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Reading: An overview prior to reading comprehension

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is defined as the level of understanding of a text/message. This understanding comes from the interaction between the words that are written and how they trigger knowledge outside the text/message. Another important component of reading comprehension is the activation of prior knowledge or making connections while reading. So, Readers must be able to draw from their experiences to apply what they are reading. If a student is not able to activate the schema necessary for a specific piece of text, his or her comprehension will be either distorted or greatly hindered.

For decades, a great amount of studies have been done to investigate the influences of reading strategies on readers' comprehension. It has no longer been considered as a static and passive process in decoding words and recoding meanings of individual words or phrases. Instead, reading comprehension has been deemed as an active, dynamic, and growing process of searching for interrelationships in a text. In this context, this research presents those fundamentals that readers bring to the text, the factors that affect reading, as well as the reading phases and their supportive strategies.

Key words*: reading, language, understanding, reader, reading comprehension, pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading, strategies.*

INTRODUCTION

The UPEC English Language Center aims to develop the ability of oral and written communication supported by a curriculum based on international standards. To achieve this purpose, students must pass 8 levels of English till level B2 in reference to the performance and standards of the Common European Framework and UPEC educational model.

Students handled previously level B1 and through this transition they have found difficulty developing reading comprehension and critical reading regarding building new vocabulary, identifying main ideas, finding specific information, summaries, drawing conclusions and generating answers and questions in an environment where there is lack of literal inferential and critical-evaluative understanding.

In fact, the Independent User B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment explicitly states that a student should be able to understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including discussions techniques in their field of expertise. Additionally, they can produce clear, detailed text on various subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

Therefore, this research seeks to provide an alternative solution to the problem: increasing reading and critical comprehension among UPEC English Center students by implementing a set of reading comprehension strategies.

1. Reading: An overview prior to reading comprehension

A simple and provisional definition of reading is that "it is a process whereby one looks at and understands what has been written" (Williams, 1996, p. 2). According to this author the key word here is ´understands´ because merely reading aloud without understanding does not count as reading. In other words, asking language learners to read aloud, if a teacher already knows that they can read, is an activity of very limited value. There are far better ways of practicing pronunciation.

Furthermore, Williams claims that this definition of reading does not mean that a foreign learner needs to understand everything in a text because understanding is not an ´all or nothing´ process either. The reader does not necessarily need to look at everything in a given piece of writing and is able to arrive at understanding without looking at every letter and words; an efficient reader usually reads in groups of words, not word by word, far less letter by letter.

Feathers Karen (2004) considers that "reading is a process of constructing meaning in which the reader is an active participant. Meaning doesn't flow automatically from the text to the reader; rather, the text contains clues that the reader uses to generate meaning" (p. 26).

To understand how this works, Feathers explains how we learn language. All our knowledge about language is based on our experiences. We develop concepts of "cat," "dog," "house," and everything else from our encounters with objects, people, and events.

Additionally, in a language program reading should not be regarded merely as a way of 'stamping in' structures and vocabulary already met through listening and speaking. As texts are permanent (unlike speech), they give the learner the chance of grappling with his problems in his own time. Spoon-feeding the learner by limiting his reading to language he already knows does not allow this development to take place. On the other hand texts should not be too difficult or the learner will be discouraged.

All in all, reading is the ability to recognize the symbols in text and speak the words that contain these symbols. There are also many definitions taken from internet, some of them are compiled below.

1. Reading is making meaning from print – a process called word recognition. Construct an understanding from them – a process called comprehension. Coordinate identifying words and making meaning so that reading is automatic and accurate – an achievement called fluency.
2. "Reading" is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them. When we read, we use our eyes to receive written symbols (letters, punctuation marks and spaces) and we use our brain to convert them into words, sentences and paragraphs that communicate something to us.
3. Reading is a complex cognitive process of decoding symbols in order to construct or derive meaning (reading comprehension). It is a means of language acquisition, of communication, and of sharing information and ideas.
4. Reading is not a straightforward process of lifting the words off the page. It is a complex process of problem solving in which the reader works to make sense of a text not just from the words and sentences on the page but also from the ideas, memories, and knowledge evoked by those words and sentences.
5. At the most basic level reading is the recognition of words. From simple recognition of the individual letters and how these letters form a particular word to what each word means not just on an individual level, but as part of a text.
6. Reading is the ability to correctly pronounce the words on the page. Source: What is Reading?at: http://www.teachreading.info/what-is-reading/ (21/08/2013).

