**Understanding of L2 Reading Comprehension**

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**Abstract:** Among the four language skills, reading has always been the most challenging one in all parts of students’ academic studies. It is safe to say that the majority of humans are able to read in their first language at some basic levels. In globalized world, productive and educated citizens will require stronger literacy abilities, including reading, writing and even speaking and communicative usages in society. Most of the societies and countries around the world are multilingual, and people are facing an increased need for speaking well in more than one language. Within this larger context, reading in second language (L2) settings continues to take on increasing importance. English is not only considered as a global language for communication but also it is a language for science, technology, literature and advanced academic research. Benefits of second language needs give us a greater global understanding of the world such as knowing many fascinating cultures around the world, academic achievement and so on. Therefore this part is devoted to the understanding of reading comprehension, process of reading comprehension, reading strategies and sources of reading difficulties.

**Key words:** Reading comprehension, reading strategies, behaviorism, cognitivism.

**Introduction**

A common way to begin with a discussion of reading is to provide a definition of a concept. In recent years a growing numbers of researches have been conducted in the field of reading. Although a considerable amount of researches have led to significant improvements for reading, there are many gaps in our knowledge and understanding the process of skilled reading.

**What is L2 Reading Comprehension?**

Researchers determined the role of reading comprehension and its definition in different ways. Grabe & Stoller (2002) explain reading as a way of creating meaning from text and to form a meaningful interpretation of information. In trying to create meaning from the text, readers are involved in active process. However, this definition does not really consider about what happens when we read and how we comprehend a text. Reading comprehension is remarkably complex, involving many processing skills that are coordinated in efficient combination.

Many conceptions of reading based on the following main theories of language learning which explain the nature of learning to read and comprehend texts. These theories are generally viewed under the heading of:

(a) behaviorism, the first and the most the traditional theory, focused on environmental factors and conceptualized learning as something that occurs from the outside,

(b) cognitivism theories focused on mental activities and the understanding of complex material,

 (c) social constructivist learning theory which involves the way of learning things through interaction. Learners generating knowledge and meaning from contact and then meaning and comprehension are constructed in the social context through the paradigm of language (Wooley, 2011). These different theoretical views have influenced educationalists for conceptualizing the process of learning on how to read.

Here we start by explaining the different points of view concerning comprehension process. What is important to consider with reading is how readers process information. Psychologists suggest that most reading models can be categorized as generally bottom-up, top-down, or interactive processing. In a bottom-up processing, meaning is constructed by decoding words and assembling sentences and paragraphs. Theories that stress bottom-up processing focus on how readers extract information from the printed page (Gough 1972). Reading begins by translating the parts of written language into speech sounds, and then pieces the sounds together to form individual words, and then segment the words together to arrive at an understanding of the author’s written message. In bottom-up processing, the reader begins decoding and recognizing letters, words, phrases, and sentence structure and finally building up meanings from incoming texts. Phonemic awareness would be one example employing ”bottom-up” processing, which focuses on more narrowly identifying individual sounds within words, then move to decoding words, reading sentences and then creating meanings of the text (Reyner, 2008). According to Grabe & Stoller (2002), bottom–up processing involves use of mechanical pattern in which the reader creates a piece-by-piece mental translation of the information of text.

On the other hand, numbers of researchers believed that reading came from the reader and not from the words or phonemes. In top-down processing, the readers activate their background knowledge (general knowledge of the world or a specific situation), make predictions and then attempt to confirm predictions. Similarly, Ruddell (1994) mentioned that forming a hypothesis is important to develop the meaning from the text because readers raise hypothesis to comprehend a written text. According to Alberto et al. (2013), reading comprehension starts from the global aspects and then focuses on linguistic units. From these perspectives, top-down processing is based on prior knowledge of reader and the information from the text is directed by the reader’s previous experiences and expectations. Goodman (1979) referred to reading “as being a psycholinguistic guessing game in which the readers use their background knowledge and language ability to predict the meaning of sentence or passage” (p.9). As USA National Reading Panel [NRP] noted (2000), several types of background knowledge influence comprehension and memory. These types are: general knowledge of the world, specific knowledge about various subjects, knowledge of the text, and strategic (or process) knowledge. From this perspective, students need to recall above knowledge for successful reading. If students have an incompatible background knowledge or lack of ability to access background knowledge, students may face comprehension difficulties during reading.

Besides bottom-up and top-down processing, one important and significant research tendency to reading is a combination of both bottom-up and top-down processing, or called interactive reading. Interactive model combines the bottom-up and top-down models as an interactive process that readers use simultaneously to gather meaning from text. Readers interact with text using their prior knowledge, experience and cultural background (Mokhtari & Sheory 2001). Gunning (2002, p.10) stated, we engage in parallel processing so that we simultaneously use knowledge of language as well as contextual and letter-sound cues. According to Kintsch (2005), reading comprehension is based on both bottom-up and top-down processes and these are integral parts of perception, recognition, problem solving, and text comprehension.

