

Implementing Reading Comprehension Activities to Promote Foreign Language Vocabulary Acquisition: Case study - Albania

IRENA SHEHU

PhD Candidate

European University of Tirana, Albania

Abstract:

Reading is an important factor with a great impact on language acquisition. Reading is not only regarded as the main contributor of the vocabulary acquisition but also of the grammar too, in this way contributing to the main elements of language learning. Thus this paper presents on the effect of reading activities on second language development.

The objective of this study is to investigate the role of exercises in reading comprehension on learning vocabulary through word-focused activities

There have been a lot of views and theories about second language vocabulary acquisition through reading. Since Reading Comprehension involves a lot of vocabulary activities it is quite evident that students benefit a lot in this context. SLA theories consider comprehension to be an important factor in language acquisition, arguing that L2 input must be decoded in some comprehensible fashion in order for learning outcomes to occur e.g. Cook, 2001; Gass, 1997; Krashen, 1985; Sharwood Smith, 1986; VanPatten, 1996).

This study is focused on the Albanian Context. The participants were 80 high school students. First they were given a list of new target words and asked them to define the meaning to make it sure that all participants were unfamiliar with the target words. Second we divided students on two groups, and they were named Group A, Group B. Each group then read and analyze a text each week during eight weeks. All the texts were the same for both groups but

exercises were not. Group A, the comprehension questions consists of vocabulary activities while group B questions consisted of only general comprehension questions. In the end students were asked again to define the list of new words given at the beginning.

The results showed that reading in general has an effect on vocabulary acquisition, but vocabulary activities reinforce more this fact. Group A showed to have better results than Group B, but nevertheless reading has a great impact in language acquisition.

Key words: Reading comprehension, comprehension question, vocabulary acquisition, word focused activities

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language, especially English has recently become a phenomenon. The number of those who are in the process of learning a foreign language is increasing day by day, so we are going to the result that foreign languages have become a great necessity.

Its importance has reached high levels even from the policies undertaken by the government during the last years. The fact that each high school student should submit an English Test in order to graduate, and that each undergraduate should sit an English Test before they are MsC or PhD graduates are significant indicator f this.

Based on these evidences, it is to be highlighted that acquiring a foreign language is an important and at the same time very difficult and problematic process. To reach effective results, detailed studies are important, highlighting difficulties and problems faced on the way, reasons that cause these difficulties, and at the same time, finding facilitating methods and approaches. Certainly, such a study would be difficult almost impossible to be developed, so reading and text analysis (as an aspect of foreign language acquisition) will be on the focus of this study.

Why reading? First of all, because reading is the core basis of teaching methodology of foreign languages, such as: use of texts for language courses, writing, repetition, development of vocabulary, grammar etc. Such, reading is crucial component in any foreign languages teaching program, thus this study is focused in text reading and comprehension. For satisfying results during foreign language teaching methodology it is very important to understand some facts related to reading and writing.

According to surveys and State Matura Exams results, one of the problems in foreign language acquisition is still text analysis, said different, the difficulty that students face to understand a text, esp., to answer comprehensive questions about that text.

Reading plays an important role in the acquisition of vocabulary, cultural aspect, grammar, by developing the counterpillars of teaching language, lexic, grammar, and cultural context. This study is mostly based on reading and exercises done to analyze a text in teaching and enhancing the vocabulary.

Through this study, we aim to present different facilitating approaches and techniques to analyze and understand texts and literature in foreign language, which then contributes to foreign language acquisition, especially English language.

It is important to mention the importance of this study, as it may be helpful to several individuals interested in the field: academics, students, pupils, teachers or professors, because it represents a mirror of reading and text analysis as processes, enhancing its role in the acquisition of a language, difficulties, as well as appropriate strategies and techniques to make the process as easy and as effective as possible.

2. Scope of the study

As mentioned above, successful reading is the basis of all teaching methodology process, because then we can read and understand materials in other fields. The role of reading and understanding a text in a foreign language is crucial. In order to understand this, we should first analyze the process of reading as a whole, after, find the position that text analysis has on learning a language, as first objective of this study.

The other objective is more important and more specific. it consists in the importance of exercises and questionnaires in vocabulary acquisition.

