodes and proposition nodes are activated (constructed). Some nodes correspond to explicit constituents in the text, whereas others are activated inferentially by world knowledge, rules, and other representations stored on long-term memory (...). When a sentence (S) is read, the set of N activated nodes include the explicit and inference nodes affiliated with S as well as the nodes that are held over in working memory from the previous sentence S1 by virtue of meeting some threshold of activation." [3].

It goes without saying that comprehension abilities play a major role in reading comprehension itself. Research has shown that the comprehension skills of preschoolers predicted their reading proficiency level by the time they were in first grade. This highlights the importance of age in achieving reading proficiency and it is why reading comprehension skills should be encouraged from an early age on. Young preschoolers who cannot read should be stimulated to activate their

comprehension skill through media, songs, pictures, cartoons, story-telling, in other words, non-reading material, especially in the case of ESL readers. Thus, by training their comprehension abilities at an early age, children will find reading comprehension undemanding later on.

In order to achieve reading comprehension proficiency one needs to understand that underlying cognitive processes lead to proficient reading comprehension performance. By increasing cognitive requirements, ESL learners can improve their reading abilities. What is more:

"Numerous studies involving verbal protocols have also shown that multiple-choice reading comprehension questions involve cognitive processes related both to constructing representations of text meaning and to decision processes related specifically to the cognitive processes involved in answering multiple choice test items (Hannon & Daneman, 2002; Kirsch & Mosenthal, 1990; Mosenthal & Kirsch, 1991)" [4].

In her article on language comprehension ability, Maria S. Murray identifies the following elements needed for skilled reading: background knowledge (facts, concepts, etc.), vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning and literacy knowledge. Through the term "background knowledge" she understands facts about the world, events, people or sayings that are needed for understanding a text:

"Young readers learn to strategically apply their background knowledge in order to interpret a text's meaning. As a small example, consider the following sentence: 'Initially Richard was upset when police told him they found bugs in his office, but to avoid prosecution he agreed to let them remain until the investigation was completed.' To comprehend this sentence either in isolation or within the context of an entire text, one will need to have learned that "bugs" are spying devices, to understand that people might get upset when they discover they are being spied on,

and to infer that Richard has created an arrangement of cooperation with the police. Without background knowledge, the author's intended meaning may be misconstrued as having to do with insects." [5]

I strongly believe that the same strategy is applied by ESL students as well. Perceiving a text by resorting to their background knowledge is one of the most effective techniques for developing reading skills. Background knowledge can span anywhere from general knowledge, facts and information acquired in previous school years, information that has been internalised via any given media. "Background knowledge allows readers to strategically infer the author's meaning with a lot less effort" [6]. What is more, several experts in cognitive science and language acquisition have demonstrated that by making use of their background knowledge the ESL learners perceive a given text more effortlessly and without constantly having to stop the reading process and look for additional information in order to understand what they have just read. In addition, background knowledge stimulates memory as well. An ESL reader with a solid background knowledge will find it easier to memorise the pieces of information, to arrange them into the correct order and to create and recreate significant units. In addition, scientists such as Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) have proven the significance of the metacognitive consciousness of the reader's cognitive and motivational processes while reading. This is why an innate affinity towards studying foreign languages or the conscious motivation to do so are certainly aids in the process of reading comprehension.

3. Possible links between contentment in reading and reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is an intense, complex and ongoing process which requires the student's attention. For ESL learners reading can be a tiresome and

draining procedure, especially when they first set out to learn English. Nevertheless, readers who practice will become good readers, who will find contentment in reading. Once the reading processes are internalised and the ESL learners practice reading regularly, they will perceive reading as a rewarding and productive activity. Understanding a written text does not only occur during the actual reading process, but also after it, when the reader has time to internalise new information and apply it in real life. Understanding a written text leads automatically to contentment. But this result depends greatly on the reading instructions that the ESL learner receives. Clear, concise and straightforward reading instructions help the ESL students achieve the goals the instructor has set for them, thus experiencing contentment. Also, a text is rarely entirely comprehended devoid of follow-up discussions or even debates. One should imagine two parallel lines connecting reading comprehension and reading contentment. The two concepts can operate interchangeably and are bidirectional. ESL learners, especially the beginners, may start with the necessity of comprehending a text. Once their objective has been reached, they achieve contentment in reading, as a natural result. Similarly, an ESL learner who enjoys reading in general, in other words, who finds contentment in reading, be it in native language or a second/foreign one, will find it easier to comprehend a read text. There is plenty of research on students' metacognitive awareness of reading processes. Pressley and Afflerbach (1995), for instance, point out that "skilled readers" [7] tend to be more conscious when reading. They are especially aware of why they are reading, thus having a plan or a strategy to do so. On the other hand, "unskilled readers" [8] are less aware of their metacognitive awareness, thus memorising less. What both type of readers share is reading as a process of decoding information.

4. Conclusions

The cognitive processes that are fundamental to reading comprehension must be understood by ESL learners, as well as their instructors. This is why it cannot be stressed enough how important it is for readers to become actively engaged with the text.

“(…) specialists in the field bring up the issue of the so-called ‘authentic materials’ and argue in favour of using them whereas some of their colleagues argue that learners may benefit more from texts that are especially written or simplified for them” [9].

Reading comprehension is a complex process that requires the reader’s complete

attention and responsiveness. Achieving reading comprehension means having a reading strategy, as well as making instructional choices. ESL learners should have clear-cut reading objectives and become strategic readers. Understanding the underlying processes of perceiving texts, not only encourages the ESL learners, but offers a significant support system in attaining reading comprehension proficiency. Making conscious use of reading strategies leads the reader to considerable achievements. These strategies are instruments of refining one of the skills tested in all academic language tests – reading comprehension.

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