

THE READING COMPREHENSION TASK: OVERCOMING SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to discuss some psychological problems occurring during reading comprehension tasks and suggest ways to overcome them. The reflection carried out in a theoretical framework including schema, mental and behavioural theories, resulted in four conclusions: inhibiting impact of learners' linguistic limitations; poor contextual background as a source of apathy; frustration and anxiety deriving from inaccessible comprehension questions; and motivation related issues during reading comprehension tasks. With regard to the psychological problems mentioned, my suggestion consists in involving learners in discovering the psychological problems that they are likely to experience during reading comprehension tasks. They might then draw from them to develop some skills that may help them overcome these problems.

Key-words: reading comprehension, psychological problems, linguistic content, contextual background, cognition, affect.

RÉSUMÉ

L'objet de cette étude était de discuter quelques problèmes psychologiques qui surviennent pendant les activités de lecture/compréhension et de suggérer des stratégies en vue de les surmonter. La réflexion menée dans un cadre théorique composé des

théories (*schema, mental, et behavioural*) a abouti à quatre conclusions: l'impact inhibiteur des limites linguistiques des apprenants; l'insuffisance des pré-requis, source d'apathie; la frustration et l'anxiété dues à l'incapacité à comprendre les questions posées ; les questions liées à la motivation pendant les tâches de lecture/compréhension. Compte tenu de ces problèmes psychologiques, nous suggérons l'implication des apprenants dans la découverte des problèmes psychologiques susceptibles de survenir pendant les activités de lecture/compréhension ; ils pourraient ainsi s'en inspirer pour surmonter ces problèmes.

Mots clés : lecture/compréhension, problèmes psychologiques, contenu linguistique, pré-requis, cognition, affect.

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension, according to Woolley (2011: 15), is “the process of making meaning from text. The goal therefore is to gain overall understanding of the text as a whole rather than obtaining meaning from isolated words or sentences”. Simply put, it is the fact of comprehending a reading material. Reading comprehension implies the reader's ability to get the gist of the text and beyond his ability to do all kinds of activities including multiple choice questions, matching, gaps filling, short answers questions and true or false statements. The main purpose of reading is to comprehend the ideas in the material. Without comprehension, reading would be empty and meaningless. Unfortunately many students are neither good readers nor good comprehenders. The achievement of comprehension is a challenge for many of them. What are the psychological implications of this challenge? How does one train students to overcome this challenge? This article aims to scrutinize these issues in order to have more insight into their didactic implications. It begins with a presentation of the theoretical framework. It then discusses the different dimensions of the psychological problems met during reading tasks before making some suggestions rooted

in the theoretical framework of this study and my personal experience as a teacher of English as a foreign language.

1-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three main theories are involved in this study: schema, mental and behavioral. Schema theory intervenes at the pre-reading phase. According to McVee *et al.* (2005: 535), this theory advocated by Plato, Aristotle and Kant among others has to do with the reader's prior or background knowledge (the organized knowledge that he already has about people, places, things, and events). That knowledge stored in his memory is activated and organized during the reading process (Gunning, 1996). As Vacca and Vacca (1999: 15) put it, those schemas or schemata "reflect the experiences, conceptual understanding, attitudes, values, skills, and strategies (...) we bring to a text situation..." in order to construct meaning.

Mental theory places more emphasis on the reader's ability to make appropriate choices between contextual cues and the ability to decode and comprehend a text. For instance, while reading a text, the reader may focus his attention on some of the characters and create a mental model of the circumstances in which those characters find themselves (Gunning, 1996).

Behavioral theory also called the attitude-influence theory goes beyond the cognitive aspect of reading by highlighting the roles of affect before, during and after the reading process. According to this theory, the learner's feelings, his total commitment (his prevailing feelings and evaluative beliefs about reading and action readiness for reading) will influence his intention to read, his reading behavior and even his performance at reading comprehension tasks (Mathewson, 1994).

