A Research into Effectiveness of Comprehension Strategies for Facilitating Reading Performance and Reader Development

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Abstract: In most cases of a reading classroom practice, learners tend to focus on grammar and vocabulary without developing positive learning strategies, believing that good grammatical and lexical knowledge helps to develop a good comprehension. However, some research and theory have proved that other elements have an effect on comprehension. Schema theory, for instance, has revealed the psychological process of reading and to some extent accounted for poor comprehension of some students despite their good linguistic knowledge. In light of the theory, this paper tries to present the exploration made in some reading classroom with practice being shifted from knowledge-based teaching to schema-based reading. It has proved, with the provision of several learning strategies, to be beneficial to learner development in reading comprehension.

Key words: schemata strategies performance comprehension development

I. Introduction

In looking at reading comprehension, the traditional assumption in EFL (English as foreign language) teaching is that it is a process in which the reader passively absorbs what the writer has produced and a process of input of knowledge, especially in lexical and syntactical terms. Therefore, priority has been given to the linguistic knowledge and the language itself in reading activities. Students tend to focus on grammar and individual words without developing positive learning strategies, believing that good grammatical and lexical knowledge makes them develop a good comprehension.

Over the past decades, however, the traditional assumption has been questioned and challenged. Some research and theory have proved that other elements have an effect on comprehension. Schema theory, for instance, has revealed the psychological process of reading and to some extent, accounted for poor comprehension of some students despite their good linguistic knowledge. This paper is, therefore, intended in light of the schema theory, to explore the effects of different elements on reading comprehension, and then provide discussion in some learning strategies practiced accordingly in reading activities, and finally make some suggestions for further research in the area concerned.

II. Schemata and reading

It is in the late 20th century that the schema theory has developed to explain how background knowledge is used by a reader (or a listener) to understand and recall a text (Kitao, 1989). Schemata theory emphasizes the role of preexisting knowledge (a reader’s “schemata”) in providing the reader with information that is implicit in a text. Reader expectations are based on
readers’ prior knowledge (Silberstein, 1994:7). Schemata are defined as highly organized, generic knowledge structures composed of slots or placeholders and have a big effect on reading comprehension (Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert and Geotz, 1977: 367-382). Schemata have two broad types --- content schemata and formal/textual schemata. Content schemata contain general or specific information on a given topic, involving knowledge of the world beyond texts, while formal schemata contain information about how rhetoric is, or ought to be, organized, involving knowledge of rhetorical structures and conventions.

The schema theory has explained explicitly how readers’ world knowledge interacts with the text to arrive to a comprehension, and pointed out the world knowledge plays an important role in reading. “What we have in our heads is a theory of what the world is like, a theory that is the basis of all our perception and understanding of the world …. Anything that I cannot relate to the theory of the world in my head will not make sense to me …” (Smith, 1982: 54-57)

Here are some illustrations.

When you read or hear “eat out in a restaurant”, the content schemata will be activated with your prior experience or world knowledge as “tables set, menu, place order, waiter, dish, drinks, bill” and so on.

When people read “河漏面”, those from Shanxi or northern part of China will know what it is, while most southerners might not understand, though they know the Chinese characters well.

Readers build meanings by drawing on a wider range of resources, including schematic and contextual knowledge, as these knowledge sources are drawn on, interactively, to achieve comprehension.

From this perspective, text comprehension requires the simultaneous interaction of two modes of information processing. Text-based processing occurs when linguistic input from the text is mapped against the reader’s previous knowledge. This process is also termed data driven because it is evoked by the incoming data. Data driven/text-based reading processing requires language processing at all levels: word, sentence, and discourse. Knowledge-based, or conceptually driven information processing occurs when readers use prior Knowledge to make predictions about the data they will find in a text. Activities that assist students in gaining or accessing background knowledge facilitate top-down processing, and help arrive to good comprehension (Silberstein, 1994:7). This processing requires knowledge processing at culture level, background level, and world knowledge level.

