An Evaluation of Some Concepts of Reading

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Since reading comprehension courses aim at developing students' abilities to use and read English efficiently, students need knowledge of how English is used in academic writing, namely knowledge of the grammatical structure and vocabulary of the language to enable them to make use of these features of language in the presentation of information. In short, students should learn in reading comprehension courses how language organizes information in written passages.

This paper discusses some significant unsolved problems in reading comprehension. The underlying study provides an overview of a variety of opinions in the field of reading on the nature of the reading process, and a review of some of the problems involved in the development of reading.

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This paper discusses some significant unsolved problems in reading comprehension. The underlying study provides an overview of a variety of opinions in the field of reading on the nature of the reading process, and a review of some of the problems involved in the development of reading. The purpose of this article is to provide a better understanding of the nature of the reading process because of its importance in education.

Keywords : reading process, academic writing, reading competence.

I. Introduction

Reading is still a vivid process and one of the most challenging human activities. Reading does not mean that an interpretation is an end by itself. The reader has additional mental processes that enable him to make use of the interpretation he has constructed so far (Clark and Clark, 1977: 43-44).

According to Deller (1986:119), good readers are engaged in activities, such as 1) integrating the text to seek the meaning in the writer's mind; 2) comparing what the writer is saying with their own experience both in life and language; 3) adjusting their reading approach in accordance with the purpose for which they are reading; and 4) revising their views in the light of what they read. "Reading in this sense is not the mere mouthing of words and decoding of every word in every sentence. It is rather the activity that enables the students to go deeper and deeper to get the meaning which is intended by the writer "(Rivers, 1981:259).

The reading process is not an easy one because it is an involved area. It involves in many fields of knowledge, such as cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics and linguistics. It also embraces a number of mental processes. Spiro, Bruce, and Brewer

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(1980: xv) emphasize this fact: "one problem faced by anyone seeking to understand current beliefs about [reading] comprehension is the interdisciplinary nature of research in this area. There are no readily available syntheses of the relevant work in the diverse disciplines of cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, linguistics, and reading education".

Reading relates ideas from many sources, and it is a path to new experiences. According to Rivers reading gives students "the opportunity to share the thinking of the great minds of another culture and so to widen horizons of their knowledge and understanding "(1981:259).

II. Various Views of Reading

Discussions in academic institutions produce more controversies, instead of providing solutions for reading problems. One reason for these problems can be the inability to achieve a common understanding of the task itself. How reading is viewed affects how the reading process is studied and taught.

For some people, reading does seem to be a process developed through systematic instruction and practice, but achieved over time from infant school onwards. Some view reading as a matter of accurate pronunciations, while others see reading as a visual task. Only those who view reading as a complex and demanding process continued to provide instructional guidance to read accurately and efficiently, and to relate what is read to other areas of life. All people, however, agree that reading is a key to experience that links people in a way that is not limited by distance or time. Strang (1948:65) writes that "reading provides experience through which the individual may expand his horizons; identify, extend and intensify his interests; and gain deeper understanding of himself, of other human beings, and of the world". Reading, as a social phenomenon, is, then, of interest and concern not only to the educationist but also to the philosopher, psychologist, sociologist, and the linguist.

Reading is more than word calling, a passive process, or merely a supplement to pictures. It is more than the recognition of the meaning of individual words. Reading means thinking, expressing feelings, and motivating to be imaginative. Effective reading is purposeful. The reader's purpose of reading determines what he reads, why he reads, and how he reads. This is the same with the teacher's overall concept of reading that influences his methods of teaching reading. That is to say, if he thinks of reading as a visual task, he will be

concerned with the correction of visual defects. If reading for him is not more than word recognition, he will be interested in word recognition skills. If he sees reading as merely reproducing what the author says, he will ask students to pay attention to the literal meaning of what they read. If the teacher views reading as a thinking process, he will be concerned with the skills which could help students interpret texts, and draw inferences and conclusions.

III. The Development of Reading Competencies

Mastering the reading process requires getting a sense of how it is structured to know what the reading process includes. It includes all that happen between the causes for the use of words and the reader's response in thought, spoken, written words, or action. Response can be in the form of a mental image or a new way of looking at something. For Douglass (1963), the reading process can be mastered by the student if he develops such skills as a repertoire of words; recognizing the meaning of unfamiliar words; and comprehension on three levels. The first level requires the student to develop the skill of deriving the literal meaning from words and their grammatical relations to each other in sentences, paragraphs and chapters. The student must learn to translate the author's thoughts into his own words. To achieve full comprehension, the reader must relate some of his experiences to the author's ideas, in addition to his knowledge of the semantic and structural meaning.

To master the literal meaning, the reader should hold in mind the content of the first sentence while he is recognizing and relating the subsequent words and noting their sequence. As a second step, the reader notes repeated key words, main ideas and supporting details. If the reader follows these steps and makes the effort to follow the author's argument, he will be helped to understand what the author is saying.

