

Strategies of Understanding Written Texts in EFL Classrooms

Maysa' A. Mahmood

English Language Department/ College of Arts & Letters / Cihan University/ Erbil

E-mail: m.alithawi@yahoo.com

Abstract

Reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the ways readers manage their interaction with written texts and how these strategies are related to text understanding, acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information. In EFL comprehension lessons, the students try to work out interpretations of the meaning related to the written word through the usage of different comprehension strategies. Yet, there are moments where the participants in the classroom fail to reach a successful understanding of the passage read despite the guidance of the teacher.

The present research aims at investigating and identifying moments of comprehension failure and reasons behind them. It also aims at specifying the different strategies used in terms of type and number of occurrences. It is hypothesized that some students in EFL classrooms fail to understand parts of written texts because they do not use any kind of strategy at particular stages of the comprehension process.

The samples selected for the research are the two sections of first year students in the Department of English language, College of Arts and Letters in Cihan University. Each section included 30 students who study comprehension as a basic course, through their first academic year, in an average of 3 hours per week. Eight comprehension lessons have been recorded and the passages discussed during these lessons, were chosen from the students' text book 'Practice & Progress' by L.G. Alexander, 1967.

The research provides a brief overview of the studies related to the process of reading comprehension. It also illustrates the ways many linguists identified the factors contributing to understanding written texts during the previous years. This is followed by mentioning the general strategies that are used by learners of the English language with explanation of their meaning and role in comprehending written texts. Section two presents the analysis of the recorded lessons. Though the discussions of eight passages were recorded, only three of them were included in the research due to shortage of space. Moments of comprehension failure are specified by the letters (CF) with reference to the reason. Types of strategies used during the lessons are identified as well.

Finally, it is concluded that the students sometimes fail to grasp the meaning of some lines or parts of a text because they don't use certain strategies. The analysis of the lessons also shows that the strategies that are mostly used by the students, in their attempt to understand what they read, are: using prior knowledge, inferring meaning, questioning, visualizing, and determining importance which are used in sequence and number of occurrences that differ from one text to another. On the other hand, strategies like synthesizing and summarizing are hardly ever used in some texts and never used in others. The research also illustrates the significant role of the teacher that contributes to the students' critical thinking and understanding of the written text

ستراتيجيات فهم النصوص المكتوبة في صفوف متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية

ميساء عبد الكريم محمود العيثاوي

قسم اللغة الانكليزية/ كلية الاداب والفنون/ جامعة جيهان/ اربيل

الخلاصة

تكمن اهمية استراتيجيات القراءة في كشفها للطرق التي يتمكن من خلالها القارئ من معالجة التفاعل مع تلك النصوص وعلاقتها بفهم النص ، الاكتساب ، الخزن واسترجاع المعلومات . يحاول متعلمو اللغة الانكليزية كلغه اجنبية في دروس الاستيعاب الوصول الى فهم النصوص من خلال استخدام استراتيجيات مختلفه . الا ان هذا لايمنع من وجود لحظات لايمكن فيها المشتركون من الوصول الى فهم صحيح للنص بالرغم من توجيه المدرس . يهدف البحث الى متابعة وتحديد لحظات فشل الاستيعاب التي يمر بها الطلاب بالاضافة الى تحديد الاستراتيجيات المختلفه من حيث النوع وعدد مرات الاستخدام . لقد تم الافتراض ان بعض الطلاب لايتوصلون الى فهم صحيح لاجزاء من النصوص المكتوبه بسبب عدم استخدامهم لاستراتيجيات معينه من مراحل الدرس المختلفه . ان العينه المستخدمه في البحث هم مجموعتان من طلاب المرحلة الاولى لقسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية الاداب والفنون جامعة جيهان . تم تسجيل ثمانية من دروس الاستيعاب التي تم مناقشتها خلال الفصل الدراسي الاول وهذه النصوص مختاره من الكتاب المنهجي للطلاب . البحث يشمل ملخص للدراسات المتعلقة بمتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغه اجنبية وعملية القراءة . كما ويوضح الطرق التي اتبعها اللغويون في تحليل العوامل المؤثره في استيعاب النصوص المكتوبه. البحث يبين ايضا الاستراتيجيات العامه التي يستخدمها المتعلمون مع توضيح لمعانيها ودورها في فهم اي نص . يتبع هذا تحليل لثلاثة نصوص تظهر من خلاله الاستراتيجيه المستخدمه والمراحل التي يتم استخدامها فيها خلال عملية الاستيعاب . وأخيرا تم الاستنتاج ان الطلاب في اغلب الاحيان يستخدمون المعلومات السابقه ، استنتاج المعاني ، الاستله ، التصور وتقرير اهمية المعلومات وهذه الاستراتيجيات تختلف من حيث النوع وعدد مرات الاستخدام من نص الