

The Influence of Vocabulary Knowledge on Reading Comprehension Achievements

Abstract

We can never overstate the power of words. Perhaps the greatest tools we can give students, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary. This research reports on the importance of vocabulary to reading achievement. Providing vocabulary instruction is one of the most significant ways in which teachers can improve students' reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading without knowing what most of the words mean. A large vocabulary is more specifically reflective of high levels of reading achievement.

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ملخص

من المستحيل أن يبلغ المرء في قوة الألفاظ. من أعظم الأدوات التي يمكن أن نرود بها طلبتنا، ليس في دراستهم فقط وإنما، عموماً، في حياتهم أيضاً هو معجم شخصي معتبر وثري. يعتني هذا المقال بأهمية المعجم الشخصي في إنجازات الطلبة في ميدان القراءة. يعتبر توفير تدريس موجه لإثراء المعجم الشخصي للطلبة إحدى أنجع الطرق التي يتسنى من خلالها للأساتذة تحسين قدرة الطلبة على فهم النص المكتوب. لا يستطيع القراء فهم ما يقرؤون ما لم يفهموا معاني الألفاظ. على وجه الخصوص، فإن ثروة المعجم الشخصي تعكس مستوى عال من الإنجاز في ميدان القراءة.

Introduction

Reading and vocabulary are central to knowing a language and using a language. It is of critical importance to the typical language learner. Nevertheless, the teaching and learning of reading and vocabulary were up to the 1970's and the 1980's undervalued in the field of second / foreign language learning. Researchers (Nation, 1990; Courtillon, 1989) started to claim the importance of vocabulary in foreign language learning. Studies (Laufer, 1997; Carter, 1987) confirm that learners feel the lexical deficit as the major problem in particular when they are learning to read and that the need to understand can explain their fascination towards lexis. Therefore, the acquisition of lexis has become a question of interest to applied-linguists since then. Reading ability and vocabulary knowledge are two of the most important components of both performance and competence in a foreign language, especially in academic settings. Each depends on the other, as both

competence and vocabulary knowledge is the single most important factor in reading comprehension, while reading is the single most important means by which intermediate and advanced learners acquire new words. However, building vocabulary through reading is a fruitful but complex activity that needs better understanding and more careful guidance.

1- Definition of Reading

To give a general definition of reading is not an easy task. A number of writers gave different definitions expressing what they think of the process of reading.

Nuttal (1982:4) states that *"In reading, the main purpose is the extraction of meaning from writing. Our business is with the way the reader gets a message from a text."*

In her opinion, what is important is the reader's ability to decode the message transmitted by the writer. This is related to the understanding a reader arrives at, and more importantly, to the understanding of how he gets and grasps messages, i.e., the understanding of the reading process.

In psycholinguistic terms, reading is concerned with the interrelation between thought and language. It is a process whereby a reader tries to understand what has been written and grasp the message. In other words, the readers will have to make sense of the text in order to extract the information they need from it. Goodman (1975:12) states that *"There is thus an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. The writer encodes thought as language and the reader decodes language to thought."*

We then notice that reading is a process by which the writer encodes a linguistic surface representation which later on the reader decodes in order to construct his meaning. According to Goodman, reader proficiency depends on the semantic background the reader brings to any given reading task.

Widdowson (1979:56) views the reading process *"As not simply a matter of extracting information from the text. Rather, it is one in which the reading activates a range of knowledge in the reader's mind that...may be refined and extended by the new information supplied by the text"*.

According to Widdowson, reading is a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text, and the reading process is an interaction between both of them.

Reading is now looked at as a cognitive activity which implies a certain amount of thinking on the part of the reader. There should be a kind of involvement and interaction of the reader with the piece of written discourse in order to get the meaning out.

2- Reading in a Foreign Language: A Reading Problem or a Language Problem?

In many parts of the world a reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important to academic studies, professional success, and personal development. This is particularly true of English as so much professional, technical, and scientific literature

is published in English today. A reading ability is the most important skill needed by learners of English as a foreign language. Yet, despite this specific need for the foreign language, most students fail to learn to read adequately. Very frequently, students reading in a foreign language seem to read with less understanding than one might expect them, and read considerably slower than they reportedly read in their first language.