According to previous studies, reading as a process plays an important role in language acquisition, especially reading.

The term “foreign language” is too broad and includes a variety of elements, but this study is generally focused on learning and broadening the vocabulary. Another element is the analysis of a text, composition of questions and exercises to a text. Questions and exercises over lexic raise the knowledge of students over language and words. Students are more probable to learn the meaning of new words when teachers stress the words and label them in the questions and comments. Obviously, different studies support this theory, as the most important in the group of theories Second Language Acquisition Theories (SLA Theories). Such theories consider text analysis an important feature on language acquisition, consequently vocabulary enhancement. Here we can mention important authors such as: Kook, 2001; Gass, 1997; Krashen, 1985; Sharwood Smith, 1986; VanPatten, 1996).

Other authors to mention are Ard and Beverly (2004), two distinctive researchers, who defined the fact that students’ awareness and memory over “new words” is increased when teachers ask questions and comments on their meaning.

Other researchers such as Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, dhe Cook (2009) studied the effect of questions the teacher made during the lesson. They developed two experiments: the first one to assess the effect that different questions might have during vocabulary acquisition, and the second to assess the impact of well-structured questions while students become familiar with the words.

Results have shown that students reached very good results in learning new words if the questions were well-structured, that means, teachers start with easy questions, and then raising the level of difficulty.

Other important researchers support the idea that students can enhance vocabulary knowledge through text analysis, in other terms questions about the text. Biemiller and Boote, who conducted a study over words frequencies during reading and text analyzing in 2006 verified the hypothesis that if target words are often repeated during exercises on text analysis, then it will be easier for students to remember and consequently learn the words.

Such studies may raise questions like, if these theories find space in the Albanian context?

Precisely, this is the aim of this study, evidentionation of the scope of reading and methodology of analyzing a text except from vocabulary acquisition.

The two main objectives of this study are:

1. to identify the connection between text analysis and vocabulary acquisition of the foreign language
2. to identify the role of text analysis type, methodology of question sentence-structure and exercises in acquiring the vocabulary of a foreign language.

3. Research inquiry, hypothesis and research methodology

Research inquiry is the key to a proper scientific research. This study is based in two important research inquiries. The first inquiry is about a more general aspect like the role of Reading Comprehension in Second Language Acquisition. Otherwise stating: which is the role of Reading Comprehension in Second Language Acquisition?

While the second inquiry is about a more specific aspect: Which is the role of reading Comprehension activities in Vocabulary acquisition?

4. Hypothesis

Since this study is based on two important research inquiries, therefore there are two hypotheses.

Hypothesis A:

If the students are engaged more on foreign language Reading Comprehension activities, then they will have better results in acquiring that language.

Hypothesis B:

If the Reading Comprehension activities consist of well structured questions, open ones focusing on vocabulary then it will be a higher probability for the students to learn new words.

5. What is the process of Reading Comprehension?

Reading

Reading is the process of thinking in conscious and unconscious manner and the reader applies a lot of strategies to create the meaning that the author of the text has intended to. The reader can do this by comparing the information he or she gets from

the text with the information or experience he or she already had.

“Reading is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them. When we read, we use our eyes to receive written symbols (letters, punctuation marks and spaces) and we use our brain to convert them into words, sentences and paragraphs that communicate something to us.”¹

Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension is the process of understanding what we are reading. Based on the definition we can say that this is a very simple process but in fact it is not, on the contrary it is considered one of the most difficult processes to be taught. This process includes three important stages, before, during and after reading a text.

When a person reads a text he is engaged in complex cognitive process. He uses simultaneously his knowledge about phones, phonetics and the skills to construct a meaning form the text.

The process of Reading Comprehension consists of two elements: vocabulary knowledge and understanding of the text. As Stephan Krashen has stated in his input Hypotheses: The best way to acquire and enrich the vocabulary is through reading.

6. The relationship between Reading Comprehension activities and vocabulary acquisition

According to Kamil & Hiebert, 2005 Vocabulary is generically defined as the knowledge of words and word meanings. More specifically, we use vocabulary to refer to the kind of words that students must know to read increasingly demanding text with

¹Elisabet Gómez Ilsa González Nancy Quezada- “TESTING READING”, Slideshare presentation)

comprehension (). It is something that expands and deepens over time.

