

Reading Comprehension Strategies

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Abstract: The academic success of the university students greatly depends on the mastery of an academic reading skill. However, students as well as teachers, take the learning of this skill for granted, as they tend to presuppose that reading skill is acquired as a part of their secondary education. As a result, most first-year students employ non university strategies to read academic texts, which leads to a surface approach to reading and prevents students from a better understanding of the material. This paper will discuss the strategies that involve students in taking a deep approach to reading academic texts.

Keywords: Reading Skill, Academic Reading Strategies, Reading for Academic Purposes

1. Introduction

Reading plays an important role in any educational system, so improvement of reading skills is vital, which is possible with the help of effective reading strategies. Reading strategies are defined in different ways. For McNamara (2012) "A reading comprehension strategy is a cognitive or behavioral action that is enacted under particular contextual conditions, with the goal of improving some aspect of comprehension"(p.6). Edge (2002) defines reading comprehension strategies as "strategies that encourage your students to use prior knowledge, experiences, careful thought, and evaluation to help them decide how to practically apply what they know to all reading situations"(p. 4).

Basically reading comprehension strategies may be defined as "a complex process involving interactions between the reader and the text, using multiple skills" (Medina, 2007, p. 4), because among the variety of known strategies "some strategies work for some students, and other strategies work for other students, just as some strategies work best with certain types of reading material, other strategies work best with other types of reading material" (Medina, 2007, p. 6). It is important to understand that to improve students' reading comprehension teachers should take into consideration students' skill level, group, dynamic, age, gender, cultural background, as well as the type of the text they deal with, to determine the approach to take.

Researches show that reading comprehensibility directly depends on the strategies readers use (McNamara, 2012; Bachman & Palmer, 2009; Bachman, 1990; Connolly, 2007; Blachowicz & Ogle, 2008; Roe et al., 2011). Strategies are especially necessary to those students who struggle most (students with less domain knowledge and low reading skills). Using strategies for developing and construction of

meaning before, during and after reading allows readers to connect the information they are reading about now with what they have learnt in the past (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2008).

2. Overview of Reading Strategies

According to Babbitt (2002), the use of reading strategies improves the reading abilities of most students, improves their interaction with the text, and finally students not only understand the text but also remember every part of the story they have read. For successful use of strategies, teachers need to develop a scaffold for their students carefully according to their needs, abilities and the type of print they work with.

Babbitt (2002) suggests eight reading strategies:

- Comprehension monitoring (involves pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities)
- Cooperative learning (students work in small groups)
- Graphic organizers (involves comparison/contrast, hierarchy diagram, and matrix diagram)
- Story structure
- Question answering
- Question generating
- Summarization
- Multiple Strategy

The purposes of reading may vary and, accordingly, the strategies applied to comprehension must be different. McNamara (2012) introduces three reading comprehension strategies for the proficient reader:

1. Dictionary artifact strategy

This strategy is used to understand context-sensitive texts, where the meaning of the words is important to understand the text. It also can be used for vocabulary enrichment, but the problem is the use of a dictionary may be overdone, as a result, the text as a whole may be misunderstood or not understood at all.

2. Contextual word definition strategy

It is an alternative strategy to the previously mentioned one. Readers infer the meaning from the context activating their cognitive actions of eye movements. This strategy is important for those students who prepare for examinations requiring high reading skills such as TOEFL, IELTS, ALES (Akademik Personel ve Lisans Eğitimi Giriş Sınavı - Academic Personnel and Undergraduate Education Entrance Exam in Turkey) as well as for students working with academic written materials.

3. Character motive strategy

Readers are required to explain the meaning of the text by analyzing causes of events, explanation of characters' behaviors, and other moments that identify why the events in the text take place and why the author mentions something.

For less successful readers McNamara (2009) suggests six reading comprehension strategies:

1. Comprehension monitoring

It is the process of students' reading and analyzing the level of understanding, as the awareness of low understanding may require the use of other strategies to increase understanding of the text and their comprehensibility.

2. Paraphrasing

Students restate the text in different words/own words, that help less skilled readers to improve the basic understanding of the information contained in the words/sentences/paragraphs and the whole text.

3. Elaboration

It is the process of making inferences/questions that involves the linking of the meaning of the word/sentence/text to existing related knowledge.

4. Logic or common sense

This strategy helps students to understand the text using logic or general knowledge because very often they do not have enough domain knowledge or directly related knowledge of the information presented in the text without knowing a lot about the topic.

5. Predictions

This strategy involves students' thinking about what may appear next in the text. This strategy is pretty uncommon when reading scientific texts, but for narrative texts may be pretty effective.

6. Bridging

It is the strategy that develops students' ability to link ideas and understanding the relation between sentences/paragraphs/chapters in the text. Making inferences is critical to understanding and to successfully comprehend the text because the reader must make inferences to build a coherent mental model of the information presented in the text.

The six strategies mentioned encourage the readers to use a set of strategies, which lead to better understanding and improvement of readers' ability to explain the text.

In higher education most second language learners consciously or unconsciously already have some reading comprehension strategies in their first language, however, not all students have effective strategies. The subject of matter is also whether they are able to use them working with texts of academic nature. Brown (2001) recommends a more detailed list of strategies to apply to classroom techniques that provide students with the techniques to read the text critically. Some of them are related to bottom-up procedures, and others involve top-bottom procedures. All together construct a mixed strategies approach to reading comprehension.

1. Establish the aim of reading

Purposeful reading gives students an idea about what they are looking for, helps them to weed out potential distracting information, and increases the speed of reading.

2. Use the graphical rules and laws to help in ascending decoding

For beginner language learners it is usually difficult to make a correspondence between written and spoken language. In this case, they may need an explanation of certain orthographic rules and peculiarities.

3. Use effective methods of silent reading for a relatively quick understanding

Students try to read the words without pronouncing them, try to visually perceive more than one word at a time, and skip unknown words trying to infer their meaning from the context. This strategy may not work beginner readers, but for an intermediate and advanced level may be quite efficient.

4. Skimming for main ideas

It is one of the most important strategies for any language learner. Skimming is reading the text quickly moving their eyes across the text for its gist. With the help of this strategy students have an advantage of being able to predict the purpose of the text, the main idea, and supporting ideas.

5. Scanning text for specific information

It is the other valuable strategy a language learner needs to acquire. Scanning is a quick search for some particular information in a text, such as dates, names, places, definitions of main points, etc. The major role of scanning is finding the necessary information in the text without reading through the whole text. This strategy is essential for dealing with the texts like manuals, schedules, forms, instructions, etc.

6. Semantic mapping and clustering

The strategy of semantic mapping/clustering helps students to organize the ideas/information from the text into order/groups to understand the relation between the pieces of data and to see the whole picture (Mozayan, Fazilatfar, Khosravi, & Askari, 2012).

7. Guessing

This strategy involves a quite broad range of procedures. Students may need to be able to make guesses about different aspects of the text:

- meaning of a word
- grammatical link
- discourse rapport
- hidden meaning
- cultural links
- semantic content

Using this strategy reading becomes a kind of "guessing game" (Goodman, 2003), and "as sooner learners understand this game, the better off they are" (Brown, 2001, p. 309). To be more successful and accurate in guesses students need a lot of appropriate practice.

8. Vocabulary analysis

Guessing/recognition the meaning of unknown words refers to readers' knowledge of word structure and its peculiarities. It is necessary for students to be aware of the meaning of key information transmitted through prefixes, suffixes, roots, grammatical and semantic contexts.

9. Understanding the difference between the literal and implied meanings

This strategy may cause some difficulties, so students may need an appropriate explanation and practice to master their ability in distinguishing differences in meaning. Students are required to acquire/apply sophisticated top-down processing skills. Proficient readers in L1 have an advantage over the less literate readers.

10. Benefit from discourse markers to understand relationships

There are numerous discourse markers, which signal the relationships between phrases, sentences, paragraphs, ideas, etc. in the English language. Knowledge of discourse markers gives readers an opportunity to understand how the idea is developed in the text and can greatly improve students' reading efficiency.

Reading strategies are "plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning" (Duffy, 1993, p. 232). Among the wide range of techniques, it is the readers' own decision (if necessary with teacher assistance) to choose the most appropriate set of strategies for better comprehension of the written material. It is clear that "the strategy use is different in more proficient and less proficient readers" (Janzen, 2002, p. 287). Generally "... strategies are essential, not only to successful comprehension but to overcoming reading problems and becoming a better reader and comprehender" (McNamara, 2009, p. 36).

3. Conclusion

There are a lot of learners of foreign language students for whom reading is the most important goal. They want to be able to read for pleasure, for their education, or for a career. In fact, whether learners do it consciously or unconsciously, the most English language learners for academic purposes primarily want to acquire is the ability to read effectively. In any academic institution, reading is what students mostly do from the beginning to the end of the program. It is not possible to imagine a scientific research without reading and all required strategies applied to understand, analyze, or synthesize of written material.

Today the major emphasize is put on the importance of reading strategies implemented in English language learning classroom. Developing learners' reading abilities and strategies that can be used in dealing with the written text, give the readers information and help them understand not only *whats* and *hows* but also *whys* delivered in the written text. Teachers/students choose the most appropriate strategies according to their needs, purposes, type of written text, and the choice may vary from one reader/situation/time/circumstance to another.

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