Reading Comprehension and its Importance in Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract
Reading can be the most important skill for second language learners in the academic contexts. In other words, in the academic settings, reading is the central means for acquiring new knowledge and gaining new access to alternative explanations and interpretations (Grabe & Stoller, 1997, cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001). If a student cannot read and comprehend a written language, they cannot be expected to be good in other content areas which will indispensably require some reading ability (Decker, 2007). So this study aims at studying and reviewing reading comprehension and its importance.

Keywords: reading, comprehension, reading skill
1. **Introduction**

There are two types of readings; one being reading aloud from a printed page, the other reading a text for comprehension. Each one is worthwhile when used at the suitable time, but the ultimate goal of reading is to get the meaning and make an attempt to recreate the writer’s intended meaning. Smith (1994, cited in Gebhard, 2006) stated that: “Comprehension may be considered as relating what we attempt to in the world around us – the visual information of print in the case of reading-to what we already have in our heads. And learning can be considered as modifying what we already have in our heads as a consequence of attending to the world around us (p.53).”

Second language learners like native speakers of a language read a text for meaning, i.e., the most important goal is to comprehend the meaning. It used to be considered that reading is just receptive skill and the readers were passive learners only. But as a matter of fact, it should be seen as an interaction between the reader and the text. ‘'Meaning does not exist in the text but in readers’ mind and the representation they build (Hass & flower, 1988, p.167).’’

Reading can also help in improving the writing skill. The more the learner reads, the better they can write. As Kennedy and Bolitho (1985) state: ‘’Reading may be regarded as a necessary precondition for any writing task, since the writer must be aware of the structure of a particular type of writing before he can he/she can produce it(p.85).”

Teaching reading skills to non native speakers of English includes unique problems and challenges at all conceivable level of instruction (Celce-Murcia, 2001). It is certain that every teacher has their own way of teaching reading comprehension. The fact is that the methods for teaching reading have subjected to substantial changes over time. As Brown (2007) asserted: ‘’A half century ago, perhaps, reading specialist might have argued that the best way to teach reading was through bottom up methodology. More recent research on teaching reading has shown that the combination of top down and bottom up processing, or what has come to be called as interactive reading, is almost always is a primary ingredient in successful teaching methodology because both processes are important.(p.299).’’

2. **Reading Comprehension**

While we can safely say that reading involves understanding of printed text, this notion doesn’t provide any indication of what specifically must be as done reading, and how it to be done. A more useful extended definition of reading would describe the reading process to include the following defining features:

1. Reading is a rapid process.
2. Reading requires processing efficiently.
3. Reading requires strategic processing.
4. Reading is interactive.
5. Reading is purposeful.
6. Reading requires sufficient knowledge of language.
7. Reading requires sufficient knowledge of the world and a given topic.
8. Reading requires extensive time on task (Grabe, 1997).

Fries (1963) held that reading comprehension is: “to extract from printed page, three levels of meaning, lexical meaning (semantic level of words and expressions), structural or grammatical meaning (derived from interrelationship among, words or parts of the words or from order of the word) and socio-cultural meaning (the evaluation that people of our culture attach to the words and groups of the words they are reading”).

2.1 The Importance of Reading Comprehension

The importance of reading comprehension in a foreign language was stated by Alderson (1984) which the foreign language in many parts of the world’s knowledge is often important to academic education, professional success and personal improvement. This is potentially true that so much technical, professional and scientific literature is written in English today. In fact, it is common that English reading comprehension ability is required of students by their subject departments often evaluated by a test of reading comprehension. A reading ability is often all that is needed by learners of English as a foreign language. Reading probably is the most generally needed skill in learning a second or foreign language (Robinson, 1991).

2.2 Components of Reading Comprehension

The study of reading comprehension is an important way to understand how fluent readers comprehend text. According to Grabe (1997), the central components of reading processing include the following:

“Orthographic processing, word recognition, phonological coding, sentence parsing, lexical access, working memory activation, prepositional integration, prepositional text-model formation, comprehension of strategic use, inference making, text model development of orthographic situation model. Throughout the study of these components basic issues such as sub-process and the extent of interaction among various sub-processes are important concerns (p.9).”

3. Reading Skill

Reading is a skill of bringing reading to and getting meaning from the printed pages (Finocchiaro, 1973). It is a process in which the reader focuses attention on the reading materials and activates previously acquired knowledge and skills in order to comprehend what someone else has written (Chastain, 1988). It is also a language-related process in which sounds and meaning of sound-symbol correspondences, and structures are important (Finocchiaro, 1973).