Concerning its relationship to Reading Comprehension, we can say, that yes, it is a strong relationship between them, and this relationship is strengthened by reading Comprehension activities; that is to say exercises and questions about a certain text.

For this we referred to The National Reading Panel (NRP) 2000– a group of researchers who came together to study the process of reading comprehension and its impact on several fields.

Concerning the field of vocabulary acquisition, The National Reading Panel identified vocabulary as one of five major components of reading. According to The National Reading Panel (NRP) vocabulary is regarded as a great contributor for both, learning to read and comprehending text: readers cannot understand text without knowing what most of the words mean.

The NRP's synthesis of vocabulary research identified eight findings that provide a scientifically based foundation for the design of rich, multifaceted vocabulary instruction.² The findings are:

- **Provide direct instruction of vocabulary words for a specific text.** Anderson and Nagy (1991) pointed out “there are precise words children may need to know in order to comprehend particular lessons or subject matter.”
- **Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important.** Stahl (2005) cautioned against “mere repetition or drill of the word,” emphasizing that vocabulary instruction should provide students with opportunities to encounter words repeatedly and in a variety of contexts.

² The above findings are developed by: The National Reading Technical Assistance Center, RMC Research Corporation. A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS “A Review of the Current Research on Vocabulary Instruction” 2010. pg. 1-2

- **Vocabulary words should be those that the learner will find useful in many contexts.** Instruction of high-frequency words known and used by mature language users can add productively to an individual's language ability (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Research suggests that vocabulary learning follows a developmental trajectory (Biemiller, 2001).
- **Vocabulary tasks should be restructured as necessary.** "Once students know what is expected of them in a vocabulary task, they often learn rapidly" (Kamil, 2004).
- **Vocabulary learning is effective when it entails active engagement that goes beyond definitional knowledge.** Stahl and Kapinus (2001) stated, "When children 'know' a word, they not only know the word's definition and its logical relationship with other words, they also know how the word functions in different contexts."
- **Computer technology can be used effectively to help teach vocabulary.** Encouragement exists but relatively few specific instructional applications can be gleaned from the research (NICHD, 2000)
- **Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning.** Reading volume is very important in terms of long-term vocabulary development (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). In later work, Cunningham (2005) further recommended structured read-alouds, discussion sessions and independent reading experiences at school and home to encourage vocabulary growth in students.
- **Dependence on a single vocabulary instruction method will not result in optimal learning (NICHD, 2000)**

7. Methodology

This study is focused on the Albanian Context. The participants were 80 high school students. First they were given a list of new target words and asked them to define the meaning to make it sure that all participants were unfamiliar with the

target words. Second we divided students on two groups, and they were named Group A, Group B. Each group then read and analyze a text each week during eight weeks. All the texts were the same for both groups but exercises were not. Group A, the comprehension questions consists of vocabulary activities while group B questions consisted of only general comprehension questions. In the end students were asked again to define the list of new words given at the beginning.

Procedures

Initially, observations in different teaching environments were made during English classes, obviously to the agreement of teachers. These studies were conducted to view the way an English Class, where reading and text analysis is on the focus, is organized, the way how students answer questions and their engagement in other such activities. This contributed in creating new valuable ideas that helped as a reference point to this study.

The second step is Focus Group, being that it is a very important method that provides a good contribute in results. A focus group is a group of English Teachers, who give opinions and share experiences regarding the process of reading and text analyzing of a foreign language. Participants in this study have been 6 High School English teachers, of years of experience with these students of same age, from X to XII grade, and their ideas, discussions, and experiences have been very worthwhile to the satisfying results of this study.

The third step is the precise work done with the students, focusing in the principal issue that is identification of the role of text analysis in vocabulary acquisition. Comparison methodology has been used to reach this.

Sample

80 students of "*Havzi Nela*" High Schools in Kukës, of different grades and levels were chosen as participants of this study.

