



Teaching Reading Comprehension to ESL/EFL Learners

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Abstract

Research conducted over the last three decades has changed our view of reading as a mere process of decoding. As Carrell and Eisterhold state EFL/ESL reading theory has been influenced during the past decades by Goodman (from the mid- to late 1970s) who views reading as a “guessing game” in which the “reader reconstructs, as best as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer.” (1983, p. 554) As Grabe describes Goodman’s perception of reading which is seen as an

active process of comprehending [where] students need to be taught strategies to read more efficiently (e. g., guess from context, define expectations, make inferences about the text, skim ahead to fill in the context, etc. (1991, p. 377)

Paran opposes Goodman’s view of reading as an “activity involving constant guesses that are later rejected or confirmed. This means that one does not read all the sentences in the same way, but one relies on a number of words – or ‘cues’ - to get an idea of what kind of sentence (e.g. an explanation) is likely to follow” (1996, p.25). Zhang (1993) explains that Afflarbach compares comprehension process to hypothesis testing (or draft-and-revision) where the reader arrives at the main idea after revising the initial hypothesis, provided the reader has adequate background knowledge.

Moreover, research and practice in TESOL was greatly influenced by Stephen Krashen’s hypotheses on language acquisition, and particularly the effect of “the Schema Theory” on studies dealing with reading comprehension. Today, a growing body of empirical research attests to the role of schemata in EFL/ESL reading comprehension. Most of the research was made on reading comprehension of the first language. However, insights were adapted to suit SL reading comprehension studies. Most important of all, specific attention is given to interactive approaches to reading, which argue that reading comprehension is a combination of identification and interpretation skills. Grabe (1991) lists the five most important areas of current research which are still prominent: “schema theory, language skills and automaticity, vocabulary development, comprehension strategy training, and reading-writing relations” (p. 375) Automaticity may be defined as “occurring when the reader is unaware of the process, not consciously controlling the process, and using little processing capacity. (ibid, p. 379-380)

In this paper, I will discuss briefly the tenets of reading comprehension, the cognitive tasks involved in reading as well as the various activities teachers use in teaching reading comprehension. Current research believes that lack of automaticity in “lower-level processing” (i.e. automatic lexical access through bottom-up process) leads to poor-skilled reading. Consequently, most current versions of interactive approaches to reading have taken a strong bottom-up orientation to the processing of lower-level linguistic structure through extensive research of eye movement. Researchers believe that “most words are recognized before higher-level (non-automatic) context information can be used to influence lexical access.” (ibid: 385)

Definition of Reading

Reading can be seen as an “interactive” process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity or (reading fluency). In this process, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as he/she tries to elicit the meaning and where various kinds of knowledge are being used: linguistic or systemic knowledge (through bottom-up processing) as well as schematic knowledge (through top-down processing). Since reading is a complex process, Grabe argues that “many researchers attempt to understand and explain the fluent reading process by analyzing the process into a set of component skills” (1991, p. 379) in reading; consequently researchers proposed at least six general component skills and knowledge areas:

1. Automatic recognition skills
2. Vocabulary and structural knowledge
3. Formal discourse structure knowledge
4. Content/world background knowledge
5. Synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies
6. Metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring

The Cognitive Tasks Involved in Reading

Carrell and Eisterhold outline the processes involved in this interactive process where both bottom-up and top-down processing occur simultaneously at all levels:

The data that are needed to *instantiate*, or fill out, the schemata become available through bottom-up processing; top-down processing facilitates their assimilation if they are anticipated by or consistent with the listener/reader’s conceptual expectations. Bottom-up processing ensures that the listeners/readers will be sensitive to information that is novel or that does not fit their ongoing hypotheses about the content or structure of the text; top-down processing helps the listeners/readers to resolve ambiguities or to select between alternative possible interpretations of the incoming data. (1983, p. 557)

Researchers, however, are still investigating the ways through which these two kinds of knowledge interact with each other during the process of reading. Jeanne S. Chall, an advocate of the phonics approach, is known for her continued struggle with the war between “those advocating phonics instruction [bottom-up processing] and those advocating whole language [top-down processing], which relies in part on instruction using sight words.” (Abraham, 2002, p. 1) Chall argues that a “systematic direct teaching of decoding should be part of initial reading instruction” (Orasanu, 1986, p.

