English as a Second/Foreign Language Reading Comprehension: A Framework for Curriculum and Instruction

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to present a curriculum and instruction framework for teaching ESL/EFL reading comprehension. Grounded in the L1 and L2 theoretical and research knowledge base, the proposed framework provides a number of dimensions and examples of best practice, based on which, reading teachers may organize their efforts to enhance their learners' reading comprehension in a language other than their own.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Framework, ESL, EFL, Curriculum, Instruction

Introduction

Reading is an important act of specific and general communication frequently performed for personal, social, and academic purposes. The threshold of literacy is currently already high in most societies all over the globe and the demand for reading proficiency in daily life and the workplace has become more pressing than ever. This is primarily due to expansion in knowledge production and dissemination, modern communication technology, and globalization.

The outcome of the reading act is comprehension with its various types of literal understanding of stated ideas as well as higher-order types which include interpretive, critical, and creative comprehension (Roe & Smith, 2012). As such, comprehension of written texts, even in one's native language, is a complex psycholinguistic task which entails understanding the stated and implied ideas, making inferences, assessing information, and producing new products based on what is read. Furthermore, numerous textual, reader-related, and context-specific factors influence comprehension. This is particularly the case in the context of ESL/EFL reading where a range of linguistic and socio-cultural variations as well as social

factors may further impact readers' comprehension of texts written in a language other than their own, as suggested by Grabe (2009).

The preceding overview of the importance and nature of the reading process as a complex act of communication underscores the need for an instructional theory of reading instruction grounded in the extant research and based on exemplary best practice in the field of teaching reading comprehension. Consequently, I reviewed the knowledge and research base in L1 and ESL/EFL reading in order to explore and confirm the threads that appear to run through reading models, research base, and instructional best practices in order to devise an instructional theory of reading comprehension. The study is premised on the assumption that reading teachers and practitioners need a valid theoretical perspective from which to plan their endeavor, as well as examples of proven and effective teaching techniques and strategies.

The Instructional Framework

In developing the framework, I was guided by a number of hypotheses regarding the possible determinants of comprehension. These hypotheses were generated based on the pedagogical implications of a number of first language (L1) and second language (L2) reading models that have influenced ESL/EFL reading theories and instructional practices. According to Barnett (1989), L1 reading models can be categorized into bottom up, top down, and interactive categories of models. The bottom up category (e.g., Gough, 1972; Laberge & Samuel, 1974; Carver, 1977) views reading as a process of decoding the text in order to extract the writer's intended meaning in a linear fashion beginning with letters, words, phrases, and sentences, following which the text is processed in small chunks. Conversely, the top-down models (e.g., Goodman 1976; Smith, 1971) consider reading as an active-constructive process in which the reader draws on his/her background knowledge to actively create meaning. Meanwhile, the interactive models (e.g., Anderson & Pearson, 1979; Kintsch & Dijk, 1978; Just & Carpenter, 1992; Rumelhart & McClelland, 1981; Stanovich, 1984) assume that comprehension results from the interaction of the reader's background knowledge and the text.

Because of the peculiarities of the reading learning needs of ESL/EFL readers, whose linguistic and cultural knowledge of the English language may vary from one context to another, the preceding L1 reading models seem to not have fully explained how ESL/EFL readers read. This is despite the fact that these models have

influenced the understanding of the ESL/EFL reading process in a very major way. In fact, many ESL/EFL reading theorists and practitioners have underscored the importance of the specific reading learning needs of second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) learners, which led to the development of the "componential" models of the reading process (e.g., Bernhardt, 1986; 2010; Coady, 1979). Specifically, these models focus on the different types of components involved in reading such as conceptual abilities, process strategies, and background knowledge, rather than the process of reading. In applying these models to L2 and FL reading, the main issues include whether L2 reading is a developmental problem and whether knowledge of one aspect of the L2 such as knowledge of syntax or vocabulary, for example, can compensate for another aspect such as background knowledge. In the same vein, Bernhardt (2010) emphasizes the importance of the compensatory interplay of L1 proficiency and L2 grammatical knowledge in the fluent processing and comprehension of upper register L2 texts, particularly literature, commentaries, and essays. Such processing entails employing the L1 and L2 resources in terms of strategies, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary, as well as underscores the significant role of automaticity and fluent word decoding skills in reading comprehension.

Furthermore, it should be noted that another category of reading models labeled as "modified interactive models" has been created to describe the L2/ FL reading process (e.g., Hedgcock & Ferris 2009). According to these models, the ordinary interactive models discussed above are self-contradictory since the essential components of bottom-up processing (i.e., efficient automatic processing in working memory) are incompatible with the strong top-down controls on reading comprehension because these controls are not automatic (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). Hence, the modified interactive models emphasize the role of bottom-up processes and minimize the role of the top-down processes on the assumption that activating prior knowledge or schematic resources may be time-consuming. As such, a reader may recognize words by perceiving information from graphemes, phoneme–grapheme correspondences, and spelling without employing schematic knowledge (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

The above theoretical perspectives were used in generating a number of hypotheses regarding the role of text-based and reader-based processing, as well as context-specific variables in ESL/EFL reading comprehension. These hypotheses relate specifically to the role of emergent literacy along with a number of text-

based factors such as fluency in word and phrase recognition, vocabulary, and decoding of grammatical and syntactic complexities as determinants of comprehension. Likewise, background knowledge, metacognitive strategies, strategy instruction, and meta-discourse awareness are also considered potential important determinants of readers' proficiency and success in getting intended meaning. In addition, it seems essential to identify the corresponding effective and proven teaching techniques and instructional strategies in order to provide classroom support in reading comprehension and link theory to practice.

Consequently, I devised the instructional framework presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Curriculum and Instructional Framework of ESL/EFL Reading

Dimension	Related Activities
Emergent Literacy	• Playing with Alphabet Blocks • Listening to Stories • Auditory and Visual Discrimination of Letters • Sight Vocabulary • Environmental Print • Reading Aloud • Big and Predictable Books • Shared Book Experiences
Fluency	• Shadow Reading • Shape Recognition • Number Recognition • Letter Recognition • Word Recognition • Phrase Recognition • Rate Build Up • Repeated Reading • Class-Paced Reading • Self-Paced Reading
Vocabulary	• Determination Strategies: Using Dictionaries, Guessing Meaning from Context, Identifying Parts of Speech, Word Structural Analysis

	• Social strategies: Asking Others
	• Memory strategies: Connecting Learners' Background Knowledge to New Words
	• Cognitive strategies: Repetition, Taking Notes, Labelling Objects, Highlighting New Words, Making Lists, Using Flashcards, Keeping a Vocabulary Notebook
	• Metacognitive Strategies: Monitoring, Decision-making, Assessment of Own Progress
	• English Language Media, Studying New Words many times, Paying Attention to English words, Skipping New words
Grammatical Complexities	• Meaning of Affixes, Suffixes, and Word Roots • Structural Analysis of Words • Syntactic Structural Awareness
Background Knowledge	• Conversing Freely with Readers, Reading Together, Telling Stories, Traveling, Showing Pictures, Movies, and Trips • Previews, Anticipation Guides, Semantic Mapping, Writing before Reading, Brainstorming • Reconstructing the Organizing Structure of the Text • Identifying the Logical Linkage of Content through Discourse Markers • Graphic Organizers
Metacognitive Awareness and Strategies	• Think Aloud • Reciprocal Teaching • Asking Questions, • Accessing Prior knowledge, Predicting, Confirming, Making inferences,

	• Retelling
	• Summarizing and Clarifying Information
	• Verbalizing Thoughts
Critical Reading	• Critical Stance and Reflect on the Author's Competence, Purpose, Point of View, and Tone
	• Questions on the Timeliness, Accuracy, Adequacy, and Appropriateness of Information
	• Differentiating Fact from Opinion
	• Recognition of Propaganda Techniques
	• Discussion of Fiction and Nonfiction Literature

Table 1 shows that an instructional framework of ESL/EFL reading comprehension should underscore the importance of emergent literacy and creating a print-rich as well as a supportive home and school environment in order to lay the foundations for literacy in the formative years of children's life. Likewise, developmentally-appropriate practice in word recognition and vocabulary acquisition is essential to prepare meaning-centered and proficient readers who are effective and efficient in comprehending the literal meaning of written discourse, reading between the lines to get implied meaning, evaluating what they read, solving problems, and creating new products based on what is read. This is because reaching a "linguistic threshold" and achieving "automaticity," as respectively suggested by Eskey (2002) and Stanovich (1984), enables readers, especially L2 readers, to free up their minds to do higher order thinking in reading and thereby overcome the problem of text-boundedness resulting from not having adequately mastered the linguistic system of the target language. As such, "lower cognitive factors" such as word recognition, which entails orthographic and phonological processing, in addition to syntactic processing and lexical access, interact with "higher cognitive factors" including attention, noticing, and conscious making of inference to impact comprehension, as suggested by Grabe (2009).

Retrieving and/or building relevant background knowledge through the provision of vicarious and real world experiences is also important to ensure mean-

ingful learning and assimilating new information into the cognitive structures of readers. Because ESL/EFL readers are likely to encounter English language texts that reflect culturally-distant and topically- unfamiliar materials, they may experience problems in comprehension stemming from the instantiation of wrong schemata or reaching unwarranted, far-fetched, or implausible conclusions due to schema interference, or the lack of any relevant schema. As such, it is essential to ensure that L2 readers activate the relevant background knowledge that is relatable to the cultural and background knowledge reflected in the texts they read. They also need to read for meaning and to monitor their comprehension as well as assess the accuracy, relevance, timeliness and bias in what they read.

The subsequent sections discuss the various dimensions of the framework and present advice and recommendations for ESL/EFL teachers to address them.

Emergent Literacy

Research shows that laying the foundations for literacy during the first year of life enhances the life-long process of learning to read and write (Clay, 1979; Teale & Sulzby, 1987). These finding are also highlighted in the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (Eunice 2010) which emphasized a strong positive link between the literacy skills developed from birth to age five with the conventional literacy skills developed later in the subsequent years of schooling.

Juel (1991) defines emergent literacy as the process of developing awareness of the interrelatedness of oral and written language. Teachers are advised to use the techniques of playing with alphabet blocks, listening to stories, auditory and visual discrimination of letters, sight vocabulary, environmental print, reading aloud, big and predictable books and shared book experiences in order to facilitate children's' awareness of the relationship of oral and written language. These activities and practices, among other developmentally-appropriate practice activities, enable children to understand the alphabetic principle, develop phonemic and phonological awareness, cultivate invented spelling skills, and build word recognition fluency as suggested by Pikulski (1987) and Holdaway (1979).

Fluency

Grabe (2010) maintains that teaching practices promoting fluency "need to be part of any well-developed reading curriculum" (p. 77), and fluency is not a

competing factor with accuracy in L2 language performance. Rather, fluency builds automaticity and is important for language learning, especially reading, as suggested by Nation (1991), Rasinski (2014) and Segalowitz (2000). Furthermore, a growing number of L2 studies have reported a positive link between word recognition fluency and reading ability (e. g., Shiotsu, 2009) and passage reading fluency and reading comprehension (e.g., Lems, 2005). Along similar lines, Taguchi et.al, (2004) reported positive effects for a silent reading intervention program on comprehension, a finding that corroborates those of Lightbown et.al, (2002) who endorsed extensive reading as an effective treatment to maintain ESL reading comprehension achievement at grade level standards from grade 4 through grade 6. Consequently, it is suggested that reading teachers draw on the seminal textbooks of Anderson (2013) as well as others (e.g., Fry, 1991, 2001a, 2001,b; Spargo, 2001), to apply proven techniques and activities to promote reading fluency. These techniques and activities include silent as well as oral reading practices such as shape, number, letter, and phrase recognition exercises; self and class-paced reading activities; and repeated, shadow, echo, and choral reading.

Vocabulary

Numerous studies have underscored the pivotal role of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension (Huang & Liou, 2007; Koda, 1989; Laufer 1992). These researchers, among others, have established that vocabulary knowledge impacts the comprehension of ESL/EFL readers in as very major way. Reading practitioners, on the other hand, have devised various learning strategies and instructional techniques for teaching vocabulary that ESL/EFL teachers can utilize to help leaners acquire the semantic system of the English language. According to Schmitt (2014), vocabulary learning strategies are classified into determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. This researcher maintains that the determination strategies include using dictionaries, guessing the meaning from context, identifying the parts of speech, and word structural analysis. Social strategies involve asking others such as the teacher or classmates inside or outside the classroom about the meaning of unknown vocabulary. Memory strategies help learners to acquire the new words by connecting learners' background knowledge to the new words. Cognitive strategies include repetition, taking notes, labelling objects, taking notes, highlighting new words, making lists, using flashcards, and keeping a vocabulary notebook. Finally, metacognitive strategies include moni-

toring, decision-making, and assessment of own progress. They can also aid learners to specify suitable vocabulary learning strategies for learning new words. Specific examples include using English language media, studying new words many times, paying attention to English words when someone is speaking English, and skipping or passing new words.

Grammatical Complexities

Grammatical complexities are defined in the context of this proposed framework in accordance to Gascoigne's (2005) definition of "grammatical competence" which entails knowledge of morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and mechanics. The extant research suggests that a "threshold of linguistic competence (morphology and syntax) is necessary for successful reading (Zarei, 2013). Furthermore, a number of studies have indicated a possible link between morphological awareness and reading comprehension (Schano, 2015). This suggests that automaticity in word recognition and knowledge of word formation rules of derivational and inflectional morphology in unfamiliar words improves independent reading and could lead to increased vocabulary breadth and depth and better comprehension (Fatemipour & Moharamzadeh, 2015; Schano, 2015). As such, ESL/EFL teachers are encouraged to teach the meaning of affixes, suffixes, and word roots as well as utilize the structural analysis of words strategy in order to increase their learners knowledge of vocabulary and enhance their textual understanding.

Several researchers have also underscored the role of understanding syntactic devices in comprehension (e.g., Ahandani, 2015; Berman, 1986; Bossers, 1992; Clarke, 1979). A basic assumption behind this research is that the provision of structural clues to ESL/EFL learners can improve their comprehension. This suggests that deliberate instruction in syntactic structural awareness is also useful in enhancing the reading comprehension of ESL/EFL readers.

Background knowledge

The role of background knowledge as an important determinant of comprehension has clearly been established and is widely recognized both in first language (L1) and second language/foreign (L2/FL) contexts. According to Pearson (1979) and Pearson, Hansen, and Gordon (1979), reading comprehension is described as the act of relating textual information to the reader's existing clusters of informa-

tion called schemata. Through direct and vicarious world experiences, parents and ESL/EFL reading teachers can provide readers with diverse opportunities to develop and enhance their schemata. This could be achieved through conversing freely with children, reading for them, telling stories, traveling, showing pictures, movies, surfing the web, and going on trips.

Because ESL/EFL readers may have developed experiential backgrounds and schemata that are different from those of their counterparts in English speaking countries, it is important ESL/EFL teachers to help them build and/or retrieve relevant schemata that match material they read at school (Drucker, 2003; Schwazzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003; Lohfink, 2009). Examples of teaching strategies and activities that teachers may use include previews, anticipation guides, semantic mapping, writing before reading and brainstorming.

Meta-discourse awareness, perceived in the context of this proposed instructional framework as the reader's awareness of how the author attempts to accommodate his/her audience and engage the reader, is also a significant determinant of ESL/EFL reading comprehension (Tavakoli, Dabaghi, & Khorvash, 2010). This is because it enables readers to better understand the author's text plan and thereby realize whether they are reading the introduction, the body, ancillary material (e.g., colored, boxed text) or conclusion of a text. Readers will also know when the author has shifted to a different topic or that certain ideas are considered more important than other ideas. Consequently, ESL/EFL teachers of reading are advised to consider using the techniques of reconstructing the organizing structure of the text, identifying the logical linkage of content through discourse markers, and using graphic organizers as effective means of building readers' text structure awareness and thereby enhancing comprehension.

Metacognitive Awareness and Strategies

In devising this framework, we perceived metacognitive strategies as acts that go beyond cognition and allow readers to organize their learning. In reading, these metacognitive strategies focus on comprehension monitoring and on taking measures to maximize it through setting a purpose for reading, planning how the text will be read, self-monitoring for comprehension, and self-evaluation of comprehension as suggested by (Keshavarz & Assar, 2011) Along similar lines, Anderson (2002) and Cohen (2003) posited that strategy use marks the difference between

effective and ineffective readers. This proposition is supported by Dhieb-Henia's (2003) findings that students who received training in strategy use did indeed benefit from it. Along similar lines, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) indicated, based on empirical evidence, that both native and non-native high-reading-ability students showed comparable degrees of higher reported usage of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies than lower-reading-ability students in the respective groups. Consequently, it would be in order that ESL/EFL reading teachers support their learners to use metacognitive strategies in order to monitor and analyze their thinking and thereby improve both their comprehension and the study skills practices, more generally.

The think aloud and reciprocal teaching procedures, respectively suggested by Baumann, Jones, and Seifert (1993) and Palincsar and Brown (1986), entail a number of metacognitive strategies that improve comprehension. These strategies include asking questions, accessing prior knowledge, predicting, confirming, making inferences, and retelling of what is read. Readers may also summarize and clarify information as they verbalize their thoughts while reading and exchange roles with the teacher to discuss and monitor comprehension.

Critical Thinking Strategies

Critical reading is important for making sound and intelligent decisions based on what is read. This entails evaluating the material based on known standards and reaching conclusions regarding the accuracy, timeliness, relevance, and bias of information presented in text. As a form of higher-order comprehension, critical reading requires questioning, fact searching, and suspending judgment, with focus on getting the main ideas and supporting details stated in the text (literal comprehension) as well as grasping the implied ideas (interpretive comprehension) and reading between the lines, as suggested by Roe and Smith (2012).

Teachers of ESL/EFL reading at all levels of schooling and reading proficiency can promote critical reading by encouraging learners to adopt a critical stance while reading in order to reflect on the author's competence, purpose, point of view, and tone. Likewise, questions on the timeliness, accuracy, adequacy, and appropriateness of information as well as differentiating fact from opinion and recognition of propaganda techniques are also important in critical reading (Roe & Smith, 2012). Along similar lines, Lelan, Harste, and Huber (2005) propose

using exploiting fiction and nonfiction literature and asking questions regarding whose story is it?, who benefits form the story?, and whose voices are not heard? to promote critical reading. Similarly, McMillan and Gentile (1988) maintain that reading multicultural literature and having students question and compare character's actions and multicultural perspectives can contribute to building the skills of critical reading.

Conclusion

This article has presented a framework for curriculum planning and instruction in teaching ESL/EFL reading. The dimensions of the framework are based on a number of hypotheses generated based on a review of the current ESL/EFL reading research and knowledge base as well as in accordance with a number of effective teaching strategies and instructional procedures of proven efficacy. ESL/EFL reading teachers are encouraged to efficiently use this framework in planning their instruction as well as draw on the various suggested activities in order to diversify their teaching activities thereby improve learners' literal and higher order comprehension, taking into consideration available time and resources in their respective schools.

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