A New Look at Comprehension in EFL/ESL Reading Classes

Azam Namjoo*, Amir Marzban

*English Language Department, Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Abstract

Reading is one of the greatest pleasures we experience in our lives. It helps us to be entertained and educated. However, some people find it boring and struggling experience, especially when it comes to reading in a second or foreign language. (Farrel, 2009). The purpose of this article is to review a set of previously published articles in regard to reading comprehension. Having reviewed the related literature, the current problem in reading comprehension is stated and consequently, the findings of this study contribute to a new insight into reading comprehension. Finally a summary of findings is made.

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1. Introduction

In defining reading comprehension, Nimmo (2008) argues that reading comprehension much like verbal communication involves the ability to think critically about the author’s message so the exchange of the ideas and the creation of the new ideas can continue. In other words, reading is a complex task which needs not only the reader’s knowledge about the vocabulary and grammar of the target language but it also requires reader’s analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating ability. Reading according to Meyer et al. can be viewed as an interaction among three variables: Reader variable such as verbal ability and word knowledge, text variable such as text structure and task variable such as telling all you remember from what you read or solving a problem with the information read. They believe that reading cannot be a successful process just by devoting reading skill to anyone of these variables.

Good readers are not passive. They not only understand most of what they have read but they are also able to relate it to their previous knowledge, evaluate the relevance of the information, analyze and evaluate the information, formulate opinions and substantiate their thinking (Masuhara, 2009). Dorn and Soffos (2005, pp.15-17) have included one definition for good readers who can integrate four types of knowledge to sustain and expand their reading comprehension: generic, text, strategic and reflective. They believed that deep comprehension depends on the dynamic interplay between the four sources of knowledge. They defined generic knowledge as cognitive information that the reader activates to construct meaning from a text. They believe that generic knowledge comprises readers’ believes and perceptions and consequently this knowledge influences readers’ interpretation of the text. Moreover, they believe that without this knowledge the readers’ comprehension will be limited to the surface level. Text knowledge, as it was discussed earlier, is referring to the knowledge of the readers ‘of different
patterns of the texts as well as the vocabulary knowledge. Dorn and Soffos (2005, pp.15-17) described strategic knowledge as the readers’ knowledge of specific strategies for problem solving including cognitive strategies for sustaining and expending the meaning of the text. The last but not the least is reflective knowledge, which Dorn and Soffos (2005) elaborated it as an ability to monitor comprehension and search for meaningful solution, integrate a range of knowledge sources and make self-correction. The four types of knowledge that are discussed above, postulate the fact that deep comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading.

In general terms, learners’ strategies are the cognitive steps learners use to process second or foreign language input (Brantmeier, 2002). However most of the time learners are not aware of these strategies. One area of learning, which needs strategies to be worked on, is reading and comprehension. Barnett (1988) stated that students who were taught reading strategy did show a greater ability to read through context than did their more traditionally taught peers. Many studies have been done on recognition of text – structure as a helpful strategy on fostering reading comprehension. In fact the researches on teaching text-structure have shown that not only familiarity with text –structure is helpful for increasing comprehension, but it also is very helpful in the learner’s recall from the expository text. The reason for increasing the readers’ recalling ability based on Ogle and Blachowich (2002) is that recognition of an organizational pattern facilitate memory for textbook information because it enables the reader to form a mental representation and to see the logical relationships suggested by the authors.

The present study aims to review the effects of text-structure proposed by Meyer incorporated with taxonomy of learning suggested by Anderson and Krathwhol (2001) on reading comprehension. This study is meant to state the existing problem in reading comprehension classes, to present basic text structure and critical thinking aspects in reading and to suggest theoretical framework and discussion in teaching text–structure along with critical thinking in reading classes.

2. Review of the related literature

2.1. Related articles on critical thinking and reading comprehension

Integrating reading and critical thinking has always been the area of interest for the reading researchers who believe that reading is a complicated cognitive task which needs to be scrutinized. Gray (2006) conducted an experimental study on improving critical thinking skills and critical reading. The purpose of his study was to determine first, what style of pedagogy is effective in improving students’ critical reading and critical thinking skills in a college learning environment? And second, what effects will Meta-cognitive teaching and Hands-on/Minds-on methodologies (students generate ideas and are provided with freedom to be physically active in their search of knowledge, based on Ridgway (1999)) have on students’ learning in a critical reading class? The study started with 20 students and the duration of the training was for 14 weeks. During the training interval, students worked in groups to solve problems. In this activity the students were expected to create and take some steps, which involved their analysis, synthesis and evaluation behaviors. To measure knowledge of critical reading, critical thinking and relative class based activities; three pre and post-tests were administered. The results of this study provide evidence that meta-cognitive critical thinking pedagogy can effectively impact the range, quantity and quality of students’ critical reading and critical thinking skills.

2.2. Related studies on text-structure strategy

It has been for decades that researchers have been focusing on the effects of teaching top-level structures explicitly in reading classes in order to foster readers’ comprehension. They have applied different top-level structures in teaching reading to evaluate their effects on learners’ comprehension and recall (Durkin, 1979; Williams et al., 2007; Sharp, 2004; Gaddy et al., 2008; Ripley, 2007). One of the most recent studies, which can be mentioned on reading and comprehension, has been done by Farell (2009). He believes pre-reading is an important activity in students’ reading comprehension. According to him if the teacher provides a preview of the type of the text the students are reading and Explains how the contents of that text are joined together, the readers will be able to recall the context more easily and effectively. Furthermore, Koda (2005) considered readers’ awareness in distinguishing the main idea and supporting details of the text. Moreover, she stated it would be beneficial in understanding how all different parts of the text come together to make it a cohesive text.

3. Statement of the problem
Some researchers believe that college students’ purpose of reading is learning from their textbooks (Self, 1997). Hence college books are in expository materials and moreover based on William (2004) as expository texts seem to be more difficult than narrative texts, we can observe students’ lack of understanding while they encounter those texts. One reason about the difficulty expository texts base on Stein and Trabasso (1981) is that the relation between events that are demonstrated in expository text is not the same sequence of familiar events that readers can see in many narratives. Regarding text structure awareness, Farell (2009) argues that making EFL or ESL learners aware of how texts are organized also help them with their reading fluency, comprehension and efficiency.

Although teaching learners how to use text structure is a useful strategy, it is not merely effective for fostering comprehension. Based on Baker and Brown (1984) the use of strategy without meta-cognition is not effective as meta-cognition involves self awareness and the conscious monitoring and regulation of comprehension. Further, Flave (1979) defines meta-cognitive strategy as assisting with monitoring and evaluating. Cognitive ability is one of the areas of thinking that Anderson and Krathwhol (2001) mentioned about it in their taxonomy of thinking. Anderson and Krathwhol taxonomy (2001) that is revised version of Bloom’s (1956) original taxonomy includes six major categories (hierarchy levels) in cognitive domain. Anderson and Krathwhol (2001) composes of six levels that are Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating. Out of these levels, the top three levels represent learners’ higher order thinking skills. The teaching of reading approach that accompany textbooks and offer strategy instruction only focuses on explaining the content and vocabulary and assessing knowledge through some comprehension questions is inadequate for the students to truly understand what they read about in expository texts (Kragler 2005). In the area of teaching reading in colleges, most college instructors have a background in elementary or secondary reading instruction. One reason of this problem according to Maxwell (1997) and Stahl (1992) is that, there are only a few graduate programs that certify instructors in developing reading. With these assumptions, the study focused on reviewing a new approach in teaching college students how to read critically to achieve educational objectives. Ladan Javdan Faghat and Zaidah Zainal (2011) reported that in Iran, the focus of teaching English is mainly on grammar and vocabularies and short readings, thus the learners perform so weak on comprehension. They discovered that the knowledge of text organization affected comprehension mainly in identifying and recalling of the most important information in a text. Alireza Karbalaei (2010) stated that EFL university students in Iran have to read a large volume of academic texts in English, but many of them entering university education are unprepared for the reading demands placed on them. He has reported that the integration of meta-cognitive reading strategy instruction within reading curricula play a vital role in enriching students’ awareness of mental processes involved in reading and the development of thoughtful and constructively responsive reading.

4. Definition of critical thinking

In the past 20 years, the definition of critical thinking has evolved with time. Tama (1989) interpreted thinking ability as a way of reasoning that demands adequate support for ones belief and unwillingness to be persuaded unless support is forthcoming. Critical thinking researchers defined critical thinking as analytical thinking and stated that the purpose of analytical thinking laid in evaluating what is read. Halpern (1997) used the term critical thinking to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal directed. The definition of critical thinking will probably change over the times; however, one fact will be remained untouched – the need to have the ability to solve a problem or come up with new ideas for a situation. Wen (1999) defines a critical thinker as the one who is involved in some special activities. Based on Wen (1999) a critical thinker is involved in investigation (analysis, evaluation and explanation of assumptions) He stated that a critical thinker is involved in freethinking (thinking independently). Another activity according to Wen (1999) is reconstruction (approving or recognizing) the current value system and changing his/her belief. It means that critical thinkers are critically listening to others, giving feedback, accepting their own shortcomings and are able to postpone decision making to the end of the process to get the most developmental result.

5. Text structure and expository texts

Text structure is another important criterion in reading comprehension (Fitzgerald, 1984; Taylor, 1992). Meyer et al. (1989) believe that text-structure exhibits which ideas of the author are more important and which are subordinated. She also stated authors are using different types of structures to convey their messages to the readers easier and the knowledge of text-structure helps the readers to differentiate passage’ main idea from supporting details easier. The structure of the text seems to be crucial component of every text. For example Meyer et al. (1989) considered it as
an overall organization of a text. Texts are in two different types: Expository texts and narrative texts. Expository texts are texts that are used by the authors to inform, to explain, to describe, to present information or to persuade. Expository texts explain concept for academic content such as science (A. Gaddy et al. 2008). There is a number of listing for types of text-structure. Meyer and Feedle (1984) have organized five basic expository text structures. (Descriptive, Sequential, Causation, Problem/Solution, and Comparison). The basic pattern of five expository text-structures based on Meyer and Feedle is shown in the table 1.

Table 1: Five Basic Expository Text Structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Elements are grouped by association with one element of association subordinate to another (topic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence</td>
<td>Elements are grouped in temporal order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causation</td>
<td>Elements are grouped before and after time and are causally or quasi-causally related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem / solution</td>
<td>Elements are organized in the same fashion as cause/ effect with the addition of overlapping elements between problem and solution, and one element of the solution's basis of similarities and an antecedent to the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>Element are organized on the basis of similarities and differences between two topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Meyer & Feedle, 1984)

6. Theoretical framework

For many students, expository text means difficult, unexciting textbook to read. So they just memorize the texts to pass their tests (Calkins, 2001). Teacher’s duty is to find the method or instruction to promote meanings for readers (Krangler, Martin and Walker, 2005). Applying reading strategy helps college freshmen to comprehend the academic books better (Kung, 2007). Good readers are not passive. They not only understand most of what they have read but they are able to relate it to their previous knowledge, evaluate the relevance of the information, analyze and evaluate the information, formulate opinions and substantiate their thinking (Masuhara, 2009). Anderson and Krathwhol (2001) argue that throughout the years, the levels of cognitive domain in learning have often been depicted as a stairway leading many teachers to encourage their students to climb to a higher level of thought. The main focus of this study was to review the previous studied to find out the impact of teaching text-structure as a factor to help students improve their meta-cognitive ability in reading classes that consequently lead to a better comprehension. In order to address issues before hand, how text-structure is helping reading comprehension as well as how teachers can teach students to be critical thinking learners, this study reviewed a number of theories that are relevant to fostering reading comprehension through using text – structure and critical thinking.

7. Conclusion

This study strived to scrutinize the effects of text-structure and critical thinking awareness on students’ reading comprehension. The review in the books and articles revealed the necessity of teaching text-structure in reading classes. There are also many studies that have been done on the effect of critical thinking instruction on the students’ reading comprehension ability. Most of them agreed on the positive effect of these two cognitive domains on reading comprehension of expository texts.

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