The relevance of these three theories to this study which aims to discuss some psychological problems related to the reading comprehension task clearly stands out. In light of mental and schema theories, the study shows particular interest in the phenomena which occur in the reader's mind during reading comprehension tasks. It also draws from behavioral theory to

discuss the extent to which some psychological factors influence learners' reading behavior.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF READING TASKS: COMBINING COGNITION AND AFFECT

Psychological dimension includes two aspects of learning: cognition and affect. Cognitive aspect has to do with intelligence, knowledge, skills or know-how whereas the affective aspect, according to Coiro (2007: 219), involves an individual's "goals, beliefs, attitudes". Simply put, it refers to learner's behavior, affective state, mood, emotions and feelings (joy, motivation, anxiety, hatred, shame, frustration). However, the question one needs to answer is as follows: Should cognition and affect be addressed separately or should we combine them?

For Vygotsky, quoted by McLeod (1987: 426), cognition should not be separated from affect because "at no level, at no state, even in the adult, can we find a behavior or state which is purely cognitive without affect nor a purely affective state without a cognitive element involved". As human beings are thinking and feeling creatures, this view sounds relevant to the extent that separating both entities could make the thought process appear autonomous, isolated from the individual's needs and interests. Therefore, in order to avoid segregating the thought process from the needs, interests and feelings of the individual, cognition in this paper is viewed in concert with affect.

A learner's poor cognitive skills combined with wrong feelings may impact his behavior during the three main phases of the reading process (Pre-reading, Reading and Post-reading phases). This study first focuses on some of the most relevant negative impacts before reflecting on the way one can help learners overcome them during reading tasks.

3. SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS RELATED TO READING TASKS

3.1 INHIBITING IMPACT OF LEARNERS' LINGUISTIC LIMITATIONS

Ny (1996: 79) defines inhibition as "an active process that reduces efficiency". According to Daco (1973: 76), inhibition occurs when "... the

energy needed to perform is blocked.”¹¹ (My translation) That energy, he says, decreases or ceases preventing the individual from achieving. In the field of education in general and particularly teaching and learning, inhibition causes the learner to remain passive for he lacks the energy needed in order to be actively involved in classroom activities.

In terms of reading comprehension, inhibition is often caused by learners’ linguistic limitations, lexical or syntactic. Lexis refers to vocabulary. According to Nash and Snowling (2006: 336), vocabulary is “the knowledge of words and their meanings”. Sheehan (2002), quoted by Kristina Hansen (2009:6), does not take a different view but goes further by considering vocabulary as “the ability to understand and use words to acquire and convey meaning”. Therefore, learners in a reading class need to know words meanings. This might help them achieve comprehension with relative ease. For Bromley (2002: 528), “Vocabulary development is both an outcome of comprehension and a precursor to it, with word meanings making up as much as 70-80% of comprehension”. My own experience as a teacher of English as a foreign language teaches me that lexical limitations hinder the effectiveness and efficiency of text processing. As far as syntactic content is concerned, it has to do with the knowledge of grammatical, syntactic and semantic system. For Hanah (2011: 1), syntax is “the part of linguistics that studies sentence structure”. Comprehension, I think, cannot be achieved unless the individual has a good command of the syntactic features of the language he uses. Linguistic knowledge (lexical and syntactic) “... plays an essential part in text comprehension.” (Xiao-Hui *et al.*, 2007, p. 18) They go further to say “Without linguistic schemata, it is impossible for the reader to decode and comprehend a text (...). The more linguistic schemata a reader has in his mind, the faster the reader acquires information and the better understanding the reader may get.” This, to some extent, corroborates my own view that linguistic limitations might block learners’ eagerness to provide energy and produce effort in order to achieve comprehension.

¹¹ « ...un blocage de l’énergie nécessaire à l’accomplissement d’un acte. »

3.2. POOR CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE: SOURCE OF APATHY

Meyer and Dick (2006: 666) define commitment as “a force that binds an individual to a target (social or non-social) and to a course of action of relevance to that target.” The absence of commitment is referred to as apathy. At the educational level, a learner’s commitment has to do with his willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in an activity he considers significant. Many authors, Hanson (1955), Knoll (2000), Cricket (2010) among others addressed the issue. Hanson (1955: 144) pictures a committed learner as the one who is “genuinely oriented to the task (...). His concern is rather with defining and accomplishing a task which he sees as germane”. He characterizes the engaged learner as an individual who has all his focus on the activity he performs. Hanson continues saying that “commitment is more than an ingredient of good learning. It is the core of good character.” (p.145) Cricket (2010: 2) shares this view but goes further by considering engagement as the motor to development. For him, “only when students see the purpose of engaging in schools, as students and agents of change, will engagement and students academics and lives improve”. Therefore, learners’ commitment allows them, to develop good manners such as courage, perseverance, industriousness, and eagerness which could have a positive influence on their grades.