All in all, ultimate aims for reading are that the learner should be able to read general texts with comprehension, read flexibly according to his purpose, be able to learn language and content from reading, and read with some degree of critical awareness. Moreover, from the previous definitions it can be inferred that certain elements are necessary to enable reading.

FUNDAMENTALS THAT READERS BRING TO THE TEXT
Williams (1996) identifies the following factors (pp. 3-10):
Knowledge of the Writing System

A writing system is a symbolic communication system that is always associated with spoken language. The effective reader has knowledge of the writing system because can recognize letters in printer´s form, e.g. a, b, c, etc., he can identify combinations of letters in spelling of words, and this helps him to recognize words.

It is assumed that the foreign language learner has already passed the stage of initial literacy in English, that is to say that he knows how to read in English. The real problem for the foreign learner is that he may not know many of the words in the text he is reading, and therefore cannot recognize them.

Knowledge of the Language

The effective reader knows the language of the text he is reading. He knows the content words and what they mean (though perhaps not all of them). He also knows the syntax (or grammar) of the language, that is to say the operation and effect of structural words, of word form, and of word order.

On the other hand, one of the principal problems of the foreign language learner, is that his knowledge of the language is incomplete, and this may cause serious difficulty with some texts. In fact a fundamental difference between the native speaker and the foreign learner is that the former uses knowledge of the language to help him read, whereas the latter uses reading to help him learn the language.

Ability to Interpret

Understanding the 'plain sense' or obvious meaning of individual sentences is important, but it is not enough. The effective reader brings with him the ability to recognize the purpose of the text as a whole, to see how the text is organized, and to understand the relationship between sentences. He is able in fact to 'follow' the writer, and not simply understand the sentences. In a general sense, we may refer to this as the ability to interpret. In this context, Dawn Dodson (2010) considers that reading is "the ability to easily read and understand texts written in the language"
at:http://www.lessonplanet.com/directory_articles/language_arts_lesson_plans/20_April_2010/383/ready_set_read_teaching_reading_fluency.(30/07/2013)

Knowledge of the world

Williams considers that all readers bring something with them to a text, in terms of a general stock of knowledge, sometimes termed 'knowledge of the world'. Whether it helps them to understand the text or not will of course depend on the nature of the text and the nature of their knowledge.

Besides, knowledge of the world does not only cover knowledge of a particular topic. It may include familiarity with different text types or knowledge of a particular culture or way of life. Newspaper articles, for instance, often assume the reader will have knowledge of

the current political situation, or of the world of entertainment or sport. This can, of course, be a problem even for a reader who speaks the same language as the writer. However, for the foreign language learner the problem may be greater, for his cultural background may be quite different from that of the writer.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT READING?

Reading always takes place within a context and is specific to the context that surrounds the act of reading. According to Feathers Karen (2004) "Three factors: the text, the reader, and the context of the reading situation — influence reading. They are not, in fact, entirely separate. Rather, they overlap and interact to affect the reading process". (p. 23).

The Text

According to this author, the vocabulary, sentence structure, and organizational patterns of reading materials vary. Fictional narratives differ from poems and info texts. A history text is different from a science. Dorothy Hennings (2001) writes that each discipline has its own essential ideas or ways of knowing; that is, each subject area organizes the relevant information in a different way. The structures of each discipline are reflected in the organization of the texts of the subject area and require different types of reading. If these structures are unfamiliar to readers, they can cause difficulty.

