The Role OF READING COMPREHENSION
IN DEVELOPING OTHER LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Introduction

An important principle of structural linguistics is that the primary medium of language is oral : speech is language. That's why speech has a priority in language teaching. Richards and Rodgers (19986: 49) believe that language is speech, not writing ….A language is a set of habits … teach the language, not about the language.

Recently, there is a trend in the teaching of foreign languages which advocates the prime importance of teaching reading as a receptive skill before the other productive skills. Gray and Gray (1982: 62) tell us that.

The most effective way to teach a foreign language is by providing a substantial base of receptive competence (listening and reading) before attempting to teach productive skills.

Hence, the presentation of language through reading passages (with appended comprehension questions) is a well – established and familiar practice.

But, learning to read does not precede comprehension; they are both part of the same process. From the beginning, the teacher's aim should be to go beyond mere words calling and to get an answer from the learner that indicates his understanding.

The Importance of Comprehension

Through the Reading Process

Since comprehension is the objective of reading, the developing comprehension should be the primary concern in the teaching of reading from the first stage, with emphasis on reading – to – learn. Smith (1978:58) Says, "Children must learn in order to understand, and learning to read is a literally a matter of understanding reading."

Goodman (1970:125) observes that

Like all language activities, reading has as its central purpose the effective receiving of the meaning of communications, the reader getting out the meaning the writer put in. "

Since getting the meaning depends so much on the reader's background knowledge and experience, it is important that teachers of reading comprehension understand learners' background knowledge, and through wise question thinking to help them in making connection with what they already know.

Zintz(1980:230) states

Most teachers agree that pronouncing words correctly without getting meaning from the context is not reading. Boys and girls must learn to synthesize meanings as they read through the passages in their textbooks.

Thus, reading comprehension is the activity that enables the students to go deeper and deeper to get the meaning which is intended by writer. It is the activity that depends on understanding.

Although reading is a process by which a learner reconstructs a message encoded graphically by a writer, it is not a matter of decoding surface structure, but of seeking meaning below the surface. (Davies, 1989:121).

To achieve full meaning through reading, Roberts (1979:31) observes that
The actual teaching of reading should not be segmented into exclusive sub – skill training where sub – skills are to be taught, they should be practiced within the context of the complete skill.
Unless the reader gets meaning from the passage, he will get merely sounds that may suggest idiosyncratic pieces of information. And unless he is getting a message that makes immediate sense to him, he will be confused and this can be

demonstrated when he uses any or all of the three categories of cues used in the interpretation of texts: semantic, syntactic and phono – graphic.
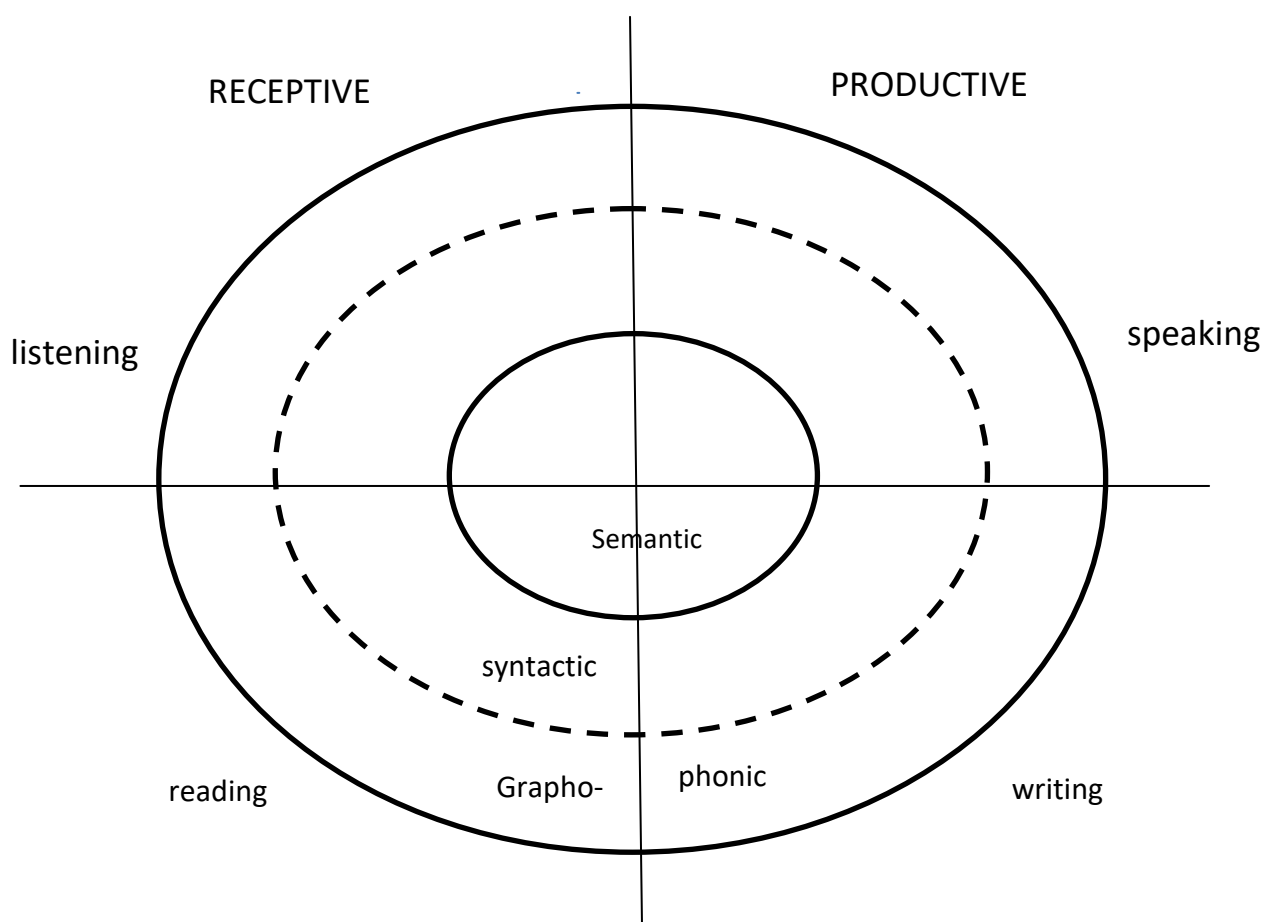
Fig. [1]

RECEPTIVE   PRODUCTIVE

listening   speaking

Semantic

syntactic

reading   Grapho-   phonic   writing

Fig. 1 The Language Process[1]

Background Knowledge

Acknowledging the importance of background knowledge in comprehension has two main sets of implications for the development of L2 reading programmers. The first is that a careful assessment needs to be made of learners' conceptual preparedness for their target reading materials. The second is that the learners should be actively encouraged to establish meaningful links between their current

[1] - from : Reading: Foundations and instructional Strategies, Lomb and Arnold (eds), 1976.

knowledge and the content of the target reading materials. (Floyd and Carrell, 1987:103).

Researches on second language reading over the past ten years have placed considerable emphasis on the role and influence of background knowledge schemata in the text comprehension of L2 learners. Tudor (1989:323) argues that "One of main lines of investigation in this area has concerned the role of cultural background in L2 text processing."

Students must be alerted to the fact that what they already know contributes to their understanding of what they read. Thus, the development of comprehension skills does not depend on an innate ability to answer questions.

The Relationship between Reading

Comprehension and Other Language Skills

1. Listening

Durrell (1969) reports that competence in the two methods of reception may be estimated by comparing reading comprehension with listening comprehension.

There are, however, some important differences between the listening and the reading modes of reception. The reader is presented with the whole word, which he assimilates at his own pace. The listener, on the other hand, receives the words in parts. thus, the initial acquisition of the stimulus or input is received differently through the two input channels.

2. Speaking

The speaker usually organizes the rational into meaningful thoughts and units. In reading, this process must be done by the reader based upon his former experience of the ways in which it is possible to combine words for specific meanings to emerge. (Swalm.1971:11)

3. Reading

Lunzer(1979:63) believes that there is an evidence that rate training in reading can produce improved comprehension as well as improvement in speed. However, Lunzer (1oc cit) found that students when are encouraged to read

quickly were able to recall less well what they had read than students who were instructed to slow down.

4. Writing

Research on the relationship between reading comprehension and writing indicates that reading skills are related to writing skills. Reading instruction may influence writing instruction and vice versa. Taylor and Beach (1984:136) mention some studies that show how writing can be reinforced by reading comprehension instruction.

Wright (1982:43) students that "few would disagree with the principle that upper – level composition instruction can be reinforced by reading comprehension instruction."

Experiment and Test

In order to show the relationship between reading comprehension and other language skills the researchers use a technique of the experiment – control group design, in which two equivalent groups were chosen. In addition, pre – test – post – test design was adopted to fulfil this technique.

Administration of the Test

The test was administered twice, at the beginning of the first semester 1990 (before the experiment: and the end of the first semester, after the experiment. This means that the experiment lasted for three months. Subjects were chosen randomly from the fourth year.

Selection of the Samples

Two sections out of four sections were selected randomly from the fourth year secondary school. One section represents the experimental group, the other represents the control group (which doesn't receive experimental Treatment). Students' mother tongue is Arabic. Students' age was taken into consideration too. Students who exceeded the limits of the notmal age (16 – 17) were excluded. The average age of both groups was approximately the same. See table 1.

Table 1: Mean of age of Experimental and Control group

Group	no.	Mean
Experimental	30	16.6
Control	30	16.4

The Pre – Test Scores

The Pre – test was given before beginning the experiment. The mean of the experimental group was 61.2and that of the control group was 61.566. The 't' test score was o.154 which indicates no significant difference between the two groups as far as their achievement in English is concerned. Table 2.

Table 2: The Mean Sd and 't' value of the Pre – Test

Group	no.	Mean	sd	df	't'
Experimental	30	16.2	12.78	58	0.154
Control	30	61.566	12.72		

^{T}cv 0.01   2.748
      0.05   2.002

Instruction

The researchers expose the experimental group into a wide range of reading comprehension materials. The passages which were chosen for this purpose were suitable for the subjects.

The subjects' background knowledge was taken into consideration also. (Page 5).

The first researcher taught the experimental group. The control group was taught by the second researcher, who didn't supply the group with any extra reading comprehension material except what was found in their textbook.

Description of the Test

The test is designed in a way to test and investigate subjects' ability in listening, reading, speaking and writing. These four skills represent tha objectives of both the test and the course of the subjects. The test was based on the objectives and units of the course. The samples were subjected to the test as one unit in order to facilitate the statistical analysis of results.

Reliability of the Test

The researchers adopted the test – retest method to ensure reliability of the test. After applying Pearson Formula, the results indicated that the correlation coefficient of reliability was 0,79 which means the test is reliable.

Table 3: The Mean and Correlation Coefficient - Retest Scores

	No.	Mean	r
Test	30	67.53	
Retest	30	63.73	0.79

The Post – Test

The same test which was designed and administered as a pre – test was applied as a post – test at the end of the experiment. See table 4.

Table 4: The Mean, sd, df and 't' Value Of the post – Test

Group	no.	Mean	sd	df	't' Value
Experimental	30	74.166	11.42		
Control	30	62. 6	12.7	58	5.249 .

^{T}cv 0.01   2.748
      0.05   2.002

The results of post – test indicate that there is a significant difference between the two groups, since 't' value is 5.249.

Discussion

1. Comparison of Pre – Test and Post – Test Scores in the Control Group.

In order to find out whether there is a significant difference in the scores of the Pre – test and post – test, the t test is used. The 't' value is 0.449 which indicates that there is no significant difference in achievement as compared with 't' critical value at .01 and .05 levels which is 2.042 and 2.756 successively. Table 5.

Table 5 : The Mean, sd, df, and 't' Value of the control Group

Test	no.	Mean	sd	df	't' Value
Pre – Test	30	61. 56	12.724		
				0.495 29	
Post – test	30	62.6	12. 707		
Difference	1.034	0.017			

2. Comparison of the Pre – Test and Post – Test Scores in the Experimental Group.

The 't' test is used again. Its value is 5.858 which indicates a significant difference between the two tests scores in the experimental group as compared with 't' critical value which is 2.042 and 20756 at .01 and .05 levels. See table 6.

Table 6 : The Mean, sd, df and 't' Value of the Experimental Group

Test	no.	Mean	sd	df	't' Value
Pre – Test	30	61. 2	12.78		
				5.858 29	
Post – test	30	74.166	11. 429		
					Difference
12.966	1.351				

The statistical analysis of the experimental group indicates that the achievement of the experimental group is higher in average than the achievement of the control group in the final scores of the post – test. The experiment demonstrates the factttt that reading comprehension has an important role in developing language skills. It is clear out of the experiment that longer exposure to reading comprehension material achieves good results as far as students receptive skills are concerned.

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