

READING COMPREHENSION :
(Towards a Socio-Psycholinguistic Perspective)

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الملخص

يدور موضوع هذا المقال حول عملية القراءة بالفهم في تعلم اللغات الأجنبية، لما لهذه العملية من الأهمية في الاستيعاب والانتاج اللغوي. يعتبر هذا الموضوع شائكا ولا زالت فيه الآراء متعددة ومختلفة بين العديد من الدارسين؛ حيث أن البعض منهم ذهب إلى تفسير هذه العملية على أنها قضية لسانية محضّة، وآخرون قالوا فيها أنها عملية ترتكز خاصة على القدرات المعرفية والفكرية في تحليل النص الذي يصف خصائص الثقافة الأجنبية.

This article aims at setting into prominence elements involved in the process of comprehension. It suggests a socio-psycholinguistic perspective to reading comprehension.

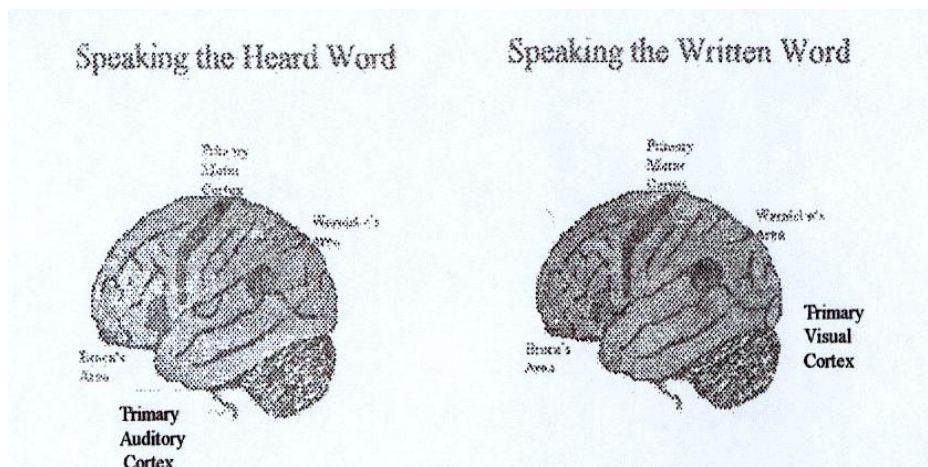
At first, it should be mentioned at this level that reading comprehension is more and more proving itself to be controversial scope of research among different specialists. Cooper (1993) considers, for instance, that comprehension is almost an end product of decoding: in fact, a process in which only your cognitive and mental abilities are taking part in decoding a given piece of writing.

It is obvious, therefore, to believe that reading is primarily affected by the linguistic knowledge of the target language: graphophonics, semantic knowledge of words phrases and sentence, syntactic knowledge of words patterns and discourse knowledge as well, since the text itself is a sequence of mutually dependent sentences graphically represented. The immediate problem that may be aroused to our learners to have Arabic as their first language, is the visual recognition of the prints and tendency to transfer the natural eye movement (from right to left) to the reading of the

foreign spirits. And certainly that prior importance should be given to scriptal knowledge (Pearson and Johnson 1978).

Unlike phonics, graphophonics deals with the actual symbol readers make use of to represent meaning. It focuses on anything dealing with the visual representation of the prints, such as appearance of the prints, their combination in words, spaces between words and the like. Therefore, comprehension obstacles, in this case, would no more be a problem relating to a specific ability, but rather to a sensory-based visual problem.

In this context, it is believed that to speak a word that is read, information must first get to the primary visual cortex. From the primary visual cortex, information is transmitted to the posterior speech area, including Wernicke area, and from Wernicke area, information travels to Broca area, then to the Primary Motor Cortex. The Broca area and the Wernicke area are connected by a bundle of nerve fibers called the arcuate fasciculus which may cause a disorder called “conduction aphasia” if ever, of course, it is damaged.



This is why, language comprehension that is linked to the Wernicke area, is first of all, reflecting a whole neurophysiological complex process, or as traditionally viewed by the behaviourists,

revealing a mechanical process which consists mainly on decoding words and memorizing by rote. Likewise, reading comprehension can be a passive procedure in which large and important segments of the personality remain unengaged, or may even resist the process.

Differently viewed, reading and comprehending a message in the form of text goes well far beyond such a stage, i.e. it means more than being able to speak the written words on the page. The fact that the meaning is in the text is unfortunately no guarantee that the reader will get it out, for we know from personal experience that a text that seems easy to one person may seem difficult to another. In this respect, Widdowson (1979) concludes that reading is an interactive process between a reader and a writer mediated through a text.

Thus, an active reading would also involve a set of other factors, such as to have a number of predictions based firstly on the title, and author of the material if possible, drawing upon one's past experiences of likely events which will occur, of vocabulary, of character, and of plot development. The point is to enable the learners think about what they are assigned to read before even they read it, so they approach a text with certain questions, ideas or predictions in mind.