Procedures

Initially, they were given a list of words to be defined, which were target in the texts used for the realization of the study, to be sure that they do not know these words. Students were asked to put a letter A, B or C next to each word, which would then refer to:

A- I have never crossed this word before

B- I have crossed the word but I don't know its meaning

C- I know the meaning of this word (translate it)

The target word list is given below:

<i>Blizzard</i>	<i>Hunger</i>	<i>dripping</i>
<i>Accustomed</i>	<i>squatting</i>	<i>embarrassed</i>
<i>Infrequent</i>	<i>prepping</i>	<i>wry</i>
<i>Splendid</i>	<i>creep</i>	<i>juvenile</i>
<i>Snow gears occur</i>	<i>cursory</i>	<i>shaky</i>
<i>Hyphen</i>	<i>literally</i>	<i>murder</i>
<i>Back rub</i>	<i>materialize</i>	<i>demand</i>
<i>Puzzled</i>	<i>enamored</i>	<i>handcuff</i>
<i>Humble</i>	<i>covert</i>	<i>handle</i>
<i>Worth it</i>	<i>culprit</i>	<i>case</i>
<i>Postmark</i>	<i>trajectory</i>	<i>protracted</i>
<i>Profound</i>	<i>trigger</i>	<i>boon</i>
<i>Sliding</i>	<i>self absorbed</i>	<i>frivolous</i>
<i>Ornament</i>	<i>bartered</i>	<i>florid</i>
<i>Pine needles</i>	<i>peek</i>	<i>hardship</i>
<i>Sprinkle</i>	<i>strained</i>	<i>foster</i>
<i>Topple</i>	<i>stealthily</i>	<i>suffice</i>
<i>Fortuitous</i>	<i>eschewing</i>	<i>beseech</i>
<i>Avert</i>	<i>innocuous</i>	<i>worthwhile</i>
<i>Splay</i>	<i>condescension</i>	<i>obtuse</i>
<i>Labor</i>	<i>glance</i>	
<i>Saw</i>	<i>perched</i>	

Students then were divided in two groups, *Group A* and *Group B*.

Each of them read and analyzed a text on one week for eight weeks in total. The texts were the same but exercises

different. Group A was given exercises focused on vocabulary and Group B on general comprehension of the text. In the end of the eight weeks students were given the list of words (above mentioned) to define each of them.

The texts chosen were of different levels, medium and over medium, being the fact that students of the High School belong to these levels. Special attention was also given to the choice of subjects, including different cultural, grammatical and linguistic aspects. Such way, the only-one-direction subject study was avoided, and at the same time, vocabulary could be enhanced, as it is the aim of this study.

The source of texts is the web page: <http://www.englishforeveryone.org/Topics/ReadingComprehension.htm>

After many discussions and in cooperation with the students chosen as participants, and teachers as leaders the following texts were chosen and here we mention them according to the level of difficulty, starting from medium level to advanced level.

Week 1: "Worth Working For" – pre-intermediate level

Week 2: "A Day Like No Other"- intermediate level

Week 3: "A Christmas in March"- intermediate level

Week 4: "Blizzard in Birmingham" –upper intermediate level

Week 5: "BB" Reading Comprehension - upper intermediate level

Week 6:- "City Girl"- Short Story- advanced level

Week 7: "Seeing clearly"- advanced level

Week 8: "Museum hours" – proficiency

For each text, two different type of questions were designed, precisely for each group, a model of which is shown below:

The model corresponds to "Blizzard in Birmingham" analyzed during the fourth week.

Group A:

- 1) As used at the beginning of the story, what does "accustomed" mean?
A. used to B. aware of C. scared of D. interested in
- 2) As used at the beginning of the story, which is the best antonym for "infrequent"?
A. common B. long C. rare D. surprising
- 3) Which other title would best fit this passage
A. "1993" B. "A Cold March" C. "Magical Snow" D. "Ill-Prepared Parents"
- 4) As used at the end of the story, which is the best antonym for "splendid"?
A. great B. perfect C. happy D. terrible
- 5) What conclusions can be drawn about what the weather is typically like in Birmingham during the month of March? I. It is warm. II. With blizzards. III. It is windy
A. I only B. I and II C. II and III D. I, II, and III
- 6) Using the passage as a guide, which best describes the meaning of "Forty is the new twenty"?
A. If you are in good shape and health, being 40 can feel like 20. B. When people turn 40, they are likely to say they are in their 20s. C. If you are 20 and are not in great shape, you can feel like you are 40. D. If you stay away from junk food, you can look 40 even when you are 20.