Reading is the most important skill of all for most students of English throughout the world, especially in countries that where foreign language learners do not have the opportunity to interact with the native speakers but have access to written form of language.
Reading can be considered as a “source of information”, as a “pleasurable activity”, and as a "means of extending one’s knowledge of the language” (Rivers, 1981, p.253). Because the reader doesn’t produce messages like a speaker or a writer, sometimes it is erroneously labeled a “passive skill” but if we examine the abilities that have a basic role in comprehension of meaning, we find that it requires active mental processing. It is also “receptive” and “decoding” skill in which the reader tries to understand the meaning of the word or phrase or sentence (code) and perceive the content of written text (Chastian, 1988).

4. Reading Comprehension: Active or Passive Process?
It was earlier believed that reading was a passive receptive skill in which the reader would not carry out any activity which reading a text. However, this traditional view about reading has been sharply rejected by many scholars. In this respect, Rivers (1981:260) commented, if we examine the abilities that come into play in fluent direct reading with recognition of meaning, it is obvious that readers are far from passive during this activity”(p.266). Chastain (1988) justified River’s statement by asserting that reading requires active mental processing for involving the activation relevant knowledge and linguistic skills to accomplish an exchange of information from one person to another”(p.78). Reading is not a passive process in which readers take something out of the text as it is suggested by bottom-up processing model. Reading is instead, an active process in which the reader must take an active contribution by drawing upon and using concurrently various abilities that he has acquired. (Wardlaugh, 1962, cited in Nunan, 1991); that is, through “top-down processing” as well.

5. Types of Reading
5.1 Intensive Reading
In many countries, English instruction in most programs, especially at the university level in ESP/EST, is usually the “intensive reading procedure” which implies close study of short passages including syntactic, semantic and lexical analysis and translation into the L1 to study the meaning (Susser and Rob, 1999).

This as Alderson & Urquhart (1984) argued, is not a reading but a language lesson: such a pedagogic practice (of focusing on the language of the text) may be justified as a language lesson, but it may be counterproductive as a reading lesson. Often what is known as “intensive reading” (as traditionally opposed to extensive reading) is actually not reading at all; the lesson consists of series of language points, using text as a point of departure. Reading text, in other words, are sources of “language exercises, rather than reading exercises” (pp.246-247).

5.2 Extensive Reading
The definition of extensive reading as a language teaching, learning procedure is that:(a) it is reading of large quantities of the materials or long text; (b)for global or general understanding; (c)with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text. Further, because (d) reading is individualized, with the students choosing the books...
they want to read, (e) the books are not discussed in the class (Bamford, 1987 & Thompson, 1984).

Large quantities of reading are essential for this procedure to be ‘‘extensive’’, but there is no agreement on how much ‘‘extensive’’ it should be. The amount of reading is not a sheer number of hours or pages but depends on the teachers and students’ recognition of how extensive reading varies from a reading class. This will be varied according to the kind of program level and other variables. Of course, quantity by itself doesn’t make the extensive reading method. It has especial techniques, exercises and activities. Broughton et al, (1978) commented that extensive reading must imply a ‘‘relatively low degree of understanding’’. They further argued that: we want students to achieve a degree of comprehension, efficient for pleasure reading, if the students find the books too difficult to enjoy, the extensive reading procedures requires the book to be changed, and not that the students be forced to study it more closely. The level of global comprehending required varies with the student’s language ability, the basic features of the text, and other considerations (p.92).

6. Views on Reading Comprehension and Teaching Approaches to Reading Comprehension

Reading is receptive skill in which the reader receives a message from a writer. Some have referred to reading as a decoding skill in which the readers arrives at the meaning of the message. Some, however; have defined reading as ‘‘thinking guided by print’’ (cited in Chastain, 1988).

The goal of reading is comprehension. Reading takes place when comprehension is achieved, so where readers do not comprehend, they are not reading. By definition, reading signifies comprehension. Thus, reading is arriving at an understanding of the writer’s message or constructing the meaning that a reader ‘‘assimilates or accommodates and bear some level of agreement with the original meaning of the author’’ (Brown, 2007).

Bernhardt (1984) described the typical classroom reading scenario as follows: 1. In the instruction students read aloud and the teacher at the same time corrects faulty pronunciation, a process that Bernhardt believed interferes with comprehending of the passage. 2. Students read the passage 3. They write the answers to questions given in the text. In addition, Bernhardt listed the following characteristics of the reading passage itself: "It contains grammar to be learned, it is accomplished by vocabulary list of the longer words, and it is followed by a list of comprehension questions. Thus, the typical classroom approach to learning to read is one based on the goal of reading to learn language" (Bernhardt, 1984).