114). Other bottom-up theorists included Gough (1972), LaBerge and Samuels (1974). Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) state that accessing appropriate content schemata depends initially on “the graphic display” which “must be somehow reconstructed by the reader as meaningful language” (p. 562). Therefore, readers can improve reading comprehension by expanding their vocabularies and gaining greater control over complex syntactic structures. Contemporary insights believe that grammar facilitates learning and its presentations to learners should be through “contextualization of linguistic forms in situations of natural use” (Hedge, 2003, p. 159)

Iversen & Tunmer list the five stages for developing word recognition which were proposed by Spencer and Hay:

- i) glance and guess;
- ii) sophisticated guessing;
- iii) simple phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences (e.g. letter sounding out);
- iv) recognition of analogy (recognition of word patterns within a word, such as *and* in *sand*);
- v) later word recognition, involving compound words and syllabification (e.g. recognising playground as play plus ground). (Spencer & Hay, 1998, p. 223)

When a child is confronted with an unfamiliar word, he/she is first encouraged to look into the word for familiar letter and spelling patterns, and then to use context as back up support to confirm hypotheses as to what that word might be, e.g. make is *m* plus *ake*, as cake is *c* plus *ake*.

Moorman and Ram (1994, p. 646) propose their functional theory which aims at describing the cognitive tasks involved in reading through the ISAAC (Integrated Story Analysis and Creativity) system.

Types of Reading

Extensive Reading

There have been conflicting definitions of the term “extensive reading.” (Hedge, 2003, p. 202) Some use it to refer to describe “skimming and scanning activities,” others associate it to quantity of material. Hafiz and Tudor state that:

the pedagogical value attributed to extensive reading is based on the assumption that exposing learners to large quantities of meaningful and interesting L2 material will, in the long run, produce a beneficial effect on the learners’ command of the L2. (1989, p. 5)

Inspired by Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, researchers have shown renewed interest in extensive reading in recent years. This is seen most clearly in various trends adopted by ELT institutions. Students are urged to read independently by using the resources within their reach (Hedge, 2003, p. 200-201). Besides, there has been a growing interest in researching the value of extensive reading. Hafiz and Tudor (1989) conducted a three-month extensive reading programme as an extra activity. The subjects were Pakistani ESL learners in a UK school and their parents were manual workers with limited formal education. The results showed a marked

improvement in the performance of the experimental subjects, especially in terms of their writing skills. The subjects' progress in writing skills may be due in part to "exposure to a range of lexical, syntactic, and textual features in the reading materials" as well as the nature of "the pleasure-oriented extensive reading." (Hafiz & Tudor, p. 8)

Hedge believes that extensive reading varies according to students' motivation and school resources. A well-motivated and trained teacher will be able to choose suitable handouts or activities books for the students. *The Reading Teacher* journal, for example, publishes a list (Appendix A) every November of over 300 newly published books for children and adolescents that have been reviewed and recommended by teachers.

Hedge (2003) also states that since extensive reading helps in developing reading ability, it should be built into an EFL/ESL programmes provided the selected texts are "authentic" – i.e. "not written for language learners and published in the original language" (p. 218)- and "graded". Teachers with EFL/ESL learners at low levels can either use "pedagogic" or "adapted" texts. Moreover, extensive reading enables learners to achieve their independency by reading either in class or at home, through sustained silent reading (SSR). Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) argue that SSR activity can be effective in helping learners become self-directed agents seeking meaning provided an SSR program is "based on student-selected texts so that the students will be interested in what they are reading. Students select their own reading texts with respect to content, level of difficulty, and length." (p. 567)

Hedge (2003), however, argues that one is not sure whether Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis "facilitates intake" in SL learners since "it is difficult to know exactly how any learner will actually use the input available" (p. 204). However, "it can be seen as an input-enabling activity." (*ibid*) No one can deny the fact that extensive reading helps greatly in "exposing" SL learners to English and especially when the class time is limited. Hedge briefs the advantages of extensive use in the following lines:

Learners can build their language competence, progress in their reading ability, become more independent in their studies, acquire cultural knowledge, and develop confidence and motivation to carry on learning. (*ibid*, p. 204-205)

Intensive Reading

In intensive (or creative) reading, students usually read a page to explore the meaning and to be acquainted with writing mechanisms. Hedge argues that it is "only through more extensive reading that learners can gain substantial practice in operating these strategies more independently on a range of materials." (*ibid*, p. 202) These strategies can be either text-related or learner-related: the former includes an awareness of text organization, while the latter includes strategies like linguistic, schematic, and metacognitive strategies. Hafiz and Tudor (1989) differentiate between extensive and intensive reading:

In intensive reading activities learners are in the main exposed to relatively short texts which are used either to exemplify specific aspects of the lexical, syntactic or

discoursal system of the L2, or to provide the basis for targeted reading strategy practice; the goal of extensive reading, on the other hand, is to ‘flood’ learners with large quantities of L2 input with few or possibly no specific tasks to perform on this material. (p. 5)

The importance of teaching reading

Hedge (2003) states that any reading component of an English language course may include a set of learning goals for

- the ability to read a wide range of texts in English. This is the long-range goal most teachers seek to develop through independent readers outside EFL/ESL classroom.
- building a knowledge of language which will facilitate reading ability
- building schematic knowledge.
- the ability to adapt the reading style according to reading purpose (i.e. skimming, scanning)
- developing an awareness of the structure of written texts in English
- taking a critical stance to the contents of the texts

The last goal can be implemented at an advanced level. Students, however, should be kept aware that not all Internet content is authentic since there are no “gate keepers” and anyone can post whatever he/she likes in this cyberspace. Consequently, students can check the authenticity of the text by looking at the following indicators: whether the article gives the name of the author or no, the date of publication, the aim of the article, etc.

The key to Reading Comprehension

Most researches on reading now focus on the effective reading strategies that increase students’ comprehension. Guthrie (1996) argues that most researchers study a single cognitive strategy, rather than conducting a long-term study of multiple strategies. Besides, few studies have addressed the issues related to “motivation” and “engagement”. As Guthrie puts it:

Engaged reading is based on motivational and cognitive characteristics of the reader...who is intrinsically motivated, builds knowledge, uses cognitive strategies, and interacts socially to learn from text. These engagement processes can be observed in student’s cognitive effort, perseverance, and self-direction in reading. (ibid, p. 404)

It is the teacher’s responsibilities to motivate reading by selecting the appropriate materials and especially for those at the early stages of learning. Guthrie and Humenick performed a meta-analysis of studies that manipulated several aspects of intrinsic motivation support for reading. These findings suggest that “meaningful conceptual content in reading instruction increases motivation for reading and text comprehension.” The second motivation-supporting practice showed that students who were provided choice of text performed higher on reading tasks than those with no choice. The third practice was using interesting texts. This conforms to Hedge’s proposal that in selecting task texts, teachers should seek interesting texts and consider variety of topics. Readers’ interest can be revealed by setting “a reading

interest questionnaire” where students check the fields that suit their interest, i.e. short stories, thrillers, science fiction, etc. Since “each learner will have different strengths to build on and different weaknesses to overcome” (Hedge, p. 205), there is no one defined reading methodology. In her functional approach to reading, Moorman & Ram (1994, p. 646) focus on science fiction genre since “stories offer many opportunities for creative reading”.

Carrell et al (1989, p. 647) conducted a study on two metacognitive strategies, semantic mapping (SM) and the experience-text-relationship (ETR) method, to study their effect on SL reading. In semantic mapping, categories and associations are displayed visually in a diagram. Carrell argues that besides “being effective for vocabulary development, semantic mapping has proved to be a good alternative to traditional pre-reading and post-reading activities” (*ibid*, p. 651). In fact, most contemporary reading tasks include pre-reading activities. Therefore, I believe pre-reading activities can be followed by SM strategy since the former aim at increasing learners' motivation. While semantic mapping is used as a tool to assess students' schema, the experience-text-relationship (ETR) method emphasizes comprehension, i.e., reading for meaning. This method is based on discussion aimed at linking what the reader already knows to what he/she will encounter in the text. It has essentially three simple steps: experience, text, and relationship. In the *experience* step, the teacher leads the students in discussion of their own knowledge or experiences that are related in some way to the passage to be read. In the *text* step, students read short parts of the texts, usually a page or two, and the teacher ask them questions about the content after each section is read. In this step, the teacher may also need to correct any misunderstandings of the text evidenced by the students. In the final step, the *relationship* sequence, the teacher attempts to help the students draw relationships between the content of the text (as developed in the *text* step), and their outside experience and knowledge (as discussed in the *experience* step). In all three steps the teacher is attempting to model and to guide the students systematically through the cognitive processes related to understanding a written text. From the results Carrell et al conclude that

...metacognitive strategy training does enhance L2 reading when compared to nonstrategy training, as in the control group [and that] while there are similarities between the two methods in their enhancement of second language reading on some measures, on other measures there are differences between them. Finally, our results show that there are significant interactions between students' learning styles and the effectiveness of training in the two different strategies. (p. 665,668)

Hedge (2003) states that although such small-scale studies need substantiation by “further experimental work”, they have “contributed to ELT methodology in raising awareness about the characteristics of effective language learning” (p. 81).

