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THE EFFECT OF KNOWING THE MAIN IDEA OF A TEXT ON ANSWERING MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS WHICH LOOK FOR THE DETAILS OF THE TEXT

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Abstract

This paper describes a classroom research with two groups of high school students to clarify the effect of knowing the main of a text (here, the name of a story) on answering multiple-choice questions which look for details. The two groups read the same story with an appropriate level of difficulty which was suitable for their level of English proficiency. The only difference between their stories was that one of them had the name of the story above it and the other did not have. Each group then took a reading comprehension test and their mean scores were compared. The findings suggest that the group of students who read the story with the name of it above did not excel the group who read the same story without its name when answering to questions looking for minute aspects of the story. This lack of excellence shows that knowing the main idea of a text does not play an important role in answering reading comprehension questions which look for details of a text. The results suggest more research in this realm and also the need for instruction on answering reading comprehension texts.

مستخلص

توضح هذه الورقة البحثية الفصول الدراسية مع مجموعتين من طلاب المدارس الثانوي لقو ضيح تأثير معرفة الرئيسي للنص (هنا، واسم قصه) الإجابة على أسئلة متعددة الخيارات التي تبد وللحصول على التفاصيل. المجموعتين قراءة نفس القصة مع مستوى مناسب من الصعوبة التي كانت مناسبة لمستواهم وللغة الإنجليزية.

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كان الفارق الوحيد بينقصصهمأن واحدا منهم كالاسم القصة فوقه، والآخرلم يكن لديك.ثم استغرق
كل مجموعة اختبار القراءة والفهم وتمت مقارنتقائجحهميعني. وتشير النتائج إلىأن مجموعة من الطلاب
الذين قرأوالقصةمع اسم أنه لم يكن فوق التفوق المجموعة الذين قرأوالقصة نفسها دولاتهماعند الإجابة
على أسئلة تبحث عنجوانب دقيقةمن القصة.هذا النقص فيالتفوق يظهرأن معرفةالفكرة الرئيسية للنص
لا يلعب دورا مهماني الرد علىأسئلة الفهملقراءةالتي تبدولاطلاع على تفاصيل النصوتشير النتائج إلى
المزيد من البحوثي هذا المجالوأيضا الحاجة إلىتعليماتالإجابة علىقراءةالنصوصالفهم

Keywords: *Reading comprehension, reading instruction, reading process, second language learning*

A. Introduction

Recent studies on reading comprehension show a growing interest in trying to grasp the meaning of a text and answering the related questions as soon and correctly as possible. Several studies have focused on the topic as an important feature of a text that is believed to facilitate the reading process. While several authors have studied this issue from the descriptive and contrastive perspectives, there is a lack of experimental work on this aspect of a text.

The concept of reading as a bottom-up, top-down process and metacognitive skills is now well consolidated in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) instructional frameworks (Kenneth Chastain, 1988). This approach is particularly effective in teaching reading skills for academic or special purposes. In addition to decoding meaning from the printed material with bottom-up skills, successful readers implement top-down skills to activate their prior knowledge of content and use textual cues to help them cope with new information. Parallel to this interactive process between the reader and the content, there is also another important type of process in the mind of the reader, a process in which the reader tries to guess the main idea of a text, i.e., the intra-personal mental process. This process helps the reader approach the text from a relatively top _down orientation and paves the way for him or her to guess the rest of the text and motivates him or her to continue the reading process as well as enjoy it as a whole and a complete text. This process helps the readers to interpret, evaluate and develop attitudes towards that material (Halliday, 1985a).

Several studies have discussed the positive effects of the presence of the main idea of a text as its topic while reading it. These effects help readers to gain a holistic view toward the content of a text in general and not an analytic view toward all of its revealed and hidden points. With reference to Marianne Celce-Murcia (2001) and Crismore (1989) both point out that topic allows written texts to be understood more easily on the part of the reader because this clue (i.e., the topic) provides the reader with a chance to participate in the reading process as an effective role player.

On the textual level, Crismore (1989) notes that the discourse structuring and the coherence of a text as well as any textual clues guide readers through a text and help them to organize content and enhance general understanding as they read, thus fostering global comprehension. Crismore (1989) further suggests that the concept included in the topic can promote critical thinking as readers are able to formulate their own opinions and compare them to those of the writer. Generally speaking, he emphasizes on the positive effect of the topic on global comprehension and does not clearly discuss the issue from analytic point of view on reading comprehension.

Other benefits of knowing the topic or guessing the main idea of a text derive from the help it can provide the readers as they proceed in reading a text. Crismore (1989) and Hyland (1999) maintain that writers use certain metadiscursive devices to produce an effect by which they can increase the role of the reader in the reading comprehension process. According to Crismore & Vande Kopple (1997), depending on writers' underlying purposes and readers' expectations, deciding on an appropriate topic is a contributing factor for a well-written text; for example, in expert to non-expert communication (e.g., textbooks) topics help readers to become interested in subject of study, thus the motivation to continue reading the text takes more strength. These devices are also an important persuasive resources used to influence readers' reactions toward texts. These reactions originate from values and established conventions of a given discourse community.

In L2 instructional contexts, it has been observed that an awareness of the main idea or the topic of a text is particularly useful in helping non-native speakers of English with the difficult task of grasping the writer's stance when reading challenging authentic materials, (Dubin & Bycina,

1991). Brown (2001) suggests that this ability enables non-native learners to better follow the writer's line of reasoning in argumentative texts. Research-based observations indicate that specific instruction on guessing the focal viewpoint of the writer can be useful to help L2 readers learn to distinguish factual content from the writer's commentary.

Writers' main points of view have been investigated from a descriptive standpoint and have been shown to be a prominent feature of various types of academic texts. These include school textbooks (Crismore, 1989), university textbooks and doctoral dissertations (Hyland, 1999). This prominent feature of a text has also been studied comparatively in order to understand its differences across cultures. Some work has focused on this issue (i.e., writing topics) in students' writing. Some text linguists analyzed ESL university students' essays and concluded that good writers paid a greater attention to writing meaningful and appropriate topics than poor writers. These text linguists, according to Brown and Yule (1983), conducted an experiment to investigate the effect of instruction on writing an appropriate topic of university essays for native-speaker university students.

An experimental group that had been taught the form, function and purpose of topic, learned to use it effectively and produce compositions that earned significantly higher scores than those of a control group, which had received no instruction on writing essay topics. However, little experimental work has been done on the effects of knowing or guessing the main idea of a written text on reading comprehension. Two studies have been done with native speakers of English. Crismore (1989) attempted to determine whether including informational and attitudinal topics in passages of social studies textbooks would influence reading comprehension or not. She found that there was some improvement in comprehension after reading passages with both types of topics.

Although the findings of these studies do not provide clear evidence that the presence of a topic in a text improves comprehension, they do suggest that it has a facilitating role, and it is worth further study. The purpose of this research was to clarify the influence of knowing the topic a text on reading comprehension in general and on answering comprehension questions in

particular. This study was carried out in Mashhad, in a non-profit non-governmental high school in which local male students attend.

B. Review of the Related Literature
1. Definition of Reading

Reading can be seen as an "interactive" process between a reader and a text which leads to automat city or (reading fluency). In this process, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as he/she tries to elicit the meaning and where various kinds of knowledge are being used: linguistic or systemic knowledge (through bottom-up processing) as well as schematic knowledge (through top-down processing). Since reading is a complex process, Grabe argues that "many researchers attempt to understand and explain the fluent reading process by analyzing the process into a set of component skills" (1991, p. 379) in reading; consequently researchers proposed at least six general component skills and knowledge areas:

    a. Automatic recognition skills
    b. Vocabulary and structural knowledge
    c. Formal discourse structure knowledge
    d. Content/world background knowledge
    e. Synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies
    f. Metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring

2. The Cognitive Tasks Involved in Reading

Carrell and Eisterhold outline the processes involved in this interactive process where both bottom-up and top-down processing occur simultaneously at all levels: Available through bottom-up processing; top-down processing facilitates their assimilation if they are anticipated by or consistent with the listener/reader's conceptual expectations. Bottom-up processing ensures that the listeners/ readers will be sensitive to information that is novel or that does not fit their processing helps the listeners/readers to resolve ambiguities or to select between alternative possible interpretations of the incoming data (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983: 557).

Researchers, however, are still investigating the ways through which these two kinds of knowledge interact with each other during the process of

reading. Jeanne S. Chall, an advocate of the phonics approach, is known for her continued struggle with the war between "those advocating phonics instruction [bottom-up processing] and those advocating whole language [top-down processing], which relies in part on instruction using sight words." (Abraham, 2002: 1) Chall argues that a "systematic direct teaching of decoding should be part of initial reading instruction" (Orasanu, 1986: 114). Other bottom-up theorists included Gough (1972), LaBerge and Samuels (1974).

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983: 562) state that accessing appropriate content schemata depends initially on "the graphic display" which "must be somehow reconstructed by the reader as meaningful language". Therefore, readers can improve reading comprehension by expanding their vocabularies and gaining greater control over complex syntactic structures. Contemporary insights believe that grammar facilitates learning and its presentations to learners should be through "contextualization of linguistic forms in situations of natural use" (Hedge, 2003: 159) Iversen & Tunmer list the five stages for developing word recognition which were proposed by Spencer and Hay:

a. Glance and guess;

b. Sophisticated guessing;

c. Simple phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences (e.g. letter sounding out);

d. Recognition of analogy (recognition of word patterns within a word, such as and in sand);

e. Later word recognition, involving compound words and syllabification (e.g. recognizing playground as play plus ground) (Spencer & Hay, 1998: 223).

When a child is confronted with an unfamiliar word, he/she is first encouraged to look into the word for familiar letter and spelling patterns, and then to use context as back up support to confirm hypotheses as to what that word might be, e.g. make is m plus ake, as cake is c plus ake. Moorman and Ram (1994: 646) propose their functional theory which aims at describing the cognitive tasks involved in reading through the ISAAC (Integrated Story Analysis and Creativity) system.

3. The Importance of Teaching Reading

Hedge (2003) states that any reading component of an English language course may include a set of learning goals for the ability to read a wide range of texts in English. Thus is the long-range goal classroom. Most teachers seek to develop through independent readers outside EFL/ESL:

a. Building knowledge of language which will facilitate reading ability.
b. Building schematic knowledge.
c. The ability to adapt the reading style according to reading purpose (i.e. skimming, scanning).
d. Developing an awareness of the structure of written texts in English.
e. Taking a critical stance to the contents of the texts.

The last goal can be implemented at an advanced level. Students, however, should be kept aware that not all Internet content is authentic since there are no "gate keepers" and anyone can post whatever he/she likes in this cyberspace. Consequently, students can check the authenticity of the text by looking at the following indicators: whether the article gives the name of the author or no, the date of publication, the aim of the article, etc.

4. How to teach reading?

Moorman & Ram (1994: 646) state that although much of the research has been carried out on teaching reading, "yet no theories exist which sufficiently describe and explain how people accomplish the complete task of reading real-world texts". Graesser describes six basic ehension: linguistic, rhetorical, causal, intentional, spatial, and roles, personalities, and objects. The theory, however, lacks a process. Van Dijk and Kitsch proposed their reading model in 1983, but it falls short by being unable to handle creative reading.

Gabb (2000) poses a very important question why learners face difficulties in moving into fluency stage although they have had basic decoding skills. She identifies a number of "barriers" which I believe the most important are limited vocabulary and lack of background knowledge

(schematic knowledge). Orasanu (1986) states that "the knowledge a reader brings to a text is a principal determiner of how that text will be comprehended, and what may be learned and remembered" (Gabb, 2000: 32). The key aspect to reading fluency is the expansion of vocabulary.

C. Methodology
1. Subjects

The test was administered to two groups of students with 55 students in each group. The students had almost the same age (i.e., 16 or 17 and in seven cases 18) and all were studying in the third-grade of high school. They belonged to moderately rich families and coming from educationally upper-class of Mashhad community. They were also motivated to take part in this exam because all of them were preparing for nationwide university examination in the next educational year. The only instruction which they received in terms of English proficiency was in their high school and they were all taught English by their high school teachers, in other words they said that none of them attended any kind of English courses out of their high school setting.

This study was carried out in a formal educational setting _ in a non-profit, non-governmental high school _ in which the national rules of Ministry of Education of Islamic Republic of Iran must be completely observed. Therefore the permission of including female students among male students of this high school, due to the national rules, was not given to the researcher. There were two gathering halls available to the researcher so that he had no limitation in terms of having the students take the test at the same time without knowing the only difference of the two versions of it. The other aspect of these gathering halls was that they were large enough to seat 55 students of each group without any problem because this issue is of prime importance both in terms of instructing students and providing them with their tests. Both the instruction on how to take a reading comprehension test and the session of administration of the test were carried out at 6:00 pm, so the gathering halls were quite quiet because at that time no other students were present in the high school.

2. Design

Since there are two groups in this study one experimental and one control group who didn't receive information about the topic, and also there is treatment so the experimental research method has been used for the purpose of this study.

3. Instrumentation

The text utilized for this study comes from the book of L. A. Hill (1980) which is specially written for reading comprehension by the name of "Steps to Understanding". Some teachers and textbook writers believe that this book has had a major influence on the approach toward writing special books focusing only on reading comprehension. The story was exactly extracted from the first part of this book which is devoted to elementary-level students. As mentioned before, I made two copies from my sample story: one with its name above and the other without it.

The availability of two authentic versions of the same text by the same author presents a rather unique opportunity to investigate the effect of the independent variable (i.e., knowing the main idea of a text) on the dependent variable (i.e., reading comprehension) without having to artificially manipulate texts _here we do not consider "the cutting the name of story out" as an important manipulation to effect the reliability of the study. However, a meaning-based analysis of the text points out that the main idea of the story was really included in the name of it. This study was undertaken with the underlying hypothesis that the long version of the story (the one with its name above) is actually more comprehensible to L2 readers than the short version (the one without its name above) due to the presence of the name of the story.

The selection of the sample story was exactly based on the proficiency level of the students. This proficiency level was determined through asking students to take a pre-test. (Nelson's pre-intermediate grammar test). According to the results of this pre-test, some of the students were left out of the sample group of the subjects. Being sure of the proficiency level of the representative sample, they were given some instruction on how to take a reading comprehension test. The researcher of

the study was also anxious about not letting students to know that they are given two different versions of the same tests, although the only difference was just either having the name of the story or not (as mentioned before, one of tests had a story with its name above and the other test with a story without its name above).

One other point to consider is the content of the story which was deliberately chosen to be interesting enough to make students continue reading it while taking the test and not leave it unfinished until the very last part of it. Also the appearance of the test had the appropriate validity to have the subjects take it as a real and serious one. Meanwhile the same attention was given to the format of the whole test and the font of letters by which the items (i.e., stems, distracters and the correct response of each item) were typed. The reliability of the test and its items was the other issue which was appropriately taken into account. To keep the story as authentic as possible no adjustments were made to the content of it.

For validating the test, first of all the emphasis was on content validation approach. According to Bachman (1990) the content validation approach is squarely on the judgment of experts. In assessing the CVR(Content Validity Ratio), a panel of subject matter experts (English teachers here) was asked to examine each item on the test to determine whether the item is "essential", "useful" or "not necessary" to the operationalization of the construct. Across raters, the CVR for an item was determined as follows:

$$CVR = \frac{Ne - N/2}{N/2}$$

Ne is the number of subject matters rating the item as essential and N is the total number of subject matter experts making a rating.

$$CVR = \frac{25 - 30/2}{30/2} = \frac{25 - 15}{15} = 10/15 = 0.66$$

According to (Schmitt& Ostroff 1986) the CVR can range from +1 to -1 for a particular item. This formula was used for all of the test items (all 50 items) to determine its content validity and each time the gained CVR was

0.66. And according to (Schmitt& Ostroff 1986) the CVR of 0.66 for each item would be sufficient with 30 experts.

4. Procedure

From about 170 students, two groups of 55 participants were randomly selected (approximately two out of three students). The students could freely enroll in the instructional period of the course starting only from one month after the beginning of the educational year in Iran (i.e., on September 23rd, 2007). Therefore, they came to the course willingly and with enough information about the purpose of the course and the test that they had to take at the end of the it. It also should be mentioned that they had no idea about the name of the book they had to read and its test format before enrolling in the course. The English proficiency level of the students was determined through an English proficiency test and according its results, most of them belonged to elementary level and it is needless to say that some of the students' name was crossed out from the experiment. The three sessions of instruction was aimed at informing students on the required reading comprehension skills and strategies and was also to prepare them for a multiple-choice examination sample texts as well as the English vocabulary and type of questions used in the test. In fact, the reading course focused on global reading strategies (e.g., identifying the main points, inferring meanings and understanding text structures) and vocabulary building.

The final test was conducted in gathering halls of the high school and it was exactly three days after the final session of the instruction. In one of the gathering halls group one, in their test, read the story with its title or name above and in the other gathering hall group two took the test in which the same story but without its title or name was included. Three school teachers helped me during the test administration to decrease the potential chance of cheating among students. The final point to mention here is that the test was administered during regular instructional periods with time limit of 10 minutes.

5. Scoring Method

The first point to consider about the scoring method is that the total score that each individual could take was four. There are two reasons for this;

1) Due to the briefness of the story, only four plausible items could be made. 2) The students were made sure that the results of this test would not have any effect on their regular high school test results and this test would be considered as an informative-predictive test, mainly on the part of the students, and the final score (i.e., maximum 4) which was almost queer to them could serve this purpose. For the reading comprehension test, mean scores were calculated globally (minimum 0/maximum 4) and for also each individual question (1 point for the correct response vs. 0 points for an incorrect response). It also seemed useful to compare responses to individual items since they were not all of the same nature (e.g., global vs. individual focus).

All the means were then compared by using a two-tailed t-test, with a .05 level of significance required to reject the null hypothesis that there would be no statistically significant differences between the two treatment groups.

D. Results

The following table represents the results of the t-test analyses for the reading comprehension test. Out of a maximum score of 4, the mean scores were 2.98 for the first group (G1) who take the complete story with its name and 2.71 for the second group (G2) who take the complete story without its name. The difference between the two means was not statistically significant. However, at the level of individual questions, two significant differences were found. In G1, students had significantly higher scores on question #1 (p = .01) that asked students to identify the main point of the story and on question #4 (p = .02) that asked students to determine the main character of the story.

Table 1. Reading comprehension test: comparison of mean scores (both for total test and for individual questions) assessed by means of the independent samples t-test

	Total test		Question 1		Question 2		Question 3		Question 4	
	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2	G1	G2
Mean score	2.98	2.71	0.90	0.72	0.75	0.81	0.65	0.72	0.65	0.43
Variance	0.79	0.95	0.08	0.20	0.19	0.15	0.23	0.20	0.23	0.25
Pooled variance	0.87		0.14		0.17		0.21		0.24	

t-stat	1.53	2.52	0.92	-0.82	2.33
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.13	*0.01**	0.36	0.41	*0.02**