If we could possibly help students expand and enrich their schemata, we can facilitate their reading performance and help them developing in reading comprehension. In light of the research and the theory, we tried to improve our reading tuitions by helping our students build positive learning strategies, activate the schemata and develop their reading comprehension.

III. Building and developing comprehension strategies

1. Build new concept of comprehension process

In order to explore the effects of the application of the schemata theory in reading comprehension and enhance students’ awareness of comprehension process, we had some tests as follows:

a) Here are some signs
For the question “what the signs stand for?”, there were quite many answers which came from the students’ different preexisting knowledge.

When they were told it was a traffic sign, the students knew for sure the lines were streets leading to different directions, because they connected it with their world knowledge.

But when asked “why is the circle disconnected at the lower part?”, few could give a correct answer. The teacher, then, helped them recall their prior experience: Wuyi Square is encircled with one-way street. Since their experience was called and the schemata were activated, they all understood that you could only go one way counterclockwise. You couldn’t go otherwise.

We can see, therefore, world knowledge really works in comprehension.

b) The following text was given to the students:

You could try reversing the car up the slope. The incline isn’t all that steep.

The students were asked to give the possible meaning of the underlined word. But they rather feel unsafe if they don’t have an accurate meaning or equivalent Chinese version.

We told the students that a good comprehension didn’t mean you must know every word. You could achieve an efficient comprehension by building up guessing strategy. If you could make use of the clue from the context, and draw on a wider resources (in this text, the familiar words “up”, “slopes”, “steep” are their preexisting knowledge), you could generate the sense and meaning of the unknown word.

2. Developing positive strategies

Prime aim of the reading course is to help readers “let read”, in other words, to provide the basic strategies and situations for learners to generate sense and meaning and thus improve the use of ways of managing linguistic knowledge and the world knowledge. We would argue that in order to do this we need to help students build some reading strategies and then provide opportunities/experiences for them to be practiced and used, as good reading strategies will help make inferences based on the information that is given from the schema, whether from default values or from relationships that are specified among slots. Thus, students will be able to activate schemata and can become complex and independent thinker.

Here are some strategies applied in our reading practice:

1). Guessing strategy

Guessing strategy was introduced and practiced in three major steps.

i) Sentence-level

At this level, we tried to find and use some clues from the immediate context preceding or following the unknown word, which would help students to understand difficult vocabulary.

Here are some examples:

◆Their posture—the way they sit or stand---can reveal attention, interest, disagreement or boredom. The new word "posture" is defined and illustrated by the immediate context following it.

◆Congress voted to augment or increase the job training program.
The relationship between the difficult word "augment" and its relevant context "or increase" is restatement so we can see the meaning of the new word.

There are some other types of relationship between the target word and the context, such as: explanation, cause or consequence, equivalence, contrast, generalization or specification, purpose, etc. By exploring the context clues and identifying the different relationships between target word and relevant context, the students can infer the meaning of an unknown word and develop a context-based reading ability.

ii) Discourse-level

Wider context at this level will be referred to find some clues to understand the related text. Students are expected to be aware of the functions and the use of transitional words, which provides an aid for students to grasp the thread of thought and to predict what may come next in what they are reading.

Transitional words can be grouped according to their respective functions and serve as signals that help to point out the directions of the thought. In training the students’ guessing ability, there are mainly required two kinds of exercises: one is to remove two or three such words or phrases from a paragraph and ask students to fill in the gap according to the context and development of the writer’s intentions. The other is to put some difficult words or created words after certain transitional and ask the students to guess the development of the text.

Here are two samples:

John is tall, dark, handsome and boing.

John is tall, dark, handsome but boing. ("boing" is a created word)

The transitionals (and, but) in above sentences bear different quality. One signals more of the same, the other changes the direction of thought. Students then do not have to go to the dictionary if they know the strategy.

