

Development Factors Influencing Reading Comprehension

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to consider the developmental factors that affect the development of reading comprehension. ESL Students at schools are daily exposed to too many different texts to read. Reading is the sole tool for the students to enhance their knowledge and hence understand the different subjects they read. Reading often constitutes the basis of follow-up work such as classroom discussion or assignments to be done at homes. For these reasons it is essential that ESL students are helped as much as possible and necessary to understand what they read. Scores of ESL students, often, waste a great deal of precious time trying to make sense of texts that are too difficult for them. It is not unusual for a student to read a text carefully for over a couple of hours with a dictionary and still not understand it very well. However, with a little support their exasperating reading experience can be turned into a more constructive one.

Key words: reading comprehension, developmental, constructive experience

INTRODUCTION

Durkin (1993) states that intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and

reader. Durkin (1993). On the other hand, Hodges (1995) confirms that reading comprehension is “the construction of the meaning of a written text through a reciprocal interchange of ideas between the reader and the message in a particular text.”

ESL learners are plagued by quite a number of texts to read. Reading, undoubtedly, accounts for much of the knowledge they acquire and further boost their understanding of the different disciplines they are likely to come across. Consequently, understanding written texts is remarkably linked with reading.

Syntactic structures, in the present study will form the point of departure in examining the factors that pose difficulties or challenges for learners to have a good grasp of the written texts. Scores of students waste such a precious time in understanding written texts as they mainly rely on dictionaries to clarify the intricacies with which a written text is marred. Without a doubt, there are other factors besides semantic ones, which can actually prevent them from making any sense of a written text.

Having a good knowledge of syntactic structures, for understanding written texts, is as important as enjoying large stock of word-power. Understanding how adjectives are used in written texts can sometimes prove much more useful than a dictionary. It is not unusual for a student to pore over a text for many hours with a dictionary and still not understand it very well. However, if their attention is drawn to other factors that had the effect of impeding their understanding, this could have turned their frustrating experience of reading a written text into a more pleasurable and profitable one.

For these reasons, it is essential that ESL students are helped as much as possible with the syntactic structures found in the written texts and even trained to recognize and handle them.

Reading and understanding written texts are two inseparable experiences. Proficient comprehension of text is

influenced by a number of factors. On top of these is the accurate and fluent word reading skills. However, there are other factors hardly researchers stop to think over. They are linked with syntactic structures. By detecting the syntactic structures, handling them carefully and efficiently, the researcher, seeks to suggest to the mainstream teachers to help their students become effective readers.

CLARITY OF WRITING THE TEXT

To clarify this point quite considerably, there are numerous factors responsible for rendering a written text inexplicable or difficult to grasp. Apart from linguistic factors, obvious difficulty relates to the legibility of a text. ESL students may have problems that are caused solely by the fact that what they are trying to understand has been poorly printed or copied, and is badly set-out or is in a very small type-face.

DIFFICULT WORDS

Another factor which can account for difficulty in a written message is the use of unfamiliar words, as for example in such a sentence: *His radical views place him outside the mainstream of American politics.* The words *radical* and *mainstream* can pose some challenges to some learners, hence detriment their understanding of perhaps the whole text.

WORLD OR BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Yet, a further hurdle can be posed in cases where the necessary background knowledge is not there. Unless the student has a fundamental understanding of statistics, for example, there is little point for him/her looking up the unknown words in the following passage since the definitions are unlikely to further comprehension. Consider the following example:

To minimize two unknowns we differentiate with respect to each variable in turn treating the other variable as a constant. The process is called partial differentiation and the notation used is standard.

COMPLEX NOTIONS

Some of the awkward factors that detrimentally hurdle understanding is the difficulty of the concept a learner has to deal with. Abstract or highly philosophical concepts that relate to arts or supernatural world can hardly be understood. Let us consider the following example,

The appeal of the view that a work of art expresses nothing unless what it expresses can be put into words can be reduced by setting beside it another view, no less popular in the theory of art, that a work of art has no value if what it expresses can be put into words.