Additionally, the readability of texts also varies. Some texts are well written and offer support for the reader. They use familiar sentence structures, are well organized, provide links between ideas, and define terms clearly. Other texts are not as well written and may be disorganized, contain sentences that are too simple or too complex, and fail to define terminology or link major concepts. Texts such as these are not "reader-friendly," making comprehension difficult.

The Reader

Feathers (2004) also considers that the reader also affects the reading process. A reader's physical and emotional state affects how he approaches reading experiences. Is the reader tired? hungry? happy? stressed? Any one of these factors can make a difference in how readers approach texts.

Moreover, the reader doesn't operate in isolation but interacts with the reading material and the situation in which the reading occurs. A student whose parents are divorcing might be upset and unable to concentrate on reading a science text. On the other hand, the same student may eagerly read a story about a child of divorced parents or informational material about coping with divorce.

As a consequence, the prior knowledge of the reader is also important. A reader's familiarity with both the topic and the format of the text substantially influences his ability to understand. If both the topic and format are unfamiliar, however, the reader is likely to

have difficulty comprehending. This is why so many of us have trouble with, for example, income tax forms.

It is assumed that readers learn a language by studying its vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, not by actually reading it. In this context, lower level learners read only sentences and paragraphs generated by textbook writers and instructors whilst good readers have developed the language skills needed to read extensively as well as integrate information in the text with existing knowledge, they are also motivated and have a flexible reading style, depending on what they are reading, good readers also read for a purpose. Defining what actions good readers take while reading, that is to say which good reading habits they will use, builds great readers.

To sum up, "reading is a complex interaction between the text, the reader and the purposes for reading, which are shaped by the reader's prior knowledge and experiences, the reader's knowledge about reading and writing language and the reader's language community which is culturally and socially situated". Hughes, J. (2007). At:
http://faculty.uoit.ca/hughes/Reading/ReadingProcess.html (28/07/2013)

The Context of the Reading Situation

"The context of the reading situation includes where the material is found, the physical location of the reader when reading, constraints imposed upon the reading, and the purpose for reading". (Feathers, 2004, p. 24).

Moreover, readers have different expectations of various types of material and these expectations influence the reading process. For example, readers expect newspapers to be easy to read as well as biased. They expect novels to focus on human events in chronological order and to be enjoyable. They expect textbooks to contain lists of facts, to have a logical organization, and to be boring and hard to read. Because of these expectations, readers approach various kinds of material differently.

On the other hand, the reader's physical location, according to Feathers, also makes a difference. Aspects of the physical location affecting comfort also influence the reading process. Am I in a comfortable cozy chair or seated in a hard chair with my book on a desk? Is the room too cold or too warm? How much noise surrounds me? These are vital questions to consider.

In addition, the context can also constrain processing. In schools, teachers often impose constraints on processing by setting reading-related tasks. Requiring readers to answer questions at the end of a chapter, fill in worksheets, find definitions, and make an outline focus attention on particular aspects of the text and suggest particular ways of reading. Students who are asked to fill in worksheets often avoid reading the entire text but skim to find the appropriate information.

The purpose for reading also forms part of the context of a situation. For example, stories are typically read for enjoyment, to experience a lived-through event, understand human characters and emotions, and recognize and appreciate the author's craft.

READING PHASES AND THEIR SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES

Pre-reading

Pre-reading consists on examining a text superficially and rapidly to determine the main ideas or the plot. This process of skimming a text allows locating key ideas before reading a text from start to finish. Nordquist R. (2006) considers that pre-reading provides an overview that can increase reading speed and efficiency. On this regard, pre-reading involves looking at titles, chapter introductions, summaries, headings, subheadings, study questions, and conclusions. Alan Jacobs (2011) considers that to be successful today, it not only becomes necessary to skim, but it becomes essential to skim well.