In this way, students build the strategy soon and understand better as following:

Some turn against others, becoming aggressive.

Others turn towards them, becoming overly compliant.

More than ninety percent of the students knew, with the help of "against" and "towards", that the difficult word "compliant" was the opposite of "aggressive". It turned out that their guessing was correct.

iii) World knowledge level

When students read “The eagle always flew on Friday”, they find there is no difficult word in here, but hard to understand. However, if they know “eagle” is a symbol of America, and is always printed on American money, and if they can draw the meaning from the contextual clues --- “It was on a Thursday, the day before the Negro payday,” the students can arrive to a good comprehension. In this way, students will gradually build comprehension strategy.

2) Inferencing / predicting strategy

Inferencing is another illustration to use higher-level knowledge in order to comprehend lower-level structures. In fact, inferencing and predicting are important elements in comprehension and often go hand in hand. Students should learn to use these elements wherever possible rather than remember everything in a text. In the training of using such skills, we find it important to do title predicting, as titles are densified content.

Such titles as following were given to predict the story of the article:

Parents must make up their mind
Darkness at noon

Alfred – A man of contrast

Does travel broaden the mind?

When predicting titles, the students would activate schemata consciously or unconsciously, trying to find connections with the textual structures. With the training going on, they became more imaginative and creative in thinking, sophisticated in tackling the language.

In addition to title predicting the students were given some exercises and texts which were purposely and carefully selected to help students do inferencing training.

3) Active strategy and formal strategy

Active strategy is an active approach to the learning task. The students were encouraged to read newspapers, magazines, contracts, ads and some other materials and books which are useful and interest them rather than concentrate only on text books. When information-searching was set as one of the tasks, students would go to the library to practice how to look up a certain information in dictionaries, encyclopedia and some other reference books. They could probably find out what they needed by doing "title research" "subject research " or "author research." Consequently, they developed research-reading ability.

Meanwhile formal technical strategy and know-how to tackle language is essential as well. Students learned with these how to make sense of grammar and vocabulary, they not only had a notion of a basic word but realized the multiple dimentions of it. The students were aware that individual words only have sense in context. The students would then be free from the word-centered reading and develop a global understanding and thus enhance learning.

IV. Results and suggestions

With the learning strategies the students have made contribution to the creative reading process and developed in their target language reading.

They read in a broad sense and get involved in more reading activities, shifted from word-structure level to discourage-culture level. With the increasing interest in reading, students are lively within and outside classrooms, and more active not only in reading but in thinking. They eventually assimilate more world knowledge. Their comprehension improves and reading speed picks up. Their average reading speed increases from about 80 wpm to 180 wpm, and average fast reading speed is from 100wpm to 300 wpm.

Good reading strategies have proved to have a positive effect on the development of English learners in the area of reading. However, the study and application of the strategies would surely have limitations. It is unclear to what extent the strategies can be adopted and used by different-leveled learners in different stages. Strategies need to be graded to know more about what to teach and when learners might then be given different strategies at specific stages in the development of their competence.

V. Conclusion

This article represents no more than a initial brief attempt to bridge the often perceived gap between theory and practice, and to relate one field of research to reading practice. We believe in reading activities, the teaching of knowledge is essential at basic stage of learners’ development, but the withholding all the time of knowledge teaching could well represent a major handicap to learners’ progress in language learning and competence development. Learning strategies then
apply both to how to learn and how to make sense of learning in the area of reading. If students are
guided to become more self-organized, more independent in their reading, which would require
practice, then they would develop the necessary habits to improve reading quality.

It is important that a consideration of learning strategies is central to the context of a more
autonomous approach to language learning. It is perhaps beneficial for both EFL teachers and
students to be fully aware that we need to have less language teaching but more teaching about
language learning and learner development. Less form-oriented but more meaning-based and
comprehension-centered learning are being called to achieve their efficiency.

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