Considering the Algerian situation, we may say that reading is both a reading and a language problem. Taking into account what has already been stated, the Algerian foreign language learning situation is specific because of the differences that exist between the mother tongue and the foreign languages learned, and the historical and cultural background learners have. These latter may explain the difficulties Arabic learners in general, and Algerian learners in particular may encounter when learning a foreign language. In addition to that, the scarcity of research on foreign language learning of Arab students does not allow the identification of the problems faced and the suggestion of probable solutions to overcome them.

However, the results of research also support the view that reading in a language which is not the learner's first language is a source of considerable difficulty. MacNamara (1970:114) found that "*the French / English bilingual students he studied were reading at a slower rate and with lower comprehension than students reading in their first language*". Besides taking considerably longer to read their second language, students who understood the words and structures of the texts under study were still unable to understand what they read in the second language as well as in their first language. MacNamara also found certain differences between reading in the native language and reading in the second language – "*in the rate at which individual words are interpreted, in the rate at which syntactic structures are interpreted and in the ability to anticipate the sequence of words*".

The conclusion to be drawn is that, on the one hand, subjects have difficulty understanding text despite knowing the words and structures, and on the other hand the interpretation of words and syntactic structures i.e. grammar and vocabulary, seems to be the main factor in poorer reading performance in the second language than in the first language.

The conclusion MacNamara came to is that students cannot read adequately in English because they cannot read adequately in their first language, in the first place. If only they learned properly in their first language, he said, the problems of reading in English would be vastly reduced.

Jolly (1978) claims that success in reading a foreign language depends crucially upon one's first language reading ability rather than the student's level of English. He asserts that "*Reading in a foreign language requires the transference of old skills not the learning of new ones*".

Therefore, students who fail to read adequately in the foreign language fail because they either do not possess the 'old skills', or because they have failed to transfer them.

This view is shared by Coady (1979:12), who asserts that foreign language reading is a reading problem and not a language problem. "*We have only recently come to*

realize that many students have very poor reading habits to transfer from their first language, and thus, in many cases, we must teach reading skills which should have been learned in first language instruction”.

Coady is supported by Goodman (1973:19) who claimed that “*The reading process will be much the same for all languages*”.

Concluding the ideas stated above, Clarke (1979) states: “*If the reading process is basically the same in all languages, we would logically expect good native language readers to be good second language readers. Furthermore, we would expect good readers to maintain their advantage over poor readers in the second language*”.

Yorio (1971:168) takes a contrary view. He claims that the reading problems of foreign language learners are due largely to imperfect knowledge of the language and to native language interference in the reading process. According to him, the process is made considerably more complex for the foreign learner because of new elements:

“The reader’s knowledge of the foreign language is not like that of the native speaker; the guessing or predicting ability necessary to pick up the correct cues is hindered by the imperfect knowledge of the language; the wrong choice of cues or the uncertainty of the choice makes associations more difficult: recollection of previous cues is more difficult in a foreign language than in the mother tongue; and at all levels and at all times, there is interference of the native language”.

Yorio’s view backs up what has already been stated concerning Arabic learners. The lack of knowledge of the foreign language learned, in addition to the differences that may exist between the two languages, may really be a hindrance for the learners. These facts may explain the difficulties Arabic learners of a foreign language have in the process of learning.

3- Importance of Reading

The focus on reading is a relatively new trend in teaching and is partly linked to the growing field of E.S.P where, as it has been remarked by linguists, it is the most important skill to teach. In this respect, Mc Donough (1984: 70) says: “*It will come as no surprise to most people to discover that in E.S.P terms, by far, the most significant skill is that of reading*”. As stated by Mc Donough, reading is given significant importance; it is becoming the most prominent skill in language teaching.