Again, it ought to be stressed at this level that reading comprehension involves being able to alter these predictions and expectations as one reads and finally, not being passive recipient of the material, i.e. a vessel receiving knowledge from external sources. This would, in all probabilities, reveal very acute insight into their ability to gain information from the proposed titles to the passage or they would, for example, be making predictions based on the information embedded in the titles. Some of their predictions would not prove to be 100% accurate but would be, at least, close enough to enhance their comprehension, and encourage them to read to confirm or reject their predictions. Following this, the learners could make a list of information that would, on their

previous knowledge of world events, help them focus on what they already know, in order to better anticipate the contents of the passage.

Part of our work as English teachers is to help them to be able to do this. Teachers, who teach students the purpose of reading strategies, how to use reading strategies, and when to use them, promote learning because knowledge and use of those strategies empowers to control and improve on their own reading.

At another layer of difficulty, if the reader has, for example, a far smaller vocabulary than the writer he will find the text hard to understand. In foreign-language reading, this problem is basic and familiar. When the reader is exposed to texts describing aspects of a foreign culture, many socio-cultural meanings are left unsaid to them. Readers are influenced by their ways of life, values and customs (Weaver1995). The breakdown of comprehension, in many cases, is due to the cultural mismatch between the text and the world of the reader. In other cases, though there is a cultural articulation between the readers and the texts, different meanings are extracted. Beyond the individual lexical items lies the semantic aspect of the text. Meaning and the social situation are present in any event. Readers rely on their sets of prior knowledge (beliefs, feelings...) to help shape the overall meaning of texts. When those sets meet the ideas of a text, they end up with different meanings for the same text (Rosenblatt 1989).

According to Vygotsky (1962), a distinction between 'meaning' and 'sense' is to be established. Meaning is somewhat a static convention socially stabilized, while sense is psychological and filled up with private associations aroused in our consciousness by the word. The lexical item is, therefore, just a medium of communication for one reader but a symbol (an aim in itself) loaded with a set of connotations for another reader. Thus, one should believe that the process of extracting meaning from what is printed on the page- is an active cognitive process by taking a vital role in

the process. Being able to read actively, is part of being to learn from a passage, whether it be a story for pleasure, a geography reading assignment, novel- any type of reading text.

In recent years, there has been considerable emphasis on the skills involved in reading comprehension mainly because it has been noticed that readers bring many attitudes towards the skill of reading comprehension, and because it is no longer viewed as simply a particular instructional approach or rather merely expecting it to develop somehow of its own accord. It is only through readers that instructors can determine the root, causes and difficulties then, design the intervention strategies. The linguistic knowledge, for instance, is not an end in itself but a means to an end, that is, comprehension. In this sense reading is supposed to be thought of as a process in which one is actively and in very personal ways involved.

All in all, reading comprehension should rather be conceived as a complex socio-psycholinguistic process that can be properly handled if the three factors mentioned above and their combinations are adequately orchestrated.

Here is a summary of what research has generally said about reading. These are major findings from cognitive psychology regarding:

- a- New and old definitions of the reading process.
- b- Characteristics of poor and successful readers.

A- New and Old Definitions of the Reading

	Traditional views	New Definition of Reading
Research Base	Behaviourism	Cognitive sciences.
Goals of Reading	Mastery of isolated facts and skills	Constructing meaning and self-regulated learning.
Reading as Process	Mechanically decoding words memorizing by rote	An interaction among the reader, the text, and the context.
Learner Role/Metaphor	Passive, vessel receiving knowledge from external sources	Active, strategic reader, good strategy user apprentice.

B- Characteristics of Poor / Successful Readers:

Characteristics of Poor Readers	Characteristics of Successful Readers
Think understanding occurs from “getting the words right,” rereading	Understanding that they must take responsibility for construction meaning using their prior knowledge.
Use strategies such as rote memorization, rehearsal, simple categorization.	Develop a repertoire of reading strategies, organizational patterns, and genres.
Are poor strategy users: • They do not think strategically about how to read something or solve a problem. • They do not have an accurate sense of when they have good comprehension readiness for assessment.	Are good strategy users: • They think strategically, plan, monitor their comprehension, and revise their strategies. • They have strategies for what to do when they do not know what to do.
Have relatively low self-esteem.	Have self-confidence that they are effective learners; see themselves as agents able to actualize their potential.
See success and failure as the result of luck or teacher bias.	See success as the result of hard work and efficient thinking.

**Adapted from R.A Knuth and B.F Jones
NCREL, Oak Brook, 1991.**

This is, in fact, to display that studies in which good and poor readers were compared reveal that the more effective readers

employ metacognitive strategies before, during, and after their reading in order to facilitate comprehension (Paris & Jacobs, 1984). Poor readers on the other hand, tend to emphasize decoding (“word barking”) rather than reading for meaning. They rarely utilize comprehension-monitoring or “fix up” strategies.

To sum up, when cognitive styles are specifically related to a particular educational context, where a social, affective, and physiological factors are intermingled, they are generally referred to as learning styles.

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