G1 = Group1 who read the complete story with its name

G2 = Group2 who read the complete story without its name

* Significant at p < .05

N = 55 students in each group

df = 108

t critical two-tail = 1.98

E. Discussion

The statistical analysis of the mean scores did not produce conclusive evidence that the story above which its name was included was more comprehensible than the same story without its name above. Since p<.05 so it can be conferred that the difference between the obtained scores of 2 groups is unimportant ,However, the fact that there were significant differences between the two groups, for two questions out of four, provides us with some implications to consider. In question #1, the first group (G1) more clearly understood the main point of the story. A possible explanation could be described as this: they answered this question because in their test the story was included which had a name; the content of the name was similar to the main point of the story.

Thus, it can be said that the existence of the name of the story can have a potential impact on reading comprehension of the subjects, at least in answering to the relevant question. In question #4, again students in G1 were more successful in answering to this item which was looking for the main character of the story. This may also be explained through considering the existence of the name of the story in their exam. In the name of the story the word "The old lady" helped students to infer the name of the main character more easily. It is also worth noting that this form of writing (i.e., the forms in which the authors provides readers with some clues to infer or guess the main idea of a text more easily) promotes comprehension (Crismore, 1989). Furthermore, the clues to the main point of the story do not help readers to

better understand minute aspects of the text. As Crismore and Vande Kopple (1997) found in their study, topics and titles generally had a positive affect on reading comprehension and also on readers' attitudes towards reading a given text but it do not promote readers' comprehension about those aspects of the text which are irrelevant to its topic or title. It is also reasonable that readers who have a more positive attitude towards a text are also likely to understand more of what they read.

F. Concluding Remarks

On a general level, the results of this study show that the presence of the title or the topic of a text can have a positive influence on comprehension. In other words, the greater the presence of some types of clues to the main point of a text, the more comprehensible the text will be. However, this interpretation needs to be dealt with cautiously. As it was mentioned previously, this research was carried out under conditions imposed by the formal instructional setting in which certain limitations were unavoidable. Although the general English language proficiency of the students was on the same level, as shown by the results of the pre-test, it would be important to take account of possible differences in individual reading strategies and their learning styles.

Moreover, a larger-scale study with more participants, longer text treatments and more tests with more items would provide more reliable data, and therefore a more reliable evidence for the final results of the study. Nevertheless, these findings indicate that the presence of the main idea of a reading text, in any form, such as titles or names, could have some implications for teaching any language in general and English in particular. Briefly speaking, this issue deserves more attention in L2 reading research, and perhaps most importantly, identifies some specific directions for further research. In fact, doing the same, if not similar, study under more controlled conditions and omitting potentially influential variables would yield more conclusive results.

On a practical level, these findings may be used to determine instructional actions to be undertaken in this or similar teaching contexts. In fact, the most important contribution of this study is its classroom applications.

Since students seem to have little awareness of the impact of inferring the main idea of a text on their reading comprehension, at least improvement on answering question looking for broad aspects and issues of a text, specific instruction should be integrated into reading comprehension courses to help students become more successful readers. This is a particularly crucial aspect in academic fields in which most students have problems in taking their academic as well as general English proficiency tests.

According to the results of this study, students should be warned against being misleader by the names or titles of a reading text when answering to analytical questions or questions looking for details. And finally it seems to be of prime importance to ask students look for two kind of clues while reading a text: 1) the clues which guide readers toward the minute points of the text 2) the clues which help readers easier and better come to the broad and main point s of a text such as the name or the title of the text. Future researchers who are interested to work on reading skill can conduct this research in different settings with different subjects; like students of different language background with higher proficiency in English and they can also use another kind of materials for treating the subjects during the course participation. Or they can use the topics whose name doesn't directly imply the main point of the topic and report their findings in order to get more evidence in this field and help all of those worldwide who are making efforts to improve reading comprehension skill.

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