It is, in fact, in the 1980’s that researchers started to consider that reading is an important skill to acquire because of the importance the English language was taking as an international means in communication, especially in academic fields where it holds a prominent place. From that period on, the view on the reading skill changed and researchers started to emphasize the fact that it is among the most important skills to teach.

Reading has often been considered a passive skill as opposed to the active skills (speaking and writing). Widdowson (1978:57) does not share this view. He points out that “*The main emphasis in language teaching has always been on the so-called active skills which are speaking and writing whereas reading and listening are said to be passive.*”

According to him, this dichotomy - active/passive - is erroneous. Certain reading specialists like Goodman (1971:135) support the notion that “reading can be understood as an active, purposeful and creative mental process where the reader engages in the construction of meaning from a text”. Reading as an active process is partly based on relevant prior knowledge, and opinions that the reader brings to the task of making sense of the words on the page. Grellet (1981:8) describes reading as “*an active skill which involves guessing, predicting, checking and asking oneself questions*”. Grellet views reading as an active skill where the reader is an active part of the process. The fact that the reader guesses, predicts, and asks himself questions is a mental activity where the reader interacts with the text. Nowadays, reading specialists agree that reading is an active and creative mental process. In the latter, the focus is on understanding what readers do when they read. This situation led to a change in language research which contributed to the proliferation of studies on reading.

4- The Nature of Reading Competence

Reading competence is perhaps the most fundamental construct in reading research. The term *competence* is used inclusively in reference to linguistic knowledge, processing skills, and cognitive abilities. Conceptualised in several different ways, diverse definitions exist, but all stem from the same basic assumption that successful comprehension emerges from the integrative interaction of derived text information and pre-existing reader knowledge. Put simply, comprehension occurs when the reader extracts and integrates various information from the text and combines it with what is already know.

The cognitive view posits that reader – text interaction can be subdivided into three processing clusters. First, in decoding, linguistics information is extracted directly from print. Next, in text information building, extracted ideas are integrated to uncover text meanings. Finally, the situation model construction, the amalgamated text information is synthesized with prior knowledge. Thus, in this view, reading success is governed by three competency groups: visual information extraction, incremental information integration, and text meaning and prior knowledge consolidation.

From a developmental perspective, Cough and his associates (Hoover and Cough 1990) suggest a different way of defining reading competence. Their contention is that, although learning to read entails the mastery of two basic operations, namely decoding and comprehension, they do not develop in parallel. Both reading and listening share similar processing requirements, and learners amass comprehension skills in the course of oral language development. By the time they begin to read, therefore, their listening comprehension ability is already well developed.

Reasoning from a functional perspective, Carver (2000) proposes yet another way of conceptualising reading competence. He believes the purpose for which text are read determine the manner in which their information is processed. He describes five reading “*gears*”, serving different purposes, on a continuum of cognitive complexity. Consider for example, three goals in text reading: locating lexical information, i.e. scanning which occurs when a reader goes through a text very quickly in order to locate a specific information of a particular interest to him, i.e., the reader is on the look-out for a particular item(s) he believes is (are) in the text. It is a fairly fast reading with

instant reaction to all irrelevant data, perhaps most of the text. When scanning, the reader searches for a specific piece of information such as a date or a name. Scanning is similar to skimming in the sense that the reader is going through a selection; however, the difference lies in the fact that in scanning, the information needed is very specific, and in skimming the information needed is general, detecting main ideas, i.e. skimming which is used when we are looking for the main idea of a passage for which it is unnecessary to examine a text thoroughly. When we skim, we glance at the text to discover its gist. The reader, in fact, is not reading in the normal sense of the word, but is setting his eye over the print at a rate which makes him to take in only, perhaps, the beginning and end of paragraphs where information is generally summarized. This allows the reader to keep himself informed about matters that are of great importance (basic comprehension), and acquiring new concepts (learning). Cognitively, reading for lexical information (scanning) is at least challenging, involving simple lexical access. Reading for basic comprehension is somewhat more taxing because it necessitates, beyond lexical access, syntactic analysis for information integration. Acquiring new concepts in learning is the most demanding of the three. According to Carver, processing requirements increase as the “reading gears” shifts upwards and as a consequence of greater task complexity, the reading rate decreases. Hence, he concludes that the indices of comprehension success vary in accordance with reading purposes. In the less demanding, lower gears (scanning and skimming), competence implies speedy information extraction. In the higher gears, however, accurate and complete text understanding is more important than speed. The clear implication is that why and how texts are read must be considered in determining reading competence.

To sum up, then, reading competence can be defined from multiple perspectives. **The cognitive view**, reflecting the interactive nature of reading, emphasises three operations as the critical core of competence: decoding, text meaning construction, and assimilation with prior knowledge. **The developmental perspective**, in contrast, highlights sequential mastery of two operations (decoding and comprehension) and their functional interdependence. **The reading gear theory**, moreover, suggests a third factor, reading purpose, to be incorporated in defining the core construct.

5- Approaches to Learners’ Strategies

A final aspect of learner language which bears on variability and of which L.2 researchers have been aware for a number of years is the use of strategies. Strategies have been classified under three headings (Ellis, 1985a:7) *learning strategies*, *production strategies*, and *communication strategies*. The distinction between these three categories on a common sense basis appears evident: learning strategies are deployed by learners to ensure that they learn, production strategies to ensure that the language can be produced rapidly in a number of situations, and communication strategies to compensate for the lack of knowledge of an L.2 by going around the problem in some way. In fact, it has proved difficult to disentangle the three common sense categories.

5.1- Reading Strategies

Considerable research has also been conducted into the strategies employed by good readers. This research has been selectively used to justify various proposals for pedagogical action. Walters (1982:71) says that

“Good readers utilise the following strategies when encountering a difficulty in a text. First of all, they read the text slowly, pausing to consider what they have read. They then reread the text, looking from one part of the text to other parts in order to make connections between these different parts, and to make a mental summary of what they have read. Walters claims that most of the people who read in this way remember both the general points and the details of what they have read better than those who use other strategies”.

As already stated in section 3, any reader whose reading is content based and facing a comprehension difficulty would certainly try to overcome it using a strategy of some sort.

5.1.1- Skimming

The reader reads quickly and at the same time tries to get the gist of what is being read. For example, the reader would read three or four sentences at one go and then try to paraphrase them in his own words.

5.1.2- Scanning

After establishing the purpose of reading, the reader establishes what kind of information that he or she is looking for in the reading task.

5.1.3- Recognizing Text Structure

Here, the reader is supposed to be at least partially aware about the rhetorical structure displayed in the text in the sense that for instance, first and last paragraphs often contain valuable background, summarizing, or concluding information. The reader is also supposed to differentiate between the supporting details and the key information.

5.1.4- Assessing the Importance of Information

The reader expresses whether information encountered is important or otherwise, based naturally on the purpose of reading.

5.1.5- Reliance on Background Knowledge

The reader processes a kind of top-down analysis referring to his past experience and his background knowledge about the content area of the text being read as a strategy to comprehension.

The findings in terms of text reading comprehension strategies used by our students reflect that the E.F.L. Teaching even at a quite high university level is still concentrating solely on the local effects of grammar, treating inadequate word recognition skills, insufficient meaning and the ability to decipher sentence structure as a major obstacle to fluent, mature reading. This restriction on the part of E.F.L.

practitioners, especially at intellectual adult level excluded those teaching aspects which operate at schemata and embedded background experience to facilitate a more conceptually – driven, top-down processing whereby the learner is no longer seen more as a knowledge seeker but as an active participant in the reading process and exchanger of information with the text.

At sentence level, the use of devices and logical connectors at both inter-sentential and intra-sentential levels is an effective skill. Its mastery usually results in a further ability, that of looking at sentences within a text as semantic units assigned the role of a link in a chain, and whose significance lies in its relationship with the other links backwardly and forwardly.

At vocabulary level, reference to context is a strategy which learners find of high importance. Translation and dictionary use are also important revealing word complexity learners' face during their reading as serious impediments to understanding.