In fact, brainstorming, class discussions, semantic mapping, pre-questions, visual aids, advanced organizers, overviews, vocabulary previews, structural organizers, a purpose for reading, real life experiences, author consideration and KWL are some pre-reading strategies mentioned by Karla Porter (2005) at:
http://departments.weber.edu/teachall/reading/prereading.html (28/07/ 2013)

To emphasize this matter, Brassell D. and Rasinski T. (2008) consider that pre-reading strategies allow students to think about what they already know about a given topic and predict what they will read or hear. Before students read any text, teachers can direct their attention to how a text is organized, teach unfamiliar vocabulary or other concepts, search for the main idea, and provide students with a purpose for reading or listening. Most importantly, teachers can use pre-reading strategies to increase students interest in a text.

Nevertheless, teachers have to deal with some common problems with reading materials. "Learners lack motivation; teachers are uncertain as to how they should carry out language preparation; teachers are unsure about selecting and devising reading-related activities" (Williams, 1996, p. 51).A good method of approaching these problems is to look at the reading session in terms of three phases: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading.

In other words, the aim of pre-reading is to arouse interest in the topic by drawing on the learners' knowledge of the world and on their opinions. It can also generate relevant vocabulary. It is carried out before learners have seen the text. When a teacher starts the lesson saying "please turn to page 34, read the passage and answer the questions." is hardly likely to motivate the learners because as Williams (1996) claims: "What the pre-reading phase tries to do is:
1. To introduce and arouse interest in the topic
2. To motivate learners by giving a reason for reading
3. To provide some language preparation for the text." (p. 37)

All in all, this author claims that not all of these aims will be relevant for all texts. In any case, language preparation does not mean that the teacher should explain every possible unknown word and structure in the text, but that he should ensure that the learners will be able to tackle the text tasks without being totally frustrated by language difficulties. In other words language preparation can be carried out by the learners, as well as by the teacher. Visuals as diagrams, maps, photographs, drawing up of lists, oral and written questions may all play a part in pre- reading.

While-reading

This phase draws on the text, rather than the learner's ideas previous to reading. The aims of this phase according to Williams (1996, p. 38) are:
1. To help understanding of the writer's purpose
2. To help understanding of the text structure
3. To clarify text content

In this phase the learner may be asked to find the answers to questions given at the beginning of the text (pre-text questions), or to questions inserted at various points within the text. The learner may also be asked to complete diagrams or maps, make lists, take notes are other types of while-reading work. What the teacher needs to do is consider what the effect of these exercises is, and whether this corresponds to both his and his learners' aims.

As a rule, while-reading work should begin with a general or global understanding of the text, and then move to smaller units such as paragraphs, sentences and words. The reason for this is that the larger units provide a context for understanding the smaller units - a paragraph or sentence, for example, may help the reader to understand a word.

According to Castilleja, G. (2012) students are often told to underline or highlight "parts that stand out." She suggests teachers explicitly teach students what kinds of things to look for and highlight to set a purpose for reading. Castilleja cites Tovani (2004) who explains that "merely underlining text is not enough. Thinking about the text must accompany the underlining" (p. 69).

Firstly, Candillejas mentions **annotating** as a during reading strategy. She claims that students can make their thinking visible by annotating. Annotations can be a paraphrasing of the information, identification of the main idea, or adding the students´ questions or reactions. Furthermore, readers are more likely to interact with the text because they engage the content if they are paraphrasing.

Moreover, if students look up from the page and are unable to annotate the text, they are thereby given a clue that they did not comprehend. Without this routine, many students tend to continue reading without ever assessing their own comprehension. With enough practice, a student can identify the main idea and write it in the margin.

As students continue, their annotations are not limited to the main idea but can also reflect the higher-order thinking skills usually practiced by good readers. Tovani (2004) states, "If I want readers to reuse and remember the information they read, I have to help them learn how to mark text" (p. 5). By guiding students to write their questions, predictions, reactions, and connections to the text on the text, we help them learn how to "hold their thinking" (p. 17) so they can use it later.

Secondly, Castilleja, G. (2012) mentions a second after reading strategy and calls it **Underline and Define Vocabulary on the Spot**. She considers that if in a test a word is underlined, a student will be asked in one way or another to define it. Because many words have multiple meanings, students must define the word as soon as they encounter it. In other words, the right definition is used, based on the context in which the word is used. She cites Vacca and Vacca (2007), "vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to text comprehension," and good readers "try to determine meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts in the text" (pp. 16, 17). According to this fact, students should use context clues to infer the meanings of new words, and their definitions should be written in the margin so the students can refer to their notes when asked.

Post-reading
On this stage Williams (1996, p. 39) claims that the aims of post-reading work are:

1. To consolidate or reflect upon what has been read
2. To relate the text to the learners' own knowledge, interests, or views.

Post-reading may also include any reactions to the text and to the while-reading work, as a consequence, learners say whether they liked it, and found it useful or not. The three phases need not be followed rigidly in every case, it they offer the teacher a framework which can help to overcome the problems outlined above. Moreover the pre- and post -reading phases generate activities which call on other skills, and help to integrate these skills with the reading. A useful suggestion would be to include guided questions for pre, during, and post reading as well as open-ended questions that help the reader ponder the text and think more critically, at a deeper level.

Block C. and Israel S. (2004) claim that highly skilled readers use similar thought processes before, during, and after reading. They (a) adjust a reading goal according to their level of prior knowledge, (b) think strategically, (c) follow their intentions to the end of a passage, (d) monitor their comprehension, and (e) reflect on an author's purpose within the constraints of a particular genre and their own reading objective. Furthermore, recent research reports and panel syntheses agree that all readers should use these expert thinking processes. However, many less able readers will not do so unless their teachers become proficient in demonstrating these thinking processes.

On the other hand, Teaching as Leadership (2009) considers that independent readers are those who are constantly monitoring their understanding of the text as they read it. These individuals are predicting, questioning, clarifying, summarizing, connecting, and evaluating as they read, essentially engaging in a dialogue with the author and themselves in their

minds. This organization claims that before discussing specific pre-, during- and post-reading strategies, one overarching key to comprehension is the understanding of a text at the structural and organizational level. They also claim that teachers must teach students how to learn from a textbook that is replete with structural and organizational elements that either enhance comprehension or simply provide more confusing text on a page.

On this regard, students who can understand text structures, that is to say chapter titles, section headings and subheadings, bolded vocabulary, figures, captions, and keys, are much more able to access the information in a text. At: Teaching as Leadership (2009) http://teachingasleadership.org/sites/default/files/Related-readings/SL_Ch4_2011.pdf. (06/09/2013).

This same source claims that the stage of the reading process after students have read is ripe with opportunities to build students' reading comprehension by means of post-reading strategies that teachers have found effective. The first one is called **Scales** and provides students with opportunities to articulate an opinion based on the themes, events, or concepts of a text. Once again, the best statements are those that aren't clearly true or false, but are somewhat debatable. In other words, readers are asked to determine how much they agree or disagree with each statement using the qualifiers strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree.

In this same context, Teaching as Leadership (2009) calls the second post-reading strategy **Very Important Points (VIPs)**. It makes readers accountable for picking out the key concepts in a passage by having students share their notes on the ideas after the class has read a text. As students read, they write questions on sticky-notes about what they have read. In addition, readers mark the three most important points of the text. Then, as a post-reading activity, students work in groups of three or four, have a discussion and answer to their questions. It is critical to have students justify what they have answered or marked as important.

To sum up, pre-reading strategies prepare students for learning by activating their prior knowledge about the topic featured in the text. During-reading strategies teach comprehension by making connections, generating questions, reflecting on the information in the text and determining importance by guiding the reader to use proficient reader strategies. After reading strategies clarify their understanding of the text connecting the old and new knowledge and help students frame it in some way to their lives. At: Before, During, and After Reading Strategies http://www.smoran.ednet.ns.ca/Reader'sworkshop/before_during_after_reading.htm (30/08/2013)

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