There is also view that reading comprehension as a transactional process involving the reader, the text, and purpose. Rosenblatt (1978) first presented the theory of a transactional model of reading. According to Rosenblatt (1985), the act of reading is transactional relationship between reader and the text. This model refers to the process of reading comprehension as transaction which takes place between reader and text, where reader is very much a part of, and actively engaged in constructing meaning. Similarly, (Damico J.C et al. 2009), reader approaches the texts in different ways. Transactional theory describes the relationship between reader and text and it is influenced by others. Like the interactive theory, the text influences the reader and the reader influences the text. Thus, the act of reading is not simply putting words together into sentences. It also involves the feeling, imagination, and situation.

**Nature of Reading Comprehension**

Yet, a review of literature on reading reveals that there are many definitions of reading comprehension and there is no general consensus one. (See Table, 2). On the other hand, most of the definitions have similarities. Primarily, researchers and teachers in the field of reading in L2 tend to follow the contexts of L1 reading. Researches in the L1 acquisition have been contributed much about the understanding and development of reading process and its development. Grabe & Stoller (2002) pointed that “current research in reading is well supported by L1 reading context and is compatible with L2 reading” (p.37). They suggested several factors related to the discussion of why student’s reading ability in L1 is well described. First, significant numbers of researches have been conducted on the reading of L1. Second, L1 readers usually accomplish a certain level of fluency in reading comprehension. Third, reading instructions in L1 readings have been explored extensively rather than L2. Even though there have been critics for these trends. Whether the process of L2 reading is similar to the process of L1 reading, the theories or models for L1 reading is applicable to L2 reading are still highly controversial issues among reading scholars (Bernhardt, 1991; Fitzgerald, 1995; Grabe, 2002). Bernhardt (1991) believes that L2 reading is “a different phenomenon from L1 reading and a specific reading theory to L2 reading is needed” (p. 226).

As a consistent result of studies on cognitive reading processes, Fitzgerald (1995) suggested that the cognitive reading processes of ESL learners are substantively the same as those of native English speakers and raised a question about the need of specific reading instructions for ESL learners under the theoretical framework. As a result of reviewing and analyzing a number of studies, National Reading Panel [NRP], (2000) suggested the following key components for development of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, oral, reading, vocabulary, text comprehension and comprehension strategy. As identifying these elements, (NRP, 2000) defined that reading is a complex cognitive and active process requiring an intentional and thoughtful interaction between a reader and a text. Even though these elements were identified from L1 reading research, they are key components for L2 reading development as well. Koda (2005) describes “comprehension occurs when the reader extracts and integrates various kind of information from the text and combines it with what is already known (p.4).

In addition, number of various theories and studies, related to reading, have a common goal to develop the reading comprehension.

Table 1.

*Some of Definitions of Reading Comprehension*

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| Sources | Definitions |
| Goodman (1979) | “ reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game, in which the reader actively interacts with the text to construct meaning” |
| Rosenblatt (1988) | “every reading act is a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular text in a particular context, and “meaning” comes into during the transaction between the reader and the text” p.6 |
| Woolley (2011) | “reading comprehension is the process of making meaning from text” p. 15 |
| Cain & Oakhill, (2008) | “an interaction between a wide range of cognitive skills and processes” p. 43. |

There are many processes involved in reading comprehension. According to Rayner (1990) it should be noted that primary focus is on the process of comprehension and not on the product of comprehension. When we read it is necessary to recognize the individual words that are printed on the page. There is a large literature dealing with the recognition of printed words (Rayner, 1990;). Understanding how individual words are comprehended is directly related to the process that occurs in reading and it has been a considerable interest in this issue.

As mentioned before, reading comprehension can be broadly defined as the process of constructing meaning by coordinating a number of complex processes that include language, word reading, word knowledge and fluency (Paris et al, 1991).Similarly, Goatly (2000) noted that comprehension is highly interactive; readers use a variety of skills and processes when encountering a text. These processes are complex and consist of multiple components. Further discourse processing is necessary to develop the understanding of a text. The comprehension of the text involves something more than the recognition of words and parsing of a sentence. According to Woolley (2011) except for decoding words and vocabulary, good comprehension depends on processing text in phrases, sentences, and discourses. The reading process requires continuous practice, creativity and critical analysis for development. Readers should build their ability to engage in purposeful reading, to develop their confidence, and to develop critical awareness including the structure of written text, knowledge of world and so on.