In terms of reading difficulties, lexis is recognized by learners as the most constraining area for them to understand text. This legitimate recognition stems from the habit learners develop along their previous learning situations whereby lexical and grammatical components of language were viewed as the building blocks of meaning. This results in an "atomistic" approach to text which requires a thorough understanding of every occurring lexical item an absolute condition to grasping the meaning of text.

6- Reading Comprehension

In view of what has been stated previously and if ever students manage to master the use of reading strategies in order to tackle the difficulties encountered in texts, in addition to the mastery of lexical knowledge, comprehension may be facilitated.

6.1- The Development of Comprehension Skills

When students have learned to decode words in text reasonably efficiently, comprehension may follow automatically. Since students learning to read have, for some years, been understanding spoken language, one would expect the skills they have learnt to transfer to understanding language in written form. However, this does not always seem to be the case. A second problem is that learners may be so engrossed in the word-decoding aspect of reading that they do not have the cognitive capacity to simultaneously carry out comprehension processes. In addition, the rapid loss of information from short-term memory makes it difficult for slow readers to « hold » information from early in a sentence so that they can integrate it with what comes later. If word recognition is slow and labored, much of the prior context may have been forgotten by the time the current word has been recognized. Decoding skills will obviously improve with practice. When students' word recognition skills become relatively fast and automatic, they are able to give their full attention to comprehending the content of the text.

Understanding a text results in a mental representation of the state of affairs the text describes – a mental model of the text. Even after the individual words have been identified and grouped into phrases, clauses, and sentences, a number of other skills will also be necessary to construct such models. The meaning of individual sentences and paragraphs must be integrated, and the main ideas of the text identified. In many

cases, inferential skills will be needed to go beyond what is explicitly stated, since authors necessarily leave some of the links between parts of the text implicit. In the case of expository texts, the skills include identifying the topic, differentiating between important and trivial information, following the argument, and extracting the gist meaning of the passage.

6.2- Understanding the Structure of a Text

Many recent theories of comprehension have drawn attention to the fact that information in a text is hierarchically structured. This structure arises because each text is focused round one or more main ideas, with subsidiary ideas and trivial details subordinated to the main ones. Proper understanding of a text depends on an understanding of the main point, and on sensitivity to the relative importance of the other ideas.

6.3- Making Inferences from Text

Inference has many roles in comprehension. In particular, inferences are crucial to the process of connecting up ideas in a text, since many things are left implicit. The emerging mental model of the text will indicate where such gaps arise and, therefore, which of the multitude of possible inferences need to be made.

A related important question is whether inferences are drawn as a text is understood, or only later. It is quite feasible that learners make optional inferences during comprehension, but that they are superior at answering inferential questions because they are able to recall a greater proportion of the explicit information in the text, from which they can make inferences retrospectively.

Conclusion

The conclusion that can be drawn is that reading comprehension skill and vocabulary development are highly correlated. Teachers should provide opportunities for extensive reading and independent strategy development which involves practicing guessing from context and training learners to use dictionaries. Explicit instruction is also important in that it involves diagnosing the words learners need to know and developing fluency with known words. In addition, they have to link spelling instruction to reading and vocabulary instruction. Spelling knowledge underlies students' ability to decode words during the process of reading. It is a powerful foundation for their reading and their vocabulary development because the spelling / meaning relationship among words allows students to learn how the structure of familiar words can be clues to the spelling and the meaning of unknown words.

Students who have vocabulary deficits have problems understanding texts. Multi-meaning words may need to be taught and discussed. Direct instruction in vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, idioms, parts of speech, and uses in phrases and sentences is essential. Textual relationship and reference are other important aspects to be included in the syllabus if we want students to improve reading comprehension.

In addition, reading comprehension is closely related to listening comprehension. It helps develop awareness skills or sensitivity to the sounds in language. As English is a morphophonemic language, the structure of this language is based on both sound-

symbol correspondences and on the use of meaningful parts (morphemes) whose structure is directly tied to their meaning. Most reading experts and researchers agree that good readers use phonological awareness, phonics and morphology to figure out the meaning and the sound of new words.

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