In the case of reading comprehension, the impact of commitment on learners’ performances is unquestionable. Thus, Knoll (2000: 15) rightly admits that “students who are personally involved in reading remember texts better and achieve a deeper understanding of those texts”. Many learners are apathetic during reading class. This situation might be caused by poor contextual background. Contextual background refers to the general setting that relates to a person or an event. Thus, one often talks about social, cultural, economic, or historical background. According to Shuying (2013: 130), contextual background in the context of reading refers to “conceptual knowledge or information about what usually happens within a certain topic, and how these happenings relate to each other to form a coherent whole.”

Generally, information presented in a familiar context is better understood and better recalled than information presented in a less familiar one. According to schema theory, the more learners are equipped with the contextual background needed to process a given text, the more they are eager to perform any kind of activity on it. Their ability to decode the message a text conveys leaves no doubt on their full commitment. It then appears that background knowledge plays a significant role in learners' engagement and beyond, their performances at reading. In the same line, Carrell (1988b: 245) asserts that "students' apparent reading problems may be problems of insufficient background knowledge". For her, learners' poor contextual background knowledge may be one of the obstacles to their engagement in the reading process. Nevertheless, many students have to cope with poor contextual background knowledge.

3.3. POOR UNDERSTANDING OF COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS: SOURCE OF FRUSTRATION AND ANXIETY

Frustration is a feeling of tension, insecurity, discouragement, or dissatisfaction that occurs when our efforts to reach a desired goal is blocked. When this occurs, it can produce feelings of anger, which in turn can generate feelings of aggression and aggressive behavior. A frustrated person trusts his own skills but is annoyed of not bringing all his resources together in the completion of a given task. Frustration is a threat to one's feelings of adequacy and can be an obstacle to reaching a goal. Typically, the emotion associated with frustration involves anxiety. According to Jafarigohar (2012: 159), anxiety is "part of human emotion which includes fear and uncertainty, uneasiness and frustration or tension". Scovel (1991) identifies two kinds of anxiety: trait anxiety and state anxiety. Trait anxiety has to do with spontaneous fear or anguish that occurs when the individual is exposed to a situational threat or stress whereas state anxiety is the fact of worrying or having worrisome thoughts over a longer period of time. According to Dobson (2012: 11), anxiety, which is linked to poor academic performance, has some harmful effect on teaching and learning. He insists

on the fact that high levels of academic anxiety can negatively affect working memory.

In the context of reading comprehension, frustration and anxiety may be caused by poor understanding of comprehension questions. The inability to understand comprehension questions may lead to learners' anxiety and erode their effort to achieve. Reading task is demanding in terms of memory work. And learners' anxiety and frustration slow or even impede effective memory work resulting in poor reactions on their parts. As behavioral theory lays more emphasis on learners' feeling towards reading, I think both frustration and anxiety should be given attention for even skillful readers are not immunized against them. Ignoring the harmful effects of frustration and anxiety during the reading process may lead to false judgment for teachers may not perceive the real abilities of their learners.

3.4. MOTIVATION ISSUES DURING READING COMPREHENSION TASKS

According to Pardee (1990: 3), "motivation can be defined as those forces within an individual that push or propel him to satisfy basic needs or wants." For Russell (1969), school motivation refers to learner's enthusiasm, involvement, attentiveness and joy, his willingness and eagerness to learn and do classroom activities. Simply put, it is the inner desire, the stamina that makes a person want to learn or perform a given task. Motivation can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. It is intrinsic when that feeling comes from the learner himself who convinces himself of the relevance of a task. Extrinsic motivation occurs when the sole motivation for an activity is to get something outside it. This study shows interest in intrinsic motivation. All the psychological factors referred to earlier relate to it. Motivation has a positive influence on education. For, as Baranek (1996: 2) puts it, "intrinsically motivated students experience school success because they display behaviors such as choosing challenging activities and spending more time on task." He adds that

Children who are intrinsically motivated display a number of behaviors that allow them to perform accordingly with their

academic abilities. (...) children who are intrinsically motivated become deeply involved in the task at hand and experience a feeling of enjoyment and seek out challenges with the intention of conquering them. (p.10)

The importance of motivation is also perceived in reading comprehension classes. Poor motivation might undermine learners' commitment to the reading task which in turn might result in poor performance. For Guthrie *et al.* (2004: 404), "students' amount of motivation correlates with achievement in reading comprehension". In the same line, Wigfield *et al.* (2008) sustain that learners' reading comprehension level is higher when they are intrinsically motivated.