7. Teaching Translation to Develop Skills in L2 Reading Comprehension

Bassnett (1998) believed that "translation offers a crucial lesson in how to read, since it is a critical way into the text." She saw it as an effective means of forcing students to read texts thoughtfully and to concentrate on the lexical, grammatical and textual levels, and improving general knowledge, while "unveiling students'
problems in comprehending (English) texts" (Brini, 2000). Teachers can stimulate the development of students’ awareness by paying attention to terminology, register, slang, expression and idioms that may characterize an individual text (Petrocchi, 2006). The teachers should explore the explicit teaching and training of strategies students use in reading L1 texts to help them enhance their understanding of L2 texts (Ebrahimi, 2012). The teachers should improve the quality of English teaching and learning process by producing and using interesting media and strategies (Nurhayati, 2014).

Translation can be a useful tool to analyze comprehension pitfalls, which may lead to problems in discourse processing (Adrabou, 2003). Reading comprehension exams are demanding to assess because they do not allow the instructor to find out how students have gotten their answers, and they don’t take into account students' comprehension or interpretation of the comprehension questions themselves (Mahmoud, 1998). In the English matriculation exam in Israel (Grabe, 1997), tests that were once designed to have students read the texts in English at first, and then answer the comprehension questions in their L1 were put an end on the grounds that experts believed that these kinds of the tests did not provide the tester with enough evidence to assess the students' level of language production.

In one experiment (Grabe, 1997) teachers delivered Israeli high school students a reading comprehension text that originally had comprehension questions involved, which had been omitted for the purpose of the experiment. The students, who were the best in reading comprehension exercises in the class, were asked only to read the text. When asked if they had comprehended the text, all the students replied positively. However, when asked general questions about:

1. the writer’s purpose
2. the writer's opinion
3. the overall meaning

It revealed that the students’ comprehending of the text had been weak. This discrepancy is seen as originating from the students' habit of depending on questions to "direct" them to making sense of the text, while not taking sufficient taking notice of the deeper meaning of the texts and not thinking independently or critically.

According to Mahmoud (1998) reading comprehension skills need to be taught as a means of teaching a foreign language rather than a means of evaluating the comprehension of the language that was done in the previous methods. Reading skill should be taught in order to make students aware of how meaning is transferred in the L2. If we suppose that there is only one "correct" answer by grading comprehension questions while students read their answers aloud in class or by obliging the teacher mark the exams according to a fixed answer key, then integral pedagogical and linguistic instruments may be disregarded if the teacher accepts the only "right" answer and moves on. Some arguments indicated that sheer labeling an answer as "wrong" may lead to poor application of the text as a means of encouraging critical thinking and awareness (Nuttal, 1982). Another problem
may rise from the complexity and seeming “trickiness” of the question, which students find frustrating (Mahmoud, 1998). If students are required to follow simple instructions such as, "Translate the following passage," they are made to connect the whole text, and there are fewer places for discrepancies. Furthermore, the degree of their comprehension may become clearer through their translation. Because there is not only one possible answer in translation, students may express themselves more freely both verbally and in writing. This probability could encourage collaborative learning; where although there may be a preferred translation, it may not necessarily be considered the only "correct" one.

Translation can be very effective because it encourages students to read texts more carefully and critically as opposed to skimming reading texts to get the main ideas, which they often leave some of the text unread. One of the main goals of translation might be to help students to reach an effective method to comprehend texts, concentrate on their ability to analyze texts in a functional way, enabling them to determine meaning, and equipping them with methodology when faced with matters such as polysemy, dictionary consultation, usage, etc. (Brini, 2000). In response to Gefen's proposal to teach Translation Skills in high schools, Shohamy claimed that translation can be used as a means to check reading or listening comprehension is a "very useful and effective technique" (Gefen 1982).

8. Conclusion

This article elaborates on different aspects of reading skill and its teaching and learning strategies. Reading comprehension can be considered as mother skill among the others. Teaching reading comprehension to EFL students has always been an important concern in language teaching. It is a field about which everyone seems to have an opinion. Some scholars in the field of ELT maintain that reading comprehension should be taught through second language in the classroom, some others scholars state that it should be taught through the first language as well as second language. This is while some other L2 teachers and researchers assert that when there is a proper level of proficiency; L1 can facilitate the process of learning and comprehending. In other words, they argue that when students are proficient enough, reading comprehension should be taught to them through the channel of first language. Most language teachers realize that there is no such thing as “the best teaching method” and therefore, few professionals in the field today persist in using only one approach or one method. On the contrary, despite the restrictions and constrains upon certain teaching techniques and procedures, teachers should try to be as flexible as possible in choosing the teaching techniques which will enable them most effectively to achieve their main goal: to give students both grammatical accuracy and communicative proficiency in a foreign language. Translation is an alternative which can contribute to the successful realization of teaching goals and be used effectively to promote foreign or second language.

References