Activities used in teaching reading

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) argue that for the beginning reader, the Language Experience Approach (LEA) proposed by Rigg in 1981 is an excellent way to control vocabulary, structure, and content. The basic LEA technique uses the students' ideas and the students' own words in the preparation of beginning reading materials. The students decide what they want to say and how to say it, and then dictate to the teacher, who acts as a scribe. LEA works because students tend to be able to read

what they have just said. The students, in effect, write their own texts, neutralizing problems of unfamiliar content. Another way to minimize interference from the text is to encourage narrow reading, as suggested by Krashen. Narrow reading refers to reading that is confined to a single topic or to the texts of a single author. Krashen suggests that narrow reading is more efficient for second language acquisition.

Contemporary reading tasks, unlike the traditional materials, involve three-phase procedures: pre-, while-, and post- reading stages. Zhang briefs that “comprehension is facilitated by explicitly introducing schemata through pre-reading activities” (1993, p.5). Thus the pre-reading stage helps in activating the relevant schema. Most teachers tend to neglect the pre-reading procedure claiming that there is not enough time. In fact, pre-reading activities motivate students before the actual reading takes place. For example, teachers can ask students questions that arouse their interest while previewing the text. Drucker (2003) suggests the following procedure teachers can take before reading a text:

...relate the passage students are going to read to something that is familiar to them. Next, provide a brief discussion question that will engage the students and, after that, provide an overview of the section they are about to read. Name the selection, introduce the characters, and describe the plot (up to, but not including, the climax). Last, direct the students to read the story and look for particular information. (p. 23)

Similarly, Abraham (2002) states that an interactive approach “demands that the teachers activate the students’ schema” during the pre-reading phase by helping “students recognize the knowledge that they already have about the topic of a text” (p. 6), i.e. through discussion of titles, subheadings, photographs, identifying text structure, previewing, etc. Such activities are called “pre-reading strategies”. As Orasanu (1986) explicates the notion of “schema” (or background knowledge) which

... can be thought of as a framework containing slots to be filled by incoming text information. For example, if a reader is presented with a text about going on vacation, he or she would likely have a slot in the vacation schema for packing a suitcase. Text statements about folding clothes or carrying bags could then fill the slot. If a reader did not have a vacation schema with a "suitcase-packing slot," the information about clothes and bags might not be readily understood. (p. 118)

The aim of while-reading stage (or interactive process) is to develop students’ ability in tackling texts by developing their linguistic and schematic knowledge. Hedge (2003) argues that although some oppose the interactive activities carried during the while-reading phase, there are only few research studies that show the “effects of intervention and their outcomes”. Moreover, “many students report positively on the usefulness of while-reading activities.” (ibid, p. 210) On the contrary, Paran (1996) believes that modern interactive reading models enable SL readers to be “less reliant on top-down processing” and enable them to achieve “greater reliance on bottom-up strategies as they become more proficient” (p. 29). It seems that teachers can use a balanced approach to teaching reading by incorporating both top-down and bottom-up processes, provided they are given flexibility in choosing the reading tasks.

Haller (2000, p. 21-24) modeled a number of school-based post-reading activities which enhance learning comprehension through the use of matching exercises, cloze exercises, cut-up sentences, and comprehension questions. For the cloze activity, the teacher puts blanks in the story in place of some of the words, usually every fifth word but not the first or the last words in the text. A cut-up sentence activity uses sentences from the given text and helps learners to gain confidence by manipulating the text in various ways. The use of lines in matching can be sometimes confusing for beginners. Haller proposes the use of “paper strips” at the beginning where a student is given the strips and asked to match for example a name with its corresponding activity. Later students can work in pairs as they understand the concept of matching and, finally, the teacher can introduce matching through lines. For extra practice students can copy their matching word slips onto another sheet of paper.

How to teach reading?

Moorman & Ram (1994) state that although much of the research has been carried out on teaching reading, “yet no theories exist which sufficiently describe and explain how people accomplish the complete task of reading real-world texts” (p. 646). Graesser describes six basic knowledge sources involved with textual comprehension: linguistic, rhetorical, causal, intentional, spatial, and roles, personalities, and objects. The theory, however, lacks a process model for its implementation. Van Dijk and Kintsch proposed their reading model in 1983, but it falls short by being unable to handle creative reading.