**Reading Strategies**

In order to learn successfully, following factors are needed be taken in consideration: the reader, the text, the strategies, and the goal. Strategies are often confused with skills or processes. Awareness (or consciousness) has been used to explain those differences; according to Schmeck (1988), skills mean capabilities or abilities that can be expressed in behavior; in contrast, learning strategies refer to a sequence of conscious procedures for accomplishing learning. According to Grabe & Stoller (2002), skills represent linguistic processing abilities that are relatively automatic in their use. Strategies are often defined as a set of abilities under conscious control of the reader (p.15). From this point, balancing many skills needed for comprehension also requires that the reader be strategic. The reader needs to recognize processing difficulties, address imbalances between text information and reader knowledge. Being a strategic reader means being able to read flexibly in line with changing purposes and the ongoing monitoring of comprehension. Readers can become skilled readers and learners if they are given instruction in effective strategies. Reading comprehension can be achieved by explicit metacognitive strategy. (Cubukcu, 2008). Paris et al. (1991) define strategies as “an actions selected deliberately to achieve particular goals. In contrast, skills are “information processing techniques that are automatic and applied to unconsciously” (pp. 610-611).

Numbers of theoretical definitions of a reading strategy are defined in reading research. Brantmeier (2002) viewed reading strategies as “the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read” (p. 1). Koda (2005) characterizes reading strategies with three core elements: “deliberate, goal/problem oriented, and reader-initiated/controlled” (p. 205). Almasi & King (2012) define reading strategies in a similar view. They follow that reading strategies are deliberate and it helps students to reach their goal of understanding. As to choosing the strategy intentionally, the choices of strategies are aimed at particular goals such as decoding text, understanding words, and constructing meaning. Afflerbach et al.(2008) defined reading strategy as “deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader’s effort to decode text, understand words, and construct meaning from the text” (p.368).

For the most second language learners, reading comprehension is generally a matter of expanding appropriate, efficient comprehension strategies. Some strategies are related to bottom-up processing, and others related to top-down processing. Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS), which was developed by Mokhtari & Sheorey (2002), is intended to measure the students’ perceived use of reading strategies while reading academic materials. Reading strategies are intentionally, carefully planned techniques and mechanisms to monitor or manage their reading comprehension, actions and procedures. (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). Accordingly, this survey of reading strategy focuses on metacognitive strategy use within the context of reading and measures three categories of reading strategies: global reading strategies (setting a purpose for reading, using context to predict new lexical items, confirming or rejecting predictions), problem solving strategies (adjusting reading rate, focusing when concentration is lost), support reading strategies (taking notes while reading, highlighting important ideas in the text). According to Mokhtari & Sheorey (2001), research in reading and its use of reading strategy awareness among the readers of English as a second language has revealed that good readers typically reflect on and monitor their cognitive processes while reading. They are aware of which strategy to use while reading and how to use strategies to ensure success in reading comprehension.

**Exploring Sources of Reading Comprehension Difficulties**

When considering whether a person has a reading difficulty, the reader’s intellectual capacity is frequently taken into consideration. Theoretically, it is generally agreed that readers should be able to read at a level equal to their intellectual capacity or level of oral language development. Students with reading problems are considered as a complex problem. It may relate to students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities (Siegal 2003). Gunning (2002) noted that reading difficulty is often the result of interacting factors or contributing causes. These factors may be classified as cognitive, linguistic, psychological, social, emotional, physical and educational.

A numbers of cognitive factors are possible causes of reading problems. These include over-all cognitive ability or ability to learn, memory, ability to pay attention. Moreover, reading leads to fuller development in vocabulary and syntax and may also promote greater cognitive efficiency. According to Elabsy (2013), there are some main sources which make language difficult. These sources are associated with illegibility, unfamiliar words, lack of background knowledge, difficult concept, complex syntax, nominalization, advanced cohesion, and poor writing. Carr & Thompson (1996) state prior knowledge affects both students with disabilities and those without disabilities. They discovered different patterns of results depending on the familiarity of the text topic. Students were tested using reading passages on topics that were familiar and unfamiliar to the participant in order to check the effect of prior knowledge while reading. Their study reported that students’ prior knowledge was a significant predictor of reading comprehension test result. Another important condition for learning to read is attention. There can be no learning without attention. Attention fulfils three functions: screening our irrelevant stimuli, selecting relevant elements, shifting from one side to another (Robeck & Wallance 1990).

Students with language difficulties are almost sure to have problems with reading. Speech articulation problems may also contribute to reading difficulties. Additional difficulties that might contribute to a reading difficulty include poor phonological awareness, inadequate automized rapid naming, and deficient word finding.

Social factors such as nationality, culture, and socioeconomics can be considered as important factors in second language reading. According to Wallance (2003), texts are the outcome of social and cultural collaborations. Social factors directly or indirectly influence the learners’ reading ability, perception and motivation. Building a sense of community is crucial for readers. It induces the students’ reading ability, motivation and self perception (Gunning 2002). In many cultures, learning is cooperative. Students do better when their material is related and reflected to their cultural heritage (Gunning, 2002. p.59). Furthermore, a number of students as having reading difficulties have associated motivational difficulties.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have examined recent understanding of the reading comprehension and its related theories, and some sources of reading comprehension difficulties. In order to approach the text actively, it requires an active and critical engagement with given text including the understanding of its form and structure. We emphasized the recommendation about connecting background knowledge to the text and using the appropriate strategy use is important for successful reading.

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