The second level demands the reader to read between the lines in order to recognize the author's intent and purpose, interpret his thought, pass judgment on his statements, search for and interpret clues to ideas from those of the author. On this second level of comprehension, the reader is also asked for recognizing and interpreting devices, such as metaphors and irony.

On the third and last level the reader moves from the literal meaning and reading between the lines towards reading beyond the lines. This level requires the reader to derive implications, speculate about consequences, and draw generalizations which are not stated by the author. The reader may also extend the scope of the author's ideas and relate them to his own ones, which he has gained from reading or experience. In doing so, the reader gains a new insight or a higher level of understanding that enables him to reflect on the significance of the ideas.

In order to learn all the skills described above, the reader must possess physical, mental, linguistic and environmental advantages. How difficult is to learn to read can be inferred from Goethe's following words; "people do not know how long it takes to learn how to read. I (Goethe himself) have been at it all my life and I cannot yet say I have reached the goal".

To shed more light on the difficulty of reading, the author of this paper discusses more solutions which may help the student cope and tackle the problems he possibly faces in reading difficult texts with more confidence. Nultall (1982:192) suggests that students should acquire and get familiarized with the following skills and strategies in order to develop reading competencies:

1. Skills involving techniques like skimming and scanning.
2. Skills which help students make use of information that is not part of the text itself, such as illustrations and diagrams, and knowledge about the author.
3. Skills with techniques that can help deal with unfamiliar lexical items by using inferences from context, or by making use of morphology and a dictionary.
4. Skills involving techniques that help make the process of interpreting the text as a whole an easy one. This can be done by the use of clues available in the text, such as cohesion and rhetorical structure.

Nultall calls these skills 'Text-Attack Skills'. According to him, these skills are central to the reading process, and the requirement for pursuing them is to have a text that is coherent and well-structured. Such requirement can lead to the examination of the quality of the texts which are used for intensive study. Usually, a text is organized to carry a coherently-structured message, and the way the meanings in a text are organized to convey the message is 'discourse'. The study of how discourse is produced and organized is 'discourse analysis. For Nultall, understanding a text involves understanding different kinds of meaning at the same time. At least these four types of meaning are involved.

1. Conceptual meaning: the meaning a word can have on it's won. All other kinds of meaning rest on this kind of meaning.
2. Propositional meaning: the meaning a sentence can have on its own. This is the same as 'signification' or 'plain sense'.
3. Contextual meaning: the meaning a sentence can have when in context. This is the same as 'functional value'. If a sentence is used in a given situation or context, it takes on a value derived from the writer's reason for using it, and from the relationship

between one sentence and others in the same text. Explaining and justifying are often called 'rhetorical act'. In a text, they are sequenced and organized into patterns which display the writer's thoughts. These patterns combine into larger patterns and so on until the writer's overall message is reached.

4. Pragmatic meaning: the meaning a sentence has only as part of the interaction between writer and reader. This kind of meaning is not easy distinguished from contextual meaning, but there exists a distinction. This is the meaning that reflects the writer's feelings, attitudes, and his intention that the reader should understand these. It therefore includes the intended effect of the sentence upon the reader (ibid).

Readers then are not concerned only with the meanings of individual sentences in a text, but also with the way they combine with indirect but implied and suggested meanings to produce a coherent message.

Understanding discourse is understanding the contextual meaning of the sentences that make it up. The first skill to be discussed, then, is recognizing the contextual meaning. Understanding the propositional meaning of every sentence in the text is not enough. Readers must also understand what the writer is doing with the sentence, and they must recognize whether he is defining something, making a hypothesis, giving an example, etc. It seems useful to make the unskilled aware of the contextual meaning so that he understands the possibilities of misinterpreting them, and so that he can tackle them.

The rhetorical structure, which is the complex network of relationships within a text, is the structure of the underlying ideas, and the connections the writer makes between them. The elements of the rhetorical structure are the rhetorical acts that the sentences perform. To make the reader understand what the rhetorical structure is, he needs to think first about the topic of the text, the purpose the writer has in writing it, and the audience he had in mind. All these together give the reader a good idea about the text he is reading, and what rhetorical structure to expect. As the reader traces the rhetorical development of a text, he may find that sometimes he cannot see the connections between two sentences. In such a case, the reader is asked to concentrate on presupposition, which provides everything the writers say or write. According to Nultall, presuppositions may be divided into:

1. The knowledge and experience that the writer expects the reader to have ; and

2. The opinions, attitudes, and emotions that the writer expects the reader to share, or at least to understand. Presuppositions, which are not immediately clear to the reader, can often be reconstructed by making intelligent use of the clues

the text provides, and by drawing the necessary inferences.

