A PILOT STUDY OF READING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH ENCOUNTERED BY TAIWANESE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present paper is to determine whether or not existing English reading programs are actually helpful and practical for promoting the reading comprehension. The results of this study could be helpful to English teachers in Taiwan who are responsible for understanding the students’ problems, and for facilitating their reading abilities toward the passing of the exam and design their communicative syllabi.

Keyword : reading comprehension, second language instruction, language learning
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INTRODUCTION

Students in Taiwan have to study English. It is not only a compulsory subject, for more than six years from elementary school through senior high school, but also is one of the three major subjects (Chinese, Mathematics and English). In order to enter a better university with high grades, normally, eight hours of English classes, at least, are necessary in one week. Based on the results of 13 surveys, all of the subjects agreed that reading in English was most required in class at senior high school. It goes without saying that English teachers spend a lot of time teaching English reading. They usually emphasized careful word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence explanations and translations. Teachers accomplished this by using and handing out many supplementary materials. It seemed that if the teachers skipped even one word they would feel that they were letting their students down. Frankly, most English teachers did try their best to help students, using this method, to reach opportunities for higher education.

According to the surveys, quite a few students studied very hard, pay attention to circling individual vocabulary, underlining phrases, and consulting a dictionary right away in order to understand the context. Unfortunately, this bottom-up strategy seemed to be in vain. Their abilities to comprehend the reading contents were seldom highly rewarded. So, what’s the problem? We often mention, “Diligence makes up for clumsiness”, or “Practice makes perfect”. Do these clichés work here in this case? Since poor comprehension frustrated them again and again, students were almost discouraged from reading, and in the long run, they were not interested in English class at all. What problems did they encounter in reading English? Did teachers know about the students’ difficulties?

The aim of the present paper is to determine whether or not existing English reading programs are actually helpful and practical for promoting the reading comprehension. The results of this study could be helpful to English teachers at the senior high school level in Taiwan who are responsible for understanding the students’ problems, and for facilitating their reading abilities toward the passing of the exam, design their syllabi. Also, some recommendations are made with the expectation that English teachers help their students not only “efficiently learn
to read”, but also “happily read to learn” by themselves after graduation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading in L1 and L2:

Having many available linguistic resources, Vorhau (1984) observed the readers, when reading in L1, are interactors who could smoothly use their own native language for developing concepts in interaction with the author’s ideas. They employ their language knowledge (e.g. Structure, grammar, or words) well even if they may not understand what they are reading. In addition, they are capable of using strategies like background knowledge to deal with what is to them at first incomprehensible.

L2 readers, however, are limited by their knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the target language, and must struggle to understand the content. In order to perceive the author’s ideas explicitly, readers often regard the vocabulary as the most important component of the language, as well as the turning point of access to comprehension. Seliger found, therefore, readers often separate the whole content into isolated pieces, and focus their attention on the individual word-units.

The desire to know every word in terms of its dictionary meaning usually leads the students to view reading in the new language as a process of decoding word by word. (Seliger, 1972, p.50)

In fact, whether L1 or L2, true reading comprehension is through the combination of words into meaning, rather than words by themselves giving meaning to the language. Obviously, when reading in L1, the readers can more easily consider the content as a whole. Even if they encounter unfamiliar words, they skip to the next, and try to finish the reading. Conversely, reading in L2, readers automatically separate the whole article into fragment sentences or words, and they, thereby, acquire an isolated, divided meaning, lack of a continuity, which is so-called “short-term memory” (Eskey, 1986, p.10). In this situation, comprehension is not clear because readers just acquire a series of discrete meanings, and they have to reread in order to connect all of the individual meanings into a whole. Short-term memory can cause a crisis in the reading comprehension process.

Comprehension and Reading

Comprehension:

Comprehension depends on knowledge. Comprehension as defined by Bernhardt (1987), is the process of relating new, or incoming information to information already stored in the memory (background knowledge). Obviously, during the process of reading, readers must not only look at words on the pages (bottom-up processing), but also activate background knowledge (top-town processing), and then build all
the elements into comprehension (Rumelhart, 1980). Furthermore, according to Bernhardt’s organization, reading comprehension can be defined as,

1. is topic-dependent
2. involves making appropriate decisions from the beginning of a text
3. involves the selection of critical features for processing
4. involves the rapid processing of text
5. involves metacognitive awareness of the comprehension process

The first two items above are so-called “schemata” (background knowledge). The third item involves scanning, which is looking for information in the text. The fourth item is also called skimming, which is reading quickly for general idea. As far as the third and the fourth parts (new information on the pages) are concerned, slow speeds in reading seem to imply limited use of them, and also limited comprehension. A study revealed that readers, who are unsuccessful, usually make more eye contact per line, rather spending more time at each fixation (Tullius, 1971). Similarly, Smith (1971) argued that the visual system is made up of three features:

1. The brain does not see everything that is in front of the eyes.
2. The brain does not see anything that is in front of the eyes immediately.
3. The brain does not receive information from the eyes continuously.

So, reading must be “fast, selective and dependent on nonvisual information”. To be more specific, reading related to both background knowledge and rate development could result in better comprehension.

Hosenfeld (1977) dealt with what successful and unsuccessful students do to assign meaning to printed texts. Successful readers keep the meaning of the passage in mind, reading in broad phrases, and skipping nonessential words; the readers guess the meaning of new words from the context. In contrast, unsuccessful readers lose the meaning of sentences as soon as the decode them. They read word-by-word in short phrases, rarely skipping nonessential words, and turn to the glossary in order to find the meaning of new words.

METHOD

One of the studies on the natural process of reading was conducted by Rumelhart (1980). He proposed an aspect of top-down and bottom-up is that both should be occurring concurrently in order to result in the best comprehension. Comprehending words, sentences, or even entire texts involves more than just relying on one’s linguistic knowledge.

In terms of Rumelhart’s hypothesis on the nature of the reading process, I used a survey as an instrument. A
A total of 13 questionnaires were received with answers to my inquiries. The results indicated that all the subjects agreed that reading, of the four language skills, played the most important role in their past experience at senior high school. Now, they think all of the four language skills are equally crucial. However, 9 out of 13 subjects still regarded reading as the most valuable skill in their future. No matter how the subjects liked or disliked English lessons, over half of them considered that the teacher’s instruction and the materials were the two significant factors, which influenced their motivation. As far as the teacher’s instruction in class was concerned, only 5 mentioned “understanding from the context”. Surprisingly, 3 out of the 5 people thought that techniques of instruction improved their English reading abilities a lot. In contrast, the other 8 subjects felt that their comprehension abilities improved only a little bit, or even not at all. As to the supplementary, 6 people disliked their materials, and the main reason was they were not interested in the content. There were 7 persons who liked handouts, and 6 out of the 7 considered the handout reading enriching their knowledge. The big problems students encountered in reading were “insufficient vocabulary” and “need to reread”, whereas merely 4 teachers noticed students’ difficulties, and further tried to solve their problems.

Questions #12 through #17 are a series of comparative questions about the differences that students reading techniques in their native Chinese language as opposed to those used when students read in English. These results obviously suggested that using the “guess from the context through background knowledge” skill resulted in better comprehension whether in Chinese or English. It was more successful than “reading each word carefully and slowly, and translated it” or “consult a dictionary immediately while meeting unfamiliar words”.

questionnaire was randomly distributed to 13 students (subjects) of the undergraduate school at the National Chen Ku University, all native speakers of Chinese and at the age of 20 through 25. All subjects have studied English for more than 6 years and they are planning to pursue higher education in the United States. They were asked to circle the past experience in English reading when they were senior high school students. Each person took approximately 15 minutes to complete this survey. The purpose of the questionnaire was to figure out how teachers teach English reading, as well as how students read in English, and, eventually, shed light on the solutions to the students perceived difficulties.
DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

My findings proved and supported for Rumelhart’s hypothesis. The results of the questionnaire were consistent with previous research by Hosenfeld (1977), dealing with what successful and unsuccessful students do to assign to printed texts. By means of the surveys, we can easily figure out that Taiwanese senior high school students do encounter several degrees of difficulty in reading comprehension. English teachers should seriously value the students’ problems and search for their solutions.

