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Problems in Reading Comprehension Skills among Secondary School Students in Yemen

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Abstract

This paper tries to identify the Students' problems in answering reading comprehension questions. Two questionnaires and two reading tasks about the students' perceptions towards the areas under investigation were used. The subjects of the study consisted of 120 students who were in the final year of the secondary school (scientific and literary sections) and 15 teachers who teach English to those students.

The findings indicated that students have serious deficiencies in discourse-based reading skills such as recognizing text organization and identifying cohesive devices. It also show that students fall back on Arabic, their mother tongue, when answering reading comprehension questions due to difficulties they face in comprehending a text. The results of the tasks administered to the students contrast with claim made by teachers that they pay attention to the reading skills investigated.

Key Words : recognizing text organization, and identifying cohesive devices.

1. Introduction

Clearly the view of reading and comprehending texts in the mother tongue is different from in a foreign language. It appears that most readers in the native language are able to predict what will come next. Several reasons may be mentioned to explain this situation.

Firstly, there is our knowledge of the code and the fact that certain combinations of items are more likely to occur than others.

Secondly, there is our knowledge of the topic.

Finally, there is our knowledge of the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical devices that guides us in comprehending a written text as efficiently as possible.

The students are able to use this knowledge, which they have acquired through their experience of learning and using their own language. Unfortunately, our students who are learning English as a foreign language are still in the process of acquiring this knowledge, and it is not clear whether explicit training in guessing and using contextual and other clues to meaning will actually help the foreign language reader to comprehend a text. The various problems Arab learners face in using English at the discourse level are

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manifested in both receptive and productive skills. The problem lies in the Arab learners' failure not only to read of more than one sentence but also to listen to an extended speech, dialogue or lecture with adequate understanding.

2. The Purpose of the Study

This study attempts to demonstrate how the following areas constitute problems for our students when they read a text for comprehension:

- To follow the organization of a text and identify antecedents and references in it.
- To answer questions that are asked in a text but not in the words in which the question is asked.

3. Background of the study

The research was conducted at three secondary schools at Aden in Yemen. The subjects of the study consisted of 120 students (70 boys and 50 girls) who were in the final year of the secondary school (scientific and literary sections) and 15 teachers who teach English to those students. They are all native speakers of Arabic and English is taught as foreign language. The students have been studying English for seven years. The number of students performed the written tasks were 120 students. While 15 teachers and 63 students filled the questionnaires. The teachers and students were randomly selected for this study. Some teachers have been teaching English for twenty years, others for ten years and some are fresh teachers who have taught the subject for about five years.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Reading comprehension

Reading is generally described as a receptive phase of written comprehension. What this paper attempts to examine is reading that is accompanied by understanding and comprehending a piece of language i.e. 'Making sense' of what someone is reading. Traditionally reading used to be seen as the reader's ability to answer questions that follow certain texts. But recent views (Smith, 1971; Widdowson, 1979; Nuttal, 1982) see reading as an interaction between the writer and reader mediated through the text for the purpose of comprehension. The idea of questions is seen as important before one actually reads that text in order to make reading a purposeful and more meaningful activity (Harri- Augstein, et al 1982). Smith(1982- 166) points out that, " The twin foundation of reading are to be able to ask specific questions(make predictions) in the first place, and to know how and where to look at print so that there is at least a chance of getting these questions answered".

Comprehension is an essential factor in good reading. It consists of the ability of the reader to paraphrase, abstract the contents, answer questions about materials, understand the main ideas and facts. Reading comprehension, as one aspect of language learning, is defined by McConkie et al.(1973) as ‘as careful reading’. That is, reading not only for comprehension but also for memory. It is also defined by Johnson (1983) as ‘any reader’s interaction with the text’. According to Perason and Johnson (1978) readers are considered to comprehend a text only when they have established logical connections among the ideas in the text and can express these in an alternate form. In this way, inferences are critical acts of comprehension. Foss and Haykes (1978) claim if reading for self (i.e reading comprehension) is not based on syntactic, semantic, discourse and pragmatic information, it will lead to short- term retention and memorization.

Reading is taught in the Yemeni schools for the sole aim of developing in the students’ ability to answer questions that follow the text (Bamatraf, 1997). It seems obvious that answering questions can only measure outcomes but do not show one reads to the process and purpose of reading.

Several studies have attempted to find out what skills and strategies are used by good readers when processing a text. In an attempt to improve the comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring skills, Palinscar and Brown (1982) used four techniques: self-directed summarizing (review), questioning, clarifying and predicting. Each technique was used in accordance with a concrete problem of text comprehension. The students received explicit instruction, extensive modeling, and repeated practice in concrete version of practical techniques. Students were always reminded how, why, and when to use these techniques. After the study 90% of the students showed a clear improvement moving up to at least the average level for their age mates.

The most important findings of reading skill and strategies research (Carrell, 1989; Barnett, 1988; Kern, 1989; Flood, et al s,, 1989), is that it is possible to teach poor comprehenders, and students with reading problems to develop reading skills and strategies evidenced to be used by good readers. These skills and strategies could be taught through explicit and specific reading construction measures.

5. Procedures of Data collection

The data collected for this study are of different types. They include:

- A teacher questionnaire.
- A student questionnaire.
- Some specific written tasks

5.1 The teacher questionnaire

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The teacher questionnaire consisted of 15 questions; it was distributed to 15 teachers. They have to answer questions dealing with their background training in English, their views on the aims of reading comprehension and the reading skills which students should develop in secondary schools, as well as the techniques used by those teachers in the teaching of reading comprehension.