Very often, the reader is able to predict what a text contains, simply because the writer organizes his ideas, and the reader thinks in similar ways. This ability makes it possible that the reader predicts what the writer is likely to say next, and this is both an aid to understanding and a sign of it.

IV. READING'S RELATION TO OTHER LANGUAGE SKILLS

Reading has a special place in the complex of language skills: listening, speaking, writing, and spelling. Teachers can help Students develop language skills basic for reading. This can be done by giving students opportunities to think about what they hear and by verbalizing their thoughts.

Listening and reading are related to each other in being means of receiving communication. They both require skills such as interpreting the main idea, perceiving relationships, recognizing sequence of ideas, sensing the mood and intent of the speaker or writer, and organizing and evaluating his ideas. A listener who has the ability to do all this should be able to read content of similar difficulty.

Speaking and reading also have a reciprocal relation between them. Effective speech makes reading more accurate and vice versa; i.e. efficient reading enriches oral communication. Receiving the thought that the author wishes to convey by reading and transmitting that thought to others by speaking or writing are the intake and output ends of the communication continuum.

Comprehending of the syntax of English sentences can also contribute to both the student's writing and reading. Practicing interpretation of the literature the student reads can give him a feeling of style, which could influence his writing more than a formal study of grammar. It can be maintained from the relations the language skills have to each other that proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking develops all skills concomitantly: one language skill reinforces the other. Since speech is primary to writing and reading, these two latter skills may be more affected by speech difficulties than vice versa.

Concerning spelling, as a part of the constellation of language skills, it is related to word recognition, grasp of meaning, vocabulary and comprehension. Spelling is concerned with significant units of speech sound (phonemes) as each is represented by a letter or a combination of letters (graphemes) and as they are put together in words or parts of words (morphemes). In spelling, the student recalls the symbols for various sounds (encoding). He thinks of individual letters and may get a visual image of the whole word. In reading, the process is reversed. The

student associates the printed symbol with the sound of the word and its associated meaning (decoding). Improvement in reading often leads to better spelling. However, this should not be understood that deficiencies in reading or vocabulary cause poor spelling. Improvement in spelling is often a by-product of wide reading.

The language skills should be closely integrated: one growing out of another. All aspects of language help to form the individual's developing personality. It is through expression that the individual discovers himself and achieves self-realization (cf. Horn and Ashbangh, 1950).

V. Problems in Understanding Texts

What causes the difficulty of interpreting a text by a reader can be summarized as follows:

1. Concepts in a text were not considered as one of the features of a text that could help understand it. This is because it had often been argued that concept formation was not the job of the language teacher.

2. Vocabulary and sentence structure: Even though it is possible to have an idea about the writer's message without understanding the propositional meaning of every sentence, it is not always possible to be absolutely certain of it. This entails, first, understanding all the vocabularies.

3. Cohesive devices: The ways of linking sentences together to create a cohesive text also cause problems in understanding a text caused by the use of the various cohesive devices. For example, the potential difficulty of pronoun reference and elliptical sentences is overlooked. The reader who does not know what a pronoun refers to, or who cannot supply the full version of an elliptical sentence, will not be able to establish its propositional meaning.

4. Discourse markers: Neglecting discourse markers, such as 'however', 'although', 'furthermore', and so on, results in misinterpretation of text; their importance is in that they serve to mark the contextual meaning of a sentence. They help the reader to know what the writer intends by the contextual meaning of a text. Discourse markers are useful signals to the reader; they can help a careful reader to establish the propositional meaning sentences have.

5. Problems beyond the propositional meaning of a sentence: It is possible that the reader is still unable to make sense of the text as a whole, even when he has understood the propositional meaning of each sentence of the text. Problems which go beyond the propositional meaning of a sentence involve the interpretation of value, or the relationships between the sentences in a text, or between writer, reader and text.

VI. Conclusion

This article has shown that hard work in teaching reading is one necessity. Another necessity concerns students' progress, i.e. reading comprehension courses need to plan work so that every student is successful.

We conclude by saying that there is an underlying assumption that a text will be organized in recognizable ways that the writer will communicate his ideas effectively. Some writers make their own rules and structure their texts in unusual ways; when such texts are studied, the reader's job is to ask himself what writers are doing and why, not to apply stereotypes and complain that writers do not keep to them.

If writers fail to communicate their message effectively, the reader must be capable of recognizing this. It is to be advised that teachers should expose students to some imperfect texts so that they can be helped to deal with them and will be reassured to find that it is not always their fault if they fail to understand.

This paper has attempted to explore and to evaluate some of the current concepts of reading. In some ways the exploration and evaluation are unsatisfying, because so much remains to be learned about what reading is and how the process functions. Much of what we need to know must await further development in basic and applied research.

Despite general agreement that the outcome of the reading act ought to be understanding, the means for moving efficiently toward that end are not yet very well-understood.

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