Results of this survey showed that the two most serious problems impeding the students’ comprehension in English reading were: (1) insufficient vocabulary and (2) the need to reread. Ironically, most English teachers spent a large amount of class time explaining vocabulary. Meanwhile, most of the students’ time was spent reading each word carefully, consulting a dictionary, and memorizing all unfamiliar words to actually complete the English reading at an acceptable level. This fact indicated that something is wrong with the exciting English reading programs in Taiwan. The question “how do teachers help students read well?” needs to be addressed. First of all, it may be that doing much reading helps students in building knowledge of vocabulary by exposing the students more efficiently, and directly to read vocabulary. However, beware not encouraging students use of a dictionary while reading but encouraging them to guess. Teachers should tell students that it is and unsuccessful reader who stops at each unfamiliar word, looking it up in the dictionary right away in order to understand the context. They should be told to try to finish an article by continuously reading with as little hesitation as possible in order to try to build up their conscious confidence without a dictionary. Furthermore, the teachers should encourage students to use “schemata”, guessing at unfamiliar vocabulary by using clues from the context. According to the results of the survey, students should be aware that this method “guess from the context through background knowledge” could efficiently improve their reading comprehension skills because this reading strategy facilitate reading for meaning. The careful reader will soon learn to understand the content, to decipher vocabulary meanings, and avoid rereading. This method will produce skilled readers, who comprehend more quickly, and avoid hours of rereading.

The importance of materials should be taken into account in order to design a syllabus. People who read, read for intellectual profit, or for pleasure believe that the content of whatever they have read will be useful to them, or will give them the special pleasure that comes
from the experience of reading literature, or will help them understand the world. Judging from the surveys, 7 out of 13 people liked them because they felt the materials used could enrich their knowledge. Psychologically, senior high students are at the age when they strongly desire to absorb different sorts of information. For this research, the supplementary materials teachers hand out and use had better relate to other academic, and non-academic fields. Also these materials must take into account the real needs and desires of learners. 6 people did not like the teacher’s handout, and 4 of them felt that all of the materials they had been assigned to use were not interesting at all. What will interest students enough to keep them reading is not always easy to know, but if interesting materials can be found, students will continue to read on their own. Thus, the vital concern of English teachers should be to find a body of materials that students might find interesting to read, and then to do everything possible to relate those materials to the students’ real concerns and needs. How about trying some authentic materials in class! If students encounter unfamiliar context, teachers could give learners some background knowledge to facilitate their recognition. Also, through using authentic materials, teachers can introduce some culture issues into learners’ lives. Reading is not only for the language but for the real world.

In addition, Needs Analysis, as is well known, is the first stage of syllabus design. In Taiwan, however, learners’ needs are seldom or never taken into account. In a traditional classroom, teachers as dictators always assume that everything they do is absolutely good for students. They rarely question themselves “Can my students understand my instruction?”, “How do they expect the English class to be taught?”, “What are students’ obstacles which might stop them from making progress”. Teachers do not seem to especially care about learners’ mental responses or their frustrated feelings. Therefore, it is not surprising, according to the questionnaire, that only 4 of the subjects thought that their English teachers had ever tried to understand their personal problems. Sadly, in Taiwan, under the present methods in use for teaching English, there is a negative factor which influences strongly the students’ ability to learn. In fact, sensitivity to learners’ needs and wishes is very important and necessary for teachers to consider when designing a truly successful learning environment, the classroom activity can no longer be viewed as a one-way task. Interaction between teachers and students needs special attention in the classroom. Teachers should try to understand what the learners want and need, and what they are thinking. Teachers should try to be facilitators instead of dictators. If so, students will feel confident to access the
different paths to reach truly high levels of success in the learning process.

The form of “testing” used by teachers will influence the type of teaching done without doubt. Examining The University Entrance Exam of English Test paper (2003), I was shocked by the high proportion of cloze test used within the content. The inclination is that it forces both teachers and students to separate the whole content into parts: sentences and phrases, or even individual words. In order to help students get better grades on the exam, teachers cannot help encouraging learners to pay too much attention to the terms of phrases, even though the teachers know it is not a natural, or especially helpful reading process for comprehension. The truth is that English teachers are in a dilemma. It is hard for teachers to change their syllabus unless the form of entrance exam is changed. This is not highly likely to happen in the near future, so the dilemma continues to exist. It influences both the teachers’ instruction and the learners’ ability of successful use of proper reading habits acquires English reading skills.

A logical conclusion to this paper would be that the pressure to earn the higher scores on the University Entrance Exam, causes teachers to face the fact: teaching to the test. This pressure causes both students and teachers to be overly concerned with materials directly aimed at the tests, and to neglect either areas of instruction or the methods of instruction, which would be harder to grade, but more effective in the long run. It is firmly presented that an individual life may be affected both positively and negatively by these tests. This factor in itself dictates the individual instruction in “reading skills”, which point toward “content comprehension”, must be naturally ignored if teachers interfere with teaching the students to pass the test! Before this type of though eliminated, the Taiwanese students will always be “looking up words and doing hours of rereading”.

REFERENCES