Gabb (2000) poses a very important question why learners face difficulties in moving into fluency stage although they have had basic decoding skills. She identifies a number of “barriers” which I believe the most important are limited vocabulary and lack of background knowledge (schematic knowledge). Orasanu (1986) states that “the knowledge a reader brings to a text is a principal determiner of how that text will be comprehended, and what may be learned and remembered” (p. 32). The key aspect to reading fluency is the expansion of vocabulary through the use of word play, puzzles, etc. I believe that beginning readers can expand their vocabulary through phonics, which will at the end help them to become fluent, skillful readers of English texts. As Spencer and Hay (1998) put it:

Word recognition is an essential component in the mastery of reading ...and considerable evidence suggests that the major difficulty confronting the beginning reader is the development of rapid, automatic word recognition skills....Efficient readers use a variety of orthographic data to recognise word units, such as individual letters, letter clusters, morphemes, word stems, and word patterns. (p. 222)

This will help them tackle the phoneme-grapheme irregularities found in English. Besides course books built on “word-frequency counting” are useful for SL learners. Hedge (2003) explains that the most used frequency list is that of M West (1953), which has some 2000 headwords. Most researchers, however, stress the need for presenting vocabularies in context because isolated words do not present a linguistic or a psychological reality. As Spencer & Hay (1998) remark:

In particular, children with reading difficulties need to see the high frequency words in context if they are to better comprehend how written language works. Once children have mastery of even a few automatic words they should be exposed to more text that will support and utilise that group of known words. (p. 224)

Drucker (2003) remarks researchers' note that "differences between languages with deep orthographic structures (having many irregular sound-letter correspondences) versus shallow ones (having mainly regular sound-letter correspondences) might cause difficulty for some nonnative readers of English" (p.23). Researchers arrived at this conclusion when they have noticed that the appearance of dyslexia in Italy is about half that of the United States. (ibid) Drucker also explains that teaching vocabulary before reading a text "creates a cognitive load that splits the learner's attention" (ibid, p.24). Teachers can give students in advance a vocabulary list or puzzles (built through educational web sites) that contain the words in the unit. In this way, students can be prepared for the reading lesson. Drucker quotes a statistics made by Zahar, Cobb, and Spada in 2001 which found that learners encounter new words 6-20 times before they are acquired, depending on the context in which exposure to the word occurs.

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Appendix A

Selected Reading Books

- Black Cowboy Wild Horses: A True Story by Julius Lester. Story based on the life of a former slave, Bob Lemmons, who becomes a cowboy. Bob rides the plains seeking a herd of wild horses to capture and tame. For grades 2-4 and older readers.
- Boom Town by Sonia Levitin. When Amanda, her mother, and her siblings arrive in California, they do not want to live in the gold fields where their father is panning for gold. So they build a small cabin in town, though it's just a stage stop and a few cabins. But when Amanda

bakes one of her pies and sells it to the miners, she starts a chain of events that makes the town grow. For grades 2-4.

- Drummer Boy by Ann Turner. Marching to the Civil War.
- Emma and the Silk Train by Lawson. Based on a true-life derailment of a silk train in 1927, this book tells the story of Emma, a young girl who dreams of having some silk of her own. When the overturned train spills its precious cargo into a river, Emma risks her life to recover a length of silk from the churning waters.
- Look to the North: A Wolf Pup This informational text describes Diary by Jean Craighead the life cycle of the wolf. George. (1999), New York: HarperCollins.
- Lou Gehrig: The Luckiest Man by David A. Adler. This book tells the story of one of the greatest ballplayers of all time. (1999). New triumphs and struggles of baseball.
- Mailing May by Michael O, Tunnell.
- My Freedom Trip: A Child's Escape from North Korea. A deeply moving story based on the memories of the authors' mother who escaped from North to South Korea just prior to the Korean War.
- One Grain of Rice. A Mathematical Folktale by Demi. This book is a folk tale about the impact one grain of rice can have. Demi. New York: Scholastic.
- Saguaro Cactus (Habitats) by Paul Berquist (1997) . An informational text that documents the life of a saguaro.
- The Summer My Father Was Ten by Pat Brisson (1998). A young boy learns a valuable ten responsibilities for the garden.