5.2 The Student Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 9 questions. It was distributed to 63 students in the third year of the secondary schools, (30 boys and 33 girls). They have to answer questions dealing with materials, techniques, needs and difficulties in learning reading comprehension skills.

5.3 The Reading Comprehension Tasks

Two written tasks were selected for the purpose of the study. They are as follow:

1. A short passage followed by nine comprehension questions. They are of the indirect types and require full understanding of the passage. They are not arranged in the same sequence as that followed in the passage itself. Therefore, the students have to refer to different parts of the passage and look for the correct answer. Some of the questions require the students to skim the text i.e. get the general gist of it, There is also a question in which the students were asked to infer the meanings of some words from the context in which they are used.
2. A short text followed by some questions in which students were asked to identify the cohesive devices used in the text. Besides, students were asked to indicate the precise reference of some pronouns and conjunctions that occur in the text.

6. Results and Discussions

6.1 Questionnaires

A close look at the teacher' responses indicate that most of the teachers had some training at university on how to teach reading comprehension (Q.No.1).Just over a half of them also attended a workshop in which there was a RC components as part of their in-service training (Qs. Nos.2 and 3).

The workshop concentrated chiefly on such RC skills as skimming and scanning, identifying devices. It also dealt with, to some extent, the skills of identifying references in a text.

Surprisingly, the teacher informants gave a rather confusing response regarding the aims of RC. They indicated that the aim of RC is to teach pronunciation, develop the students' vocabulary and explain grammatical structures (Q.No.6).

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Support for this explanation is evidenced in the teachers' responses to other questions (for example questions nos.11, 12 and 15) which clearly show that they understand what RC entails. When asked about their perceptions of the main difficulties pupils face in the area of RC, the overwhelming majority of the teacher informants stated that the most difficult problem is answering questions in which the words used are different from those occurring in the passage.

Moving on to the actual teaching of reading, almost all the informants stated they devote more than a quarter of the English lesson to reading (Q.No. 9). In their teaching of reading, most of the informants claimed that they deal with the main reading skills and strategies such as identifying text organization, information structure, linking devices and the main idea in the text.

From the teachers' overall responses, it may be concluded that some of them have a muddled view of how to teach RC as they confuse it with the teaching of other language areas such as pronunciation and grammar.

The students' responses indicate that they recognize the importance of reading. When asked to order the four skills according to their importance as they perceive it, almost half of the student informants placed reading in the second rank.

About 70 percent of the students' informants stated that they resort to Arabic when answering reading comprehension questions. This stands as a further evidence of the students' inability to use proper RC strategies in handling reading texts.

6.2. Analysis of the results of the tasks of reading comprehension

Task (1)

A reading task followed by ten questions aimed to test the students' ability in such skills as skimming, scanning and guessing the meaning of form their context.

The result showed that only 3 out of 120 students provided correct answers to all the questions, while the rest gave wrong answers to one or more questions.

Task (2)

Some teachers may think that reference system in English is an easy area, so they may not pay attention to it. However, the answers to the questions in task (2) show clearly that our students face many problems in this area. Only "3" students (out of '120) gave correct answers to the first question.

The analysis of the students' performance in the two RC tasks administered by the researcher has clearly shown that they suffer from glaring weaknesses in their RC skills.

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They simply cannot skim a text or locate a specific piece of information in it (i.e. scanning). They also seem to have had little practice in identifying the cohesive devices of reference as manifested in the serious errors they have made in this area. Moreover, they have demonstrated their inability to differentiate between conjunctions and such grammatical categories as prepositions, demonstratives, articles or even verbs.

The students' poor performance in RC tasks may be particularly ascribed to the way reading is taught in schools. Teachers seem to have an incorrect view of what would be considered as the aims of teaching reading comprehension. For them reading comprehension should aim at developing pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Given this view, it is not really surprise that the student informants who were taught English by those teachers performed so badly in RC tests.

The results of the tests further revealed that the subjects fall back on Arabic, their mother tongue, in their answers to the RC questions. This was evidenced in the traces of interference of Arabic in the grammatical form of the sentences written by the students.

7. Conclusions

The major findings are as follows:

Although reading figured prominently in the students' order of importance of the language skills, it was thought to be less important than listening. This may be due to the insufficient attention accorded to the reading skill in Yemeni schools.

Most of the teacher and student informants expressed the view that the reading passages in the course book and RC questions that follow them are of moderate difficulty. The students added that they find the reading class 'interesting'. However, these classes do not seem to tie in with the students' poor performance in the RC tasks administered by the researcher.

In the teaching of reading, most teachers stated that they focus on developing pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. This indicates the teachers' lack of differentiation between linguistic skills and RC skills.

Students exhibited glaring weaknesses in the basic reading skills of skimming and scanning as revealed in the tests. Students do not seem to have the faintest idea of cohesive devices including reference and linking words.

Students showed their inability to answer RC questions in which the words and phrases used are different from those occurring in the reading text.

The results of the tests have confirmed the claims made by both students and teachers that they fall back on Arabic when answering RC questions.

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10. Suggestions for the Teaching of Reading

It is suggested that the teachers' role in RC is not to explain a certain passage but rather to train learners to search for certain linguistic clues to the global meaning of the text. Unfortunately, some teachers in their teaching of reading are reasonably skillful in identifying and recognizing words, but fail to give attention to the comprehension skills.

Students need to be given more activities to identify antecedents and references; this can be achieved through specific and direct pieces of RC. More time should be given to reading comprehension skills. Aims of the reading comprehension must be clearly specified and prepared carefully, i.e. what techniques are to be used in this practice.

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