Reading Achievement in Foreign Language

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Abstract: *Reading in foreign language can be regarded as the most essential skill in foreign language learning since learners do not have much chance to practice in other three skills: listening, speaking and writing. However, reading achievement is of great importance with regard to the reading purposes and reasons. On the other hand, to improve reading achievement and reading skill is really significant to enhance the perfection in foreign language. This study presents some related concepts associated with reading achievement and focuses on some related factors affecting it.*

Keywords: *Reading, reading achievement, readability, Flesch Reading Ease test*

Yabanci Dilde Okuma Başarısı

Öz: *Öğrenciler diğer üç beceride -dinleme, konuşma ve yazma- pratik yapma fırsatı çok fazla bulamadığından yabancı dilde okuma yabancı dil öğreniminde en önemli becerilerden biri olarak kabul edilebilir. Bununla birlikte, okuma başarısı okuma hedef ve nedenleriyle ilgili büyük öneme sahiptir. Diğer taraftan, yabancı dilde yetkinliği artırmak için okuma başarısını ve okuma becerilerini geliştirmek gerçekten önemlidir. Bu çalışma okuma başarısıyla ilgili bazı kavramları sunmakta ve okuma başarısını etkileyen bazı ilgili faktörlere odaklanmaktadır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Okuma, Okuma Başarısı, okunabilirlik, Flesch Reading Ease testi*

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Introduction

People read for different purposes and reasons. Some read for pleasure, some read for information, and some for meaning such as conceptual meaning, propositional meaning, contextual meaning and pragmatic meaning (Rahman, 2007). Reader can improve his/her mind and thinking via reading. Dutcher (1990) states that reading is a dynamic process in which the reader actively participates as regards his / her background knowledge, and then the reading situation occurs.

While researchers are dealing with the topic reading in terms of different aspects, there arises a question from the very beginning: what is reading? Reading process is commonly defined as the recognition of the words in a text, the combination of the meanings of these words with our knowledge and comprehension at the end. Correct reading leads to correct interpretation and it brings correct comprehension.

Alderson (1984, as cited in Rahman, 2007) says that reading process of the readers for all languages is much the same. According to Jolly (1978, as cited in Rahman, 2007), reading in a second language is the 'transference' of native language reading skills into the target language. In other words, readers who have effective skills in their native texts are able to read EFL (English Foreign Language) or ESL (English Second Language) texts in the same manner.

Reading is simply to understand the written words, but it is more complicated than this. It requires decoding, comprehension and interpretation (http://www.buckleycountryday.com/page.cfm?p=1055). Decoding, in its lexical meaning, is to recognize written symbols that represents words. However, in its broad sense, decoding is to understand the meaning of a word, phrase or a sentence. Just decoding does not necessarily means that reading is achieved. Comprehension is one of the other three prerequisites of reading achievement. Comprehension in reading is to understand the intended meaning. However, comprehension depends on the reader, the topic of the texts, and so on. Interpretation is beyond decoding and comprehension. It makes sense of the written text via critical thinking.

I. Reading Achievement

Reading may be seen as one of the most basic methods in learning a foreign language. There are many factors making reading process so important in learning foreign language, of course. First of all, reading in a foreign language builds fluency. There may be a question as such: why fluency is so important in reading to learn a language? However, ''fluency is thought to consist of both accuracy and automaticity in word recognition as well as the appropriate use of prosodic and syntactic knowledge for better comprehension of text'' (Grabe, 2004; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003;National Reading Panel, 2000, as cited in Taguchi, Gorsuch, & Sasamoto, 2006, p. 1). We may also think that reading leads learners to increase their vocabulary. Reading is possibly the most effective way for vocabulary

acquisition. The more vocabulary a learner acquires, the more s/he delves grasp meaning. So this vocabulary acquisition process directly helps learners be more effective in comprehension process. At this point reading achievement gets importance.

Improving reading achievement and reading skills of learners is really significant in reading process to enhance the perfection in foreign language. Then what are the ways to improve reading achievement? First of these ways may be motivation. Learners can get more involved in text when there is a content getting their attention. That is, "the development of reading ability is closely linked to extensive engaged reading, that is, reading that the reader wants to do, that is done for a purpose, and done with motivation on the part of the reader." (Smith, J., Smith, L., Gilmore & Jameson, 2012, p. 202)

Comprehension needs understanding cultural connections and ideas as well as interpreting the latent meanings within text. Another way is to make a connection between the text itself and prior knowledge of the reader. Here background information and pre-reading activities are highly important to improve reading achievement. Before beginning to read text, reader can look through text and it gives reader a general impression what the text is about and this helps reader to understand text better. Taking notes, on the other hand, can be thought as another way to enhance reading activity. While reading text reader can underline and take notes of important points. These key words in text enable reader to comprehend the general and basic terms of text.