The words in themselves are not excessively difficult and no special background knowledge is requisite, but the concept expressed in the passage is multifaceted, hence proved difficult to grasp.

COMPLEX SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES

The text cited above about art is also difficult due to its syntactic complexity. In general, long sentences containing subordinate or embedded clauses tend to be less immediately intelligible than shorter, simpler ones. For example, the second instruction below is probably more readily understood than the first, which contains an embedded participial clause.

Desiring rest, I lay down in the shade
I lay down in the shade to rest

Verbal nouns constitute specific difficulty to understanding as they can be subject or object of a verb, be governed by a

preposition or qualified by an adjective. It may also in its capacity as a verb representing an action, take an object.

- Early *rising* is good for the health (subject)
- The secret of success is *knowing* what is likely to happen (complement)
- I hate *waiting* at a railway station for the train to arrive.

NOMINALIZATION

This grammatical term refers to the use of a noun in combination with a modal verb. Such kind of application is a feature which characterizes academic language and hence causes difficulty of understanding for ESL learners. Consider the following example, where the first fragment is the same as the second, however the second which carries the element of nominalization is much more difficult:

*We **concluded** that pH determined the rate*

*A **conclusion** was reached that pH determined the rate.*

POLYSEMY

Polysemy is the association of one word with two or more distinct meanings. A *polyseme* is a word or phrase with multiple meanings. Adjective: *polysemous* or *polysemic*. In contrast, a one-to-one match between a word and a meaning is called *monosemy*. According to William Croft, "Monosemy is probably most clearly found in specialized vocabulary dealing with technical topics" (*The Handbook of Linguistics*, 2003).

Polysemous can cause difficulty if the student has learned one meaning of the word, but the word has a different meaning in the context of the sentence the student is reading. An example is the word *solution* which can mean either the answer to a problem or a mixture of two substances. Mathematics is full of words that ESL students are likely to

have learned first with their everyday meaning: *table, mean, power, even, volume, root, etc.*

Jokes and puns are frequently based on the polysemous nature of the words they contain, which is why they are usually so difficult for ESL students. A good example can be found in the following:

BANKS, PUPILS, AND BATS

Sports Illustrated can be bought for 1 dollar or 35 million dollars; the first is something you can read and later start a fire with, the second is a particular company that produces the magazine you just read. Such **polysemy** can give rise to a special ambiguity (*He left the bank five minutes ago, He left the bank five years ago*). Sometimes dictionaries use history to decide whether a particular entry is a case of one word with two related meanings, or two separate words, but this can be tricky. Even though *pupil* (eye) and *pupil* (student) are historically linked, they are intuitively as unrelated as *bat* (implement) and *bat* (animal)."

POLYSEMY IN ADVERTISING

"Common **polysemic** puns involve words like *bright, naturally, clearly*, where the advertiser will want both meanings. This headline ran above a picture of a sheep:

Take it from the manufacturer.

Wool. It's worth more. Naturally.

(American Wool Council, 1980)

Here the pun is a way of attributing wool, not to a manufacturing industry, but to nature." (Greg Myers, *Words in Ads*. Routledge, 1994

WORKING MEMORY

Working memory can be thought of as a *mental workspace* where new information is held briefly before being transferred to higher level language and executive functions. Reading comprehension tasks can place enormous strain on a learner's working memory capacity, particularly if the learner has poor language skills. So, for the tutors to help develop their students' working memories they have to do something about the working memory by devising certain strategies or activities.

INFERRING

Research indicates that learners with reading comprehension problems have poor inference skills. To infer what's happening in a story is a vital cognitive skill. It enables the reader to go beyond surface meaning of a text and to go deep and discover the author's concealed meaning. Thus, Inferring is such a vital strategy which should be reinforced.

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