Group B:

- 1) The author may have described the storm as magical because:
A. Lily Mae believed the snow was magic B. it was such an unusual thing to happen that it felt like magic C. there was no other explanation for why the storm occurred D. the author wanted to cast doubt on whether the storm actually took place
- 2) How are the children different than the adults in this passage? **A. The kids stayed warm, while the adults were very cold. B. The kids knew the storm was coming, while the adults did not. C. The kids went out and had fun, while the adults did not know what to do. D. The adults still had to go to work, while the kids stayed home.**
- 3) What can be said about the Turner kids' ideas for playing in the snow without the usual snow gear? I. They were creative. II. They were effective. III. They were complicated.
A. I only B. I and II C. II and III D. I, II, and III
- 4) What was going on outside of Birmingham during the snowstorm?

A. The rest of the country was also dealing with snow. B. Nothing—Birmingham was the only area affected by the storm. C. The Eastern United States was also hit by the storm. D. The passage does not provide enough information to say.

5) "What was funny was that even the slightest bit of snow was enough to cancel school and close businesses." "No one knew how to drive in the stuff." Which of the following punctuation marks could best be used to combine the above sentences

A. a comma (,) B. a semicolon (;) C. an ellipsis (...) D. a hyphen (-)

It is to be mentioned that a similar model has been conducted by the researchers Nash & Snowling in 2006. On the focus of their study was the methodology of vocabulary acquisition through definitions, or text reading and comprehension (answering questions based on the context). Different from our study, the focus was on 24 children, it lasted 3 months, observing the two groups, and in the end, the contextual methodology resulted more effective in learning and enhancing vocabulary.

8. Analysis and interpretation of data

Let us compare the results of the list of target words used in the beginning and end of the study:

Test of words in the beginning of study:

Total words: 65

Total students: 80

Total-----5200 answers A, B, or C

Results:

Answer A (I have never crossed this word before) - 1920-----24 words- 30 students

Answer B (I have crossed the word but I don't know its meaning) - 2720-----34 words- 41 students

Answer C (I know the meaning of this word (translate it))-560 -----7 words—9 students

Test of words in the end of study:

In the end of the study students were asked to translate the list of the target words. 80 students in total, respectively 40 for each group, results are as follows:

Group A -40 students: 20 students already knew all the words
15 students results to 2- 5 unknown words
5 students resulted to more than 5 unknown words

Group B-40 students: 5 students already knew all the words
15 students results to more than10 unknown words
10 students results to more than 5 unknown words
10 students results to 1- 5 unknown words

In Total: 25 students managed to define all the words of the list
25 didn't reach to define 1-5 words
15 students resulted to more than 5 unknown words
10 students resulted to more than 10 unknown words

Based on the above data we can reach the conclusion that reading and text analysis, obviously play an important role in vocabulary acquisition of a foreign language, and both groups showed satisfactory results but Group A was more successful, highlighting the fact that text analysis and comprehension is more helpful in vocabulary acquisition.

9. Conclusion/Recommendations

Reading and text analysis, precisely exercises and questions over texts provide a great contribute to foreign language acquisition. Definitely, the term "Foreign Language" is a large term and contains a series of elements, and that is where we focus, on the crucial element: lexic (vocabulary).

So, the aim is to identify the role of reading and text analysis while learning new vocabulary of a language, through the two approaches: Focus Group and Methodology of Comparison.

Relating from the above data, reached from the study conducted with two groups of students, using same texts but different approaches and questions to analyze, and where the results were achieved through a target words' list, these results showed that reading and text analysis play a very important role in vocabulary acquisition, and both groups had good results but Group was more successful, highlighting the fact that text analysis and comprehension is more helpful in vocabulary acquisition.

Recommendations:

We can mention the following point of reference as recommendations:

1. Usage of questions focusing on lexic/vocabulary
2. Underlining and analyzing the new words in the beginning of class and repetition in the end.
3. Usage of new words in different contexts of our everyday life and real situations.
4. Motivation of students in reading and exercises over reading.

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