With this development, one can see that reading comprehension task is a real challenge for learners. It involves them in active mental process which calls for their cognitive and affective skills. Therefore, failure to effectively involve in this active mental process would mean failure to achieve comprehension.

3. HELPING STUDENTS TO OVERCOME PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS DURING READING TASKS

My suggestion is based on some classroom activities carried out with my own learners². The activities consist in organizing some training sessions that help to collect some data from learners. The analysis of these data has enlightened me on some psychological problems that learners met.

A framework for training students readers

Reading passage

On Dec. 1, 1955 Rosa Park, a 42-year old negro seamstress, was ordered by a Montgomery city bus driver to get up and make way for some white passengers. She refused, was arrested and fined 10 dollars under an Alabama law making it a misdemeanor for any person to disobey a bus

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driver's seating instructions but that was not the last of the Rosa Parks case: it has since been used to prove that economic reprisal, as advocated against Negroes by the White Citizen's Councils of the south, is a double-edged blade.

Within 48 hours after Rosa Parks has been arrested, mimeographed leaflets were being circulated in Montgomery's Negro sections, calling for a one-day boycott of the city buses. The strike was so successful that Negro leaders decided to continue it until their demands were met.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

(Read the text above and provide short answers to the following questions)

- 1- What was Rosa Parks summoned to do?
- 2- Did she obey? What was the outcome?
- 3- How did the Black community reply?
- 4- What was the main cause of the strike?
- 5- Can you name some of the leaders of the strike?

An interview that followed the activities revealed what follows:

1. Some were unable to read the text fluently. They stumbled over some 'unknown' words.
2. Others said that they were not expecting this kind of text; a topic that had little in common with their own life.
3. Some said they understood the text but were unable to answer the questions in their own words.
4. Others said they understood the questions but feared to give answers the wrong answers.
5. Some said they were unable to name some leaders because they had a vague idea about the history of America.

How does one explain these reactions? How do they correlate with the learners' performances?

First, students who were unable to read the text fluently and stumbled over some 'unknown' words or those who were unable to answer the questions in their own words were inhibited because of their poor linguistic knowledge. Secondly, the learners who thought that the topic had nothing to do with their own lives were not psychologically prepared to work on this kind of topic since they did not see its interest for them. These students lacked the intrinsic motivation conducive to performance. Thirdly, the learners who were not sure to meet the rater's expectations were anxious. This prevented them from achieving. Fourthly, the ones who failed to explain the main cause of the strike or name some of the freedom fighters had poor contextual background knowledge. This impeded their effective commitment which resulted in failure.

Suggestion

Drawing from the conclusions of my intervention and taking account of the theoretical framework of this study, I suggest that learners should be involved in discovering and having better insight into the psychological problems they are likely to meet during reading comprehension tasks. This might allow them develop some skills that may help them achieve.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to discuss some psychological problems relating to reading comprehension tasks and suggest ways to overcome them. The reflection carried out in a theoretical framework including schema, mental, and behavioral theories resulted in four conclusions: inhibiting impact of learners' linguistic limitations; poor contextual background knowledge as a source of apathy; frustration and anxiety deriving from inaccessible comprehension questions; and motivation issues during reading comprehension tasks. With regard to the psychological problems mentioned my suggestion is as follows: involving learners in discovering the psychological problems that they are likely to experience during reading comprehension tasks; they might then draw from them to

develop some skills that may help achieve. Nevertheless, I feel this study would have led to more instructive conclusions if a formal investigation was carried out in the context of an effective reading comprehension class. Therefore, for further reflections on the issue, emphasis might be laid on this approach to the study. In addition, the contribution of ICTs³ to minimizing the harmful effects of psychological factors on learners' performances at reading comprehension tasks might nourish innovative reflections in the field.

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