Readers' reading achievement is related to the success in education and life. So, how can we measure reading achievement? Reading comprehension tests have commonly been used to measure reading achievement of the readers, and these tests generally involve "(a) reading passages that vary in difficulty, (b) answering questions on each passage, and (c) working under a limit time" (Carver, 2000. p. 6). In these tests, high score means high reading achievement and low score means low reading achievement. Within the recent decade, the traditional concept of reading achievement has been upgraded by a new concept called EF (Efficiency Level) (Carver, 2000). Since EL is closely related with some other important concepts, it will be better to explain these items first. Besides all of these above, there are also many factors affecting reading achievement that can be sorted out from socioeconomic and gender differences to parental involvement to age.

A. Rauding Theory

Rauding, term itself is the combination of two words: reading and auding (Carver, 2000). Reading means to comprehend the language in the form of text whereas auding refers to comprehend the language in the form of spoken words (Carver, 2000).

Rauding is sometimes referred to normal reading, typical reading or simple reading but it is to comprehend all, or almost all, of the thoughts in the sentences as they are read (Carver, 2000). Carver (2000) states that rauding is to comprehend the complete thoughts during reading and auding. Although reading means to look at the printed forms

and auding means to listen to the spoken words, reading and auding may occur without comprehending. On the other hand, "rauding means that an individual is comprehending most, if not all, of the thoughts during reading or auding" (Carver, 2000, p. 4).

Rauding theory is closely related to the "fluency in reading". In rauding theory, the individuals are said to be fluent readers. Fluent readers are both the readers who read the text orally with the accuracy of pronunciation and comprehend the texts and the silent readers who read the text silently and comprehend the texts.

B. Causal Model

Reading achievement is the crucial point of the causal model. Carver (2000, p. 11) figured out the causal model as in the Table 1.

Table 1

Symbol	Theoretical Construct	Similar Traditional Concepts	CommonlyUsed Name
EL	Rauding efficiency level	Reading achievement, general reading ability, or ability to read efficiently.	Efficiency level
AL	Rauding accuracy level	Reading level, or most difficult text that can be accurately comprehended during reading.	Accuracy level
RL	Rauding rate level	Normal reading rate.	Rate level
VL	Verbal knowledge level	General knowledge, or the most difficult text that can be accurately comprehended during listening.	Verbal level
PL	Pronunciation knowledge level	Decoding ability, or the number of words that can be accurately identified.	Pronunciation level
Cs	Cognitive speed level	Rate of naming letters or numbers or thinking speed.	Cognitive speed level

Six Theoretical Constructs, Their Symbols, Their Corresponding
Traditional Concepts, and Their Commonly Used Names Carver (2000, p. 11)

From this brief overview, it can be said that the best way in order to gain full reading achievement is to focus on all these concepts: Efficiency Level (EL), Accuracy Level (AL), Rate Level (RL) , Verbal Knowledge Level (VL), , Pronunciation Knowledge Level (PL) and Cognitive Speed Level (Cs).

C. Efficiency Level (EL)

Carver (2000) describes Efficiency Level (EL) as "the highest level of passage difficulty, DL, at which individuals can accurately comprehend when the passage is presented at a rate commensurate with that difficulty level; symbolized as EL; traditional standardized tests of reading comprehension are indicants of EL; general reading ability, or reading achievement" (p. 406). As understood from the description by Carver (2000), the readers are evaluated in terms of the accurate comprehension with regard to given time.

D. Accuracy Level (AL)

Accuracy level means reading words in any text with no errors but with fluency. Each individual can read accurately at their rauding rate and they can become good readers if they have a high accuracy level, but this does not necessarily mean that individuals who have high accuracy level must have high reading achievement as rate level is low (Carver, 2000).

E. Rate Level (RL)

Rate level is the speed of the level which can be evaluated by rate level tests. A high rate level is necessary for high reading achievement but not enough alone for high reading achievement, and the other crucial one is accuracy level which was explained above (Carver, 2000).

F. Verbal Knowledge Level (VL)

According to Carver (2000), verbal knowledge level is necessary for accuracy level, as is the pronunciation level. Imagine a new learner of the foreign language who has insufficient vocabulary knowledge, how can he get a high accuracy level within the text?

G. Pronunciation Knowledge Level (PL)

As mentioned above, pronunciation level is one of the two major prerequisites of the accuracy level. Although pronunciation level is of high importance in high reading achievement, it cannot be said that the readers who have difficulty in pronunciation have low reading achievement or that the readers who have high pronunciation level have high reading achievement since reading achievement is closely related to the verbal knowledge level and cognitive speed level (Carver, 2000).

H. Cognitive Speed Level (Cs)

Carver (2000) defines cognitive speed level as "fastest speed of naming a series of simple stimuli which have been overlearned, in grade equivalent units; symbolized as Cs; basic rate of thinking about verbal material; similar to verbal speed, naming speed,

or speed of thinking" (p. 400). Even though cognitive speed level is crucial for reading achievement, it is not the only prerequisite since there are two other important causes of reading achievement: verbal level and pronunciation level.

I. Aspects of Proficiency

Cummins (2008) states that "in order to understand patterns of reading development among English Language (EL) students, we must distinguish among three very different aspects of proficiency in a language: (1) conversational fluency, (2) discrete language skills, and (3) academic language proficiency. The rationale for making these distinctions is that each dimension of proficiency follows very different developmental paths among both EL and non-EL students, and each responds differently to particular kinds of instructional practices in school." (p. 2)

J. Conversational Fluency

Conversational Fluency is related to the ability to hold a conversation in face-to-face interactions (Carver, 2000). Most native speakers of English can develop conversational fluency at the very early age whereas English language learners can develop conversational fluency within a very short time either in school or in the environment (Cummins, 2008).

K. Discrete Language Skills

These skills involve phonological, literacy, and grammatical knowledge (Carver, 2000). Native learners of the language can acquire these skills through "explicit instruction or through immersion in a literacy- and language-rich environment either in home or school" (Cummins, 2008, p. 2). These learners can "acquire initial literacy-related skills, such as phonemic awareness and letter sound correspondences, with minimal difficulty in the early grades of schooling" (Cummins, 2008, p. 2). However, "EL students can learn these specific language skills concurrently with their development of basic vocabulary and conversational fluency" (Cummins, 2008, p. 2).

L. Academic Language Proficiency

This proficiency is different from the former two, in that it "includes knowledge of the less-frequent vocabulary of English as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written language" (Cummins, 2008, p. 2). In foreign language learning, students are exposed to less "low-frequency words (primarily from Greek and Latin sources), complex syntax (for example, passive constructions), and abstract expressions that are virtually never heard in everyday conversation" (Cummins, 2008, p. 2). They are supposed to both understand the texts in academic disciplines and use the ideas within the language in an accurate and coherent way in their own writing (Cummins, 2008).

Conclusion

The nature of the relationships among reading achievement and other factors such as self-perception of reading ability, culture and gender have been studied over the past few decades. Furthermore, reading achievement is influenced by the amount of the reading individual performs and by one's motivation to read.

Smith, K., Smith, F. Gilmore, A., and Jameson, M., (2012) tried to investigated the relationship among students' self-perception of reading ability, enjoyment of reading and reading achievement. They studied reading enjoyment, and reading achievement of 8 and 12 year old children. They found out that reading achievement of increased substantially in going from age 8 to age 12 but the reading enjoyment and reading self-efficacy decreased, and also, girls showed higher levels of reading achievement and higher levels of reading enjoyment than the boys whereas the differences in self-efficacy by gender were minimal.

As reading has gained importance within the few decades, some tests have occurred to assess or measure reading comprehension, reading achievement, reading fluency, and etc. However, there is no one definite test that can measure reading comprehension skills thoroughly because reading does not consist of just reading strategy, reading fluency, verbal knowledge, pronunciation knowledge, reading achievement and so on. Reading is more than these, and is related to many aspects. Hence, various reading tests measure various aspects of reading. All these aspects comprise reading achievement. On the other hand, the fact that each reader may have different individual variations and other different factors should not be ignored: the way s/he reads, the speed s/he has, the difficulty of the texts and so on.

Of all these various factors that can affect the reading achievement of the readers, the level of the text (readability of the text) could be of great importance. One can see the readability statics of the text in Microsoft Office Word. In Microsoft Office Word, you can see the reading level of the document with readability scores according to the following test:

Flesch Reading Ease test (Flesch, 1948 as cited in Brown, J., D. , Janssen, G. Trace, J., & Kozhevnikova, L. 2012)

This readability test deals with the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence on a 100-point scale. In Flesch Reading Ease test, if the score is high, it is easier to understand the document. According to Flesch Reading Ease test, the standard files could be between 60 and 70

The formula is:

"206.835 – (1.015 x ASL) – (84.6 x ASW)

ASL = average sentence length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences)

ASW = average number of syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words)

How to use Flesch Reading Ease Score in Microsoft Word:

1. Click the **Microsoft Office Button**, and then click **Word Options**.

2. Click **Proofing**.

3. Make sure **Check grammar with spelling** is selected.

4. 4. Under **When correcting grammar in Word**, select the **Show readability statistics** check box." (http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/word-help/test-your-document-s-readability-HP010148506.aspx)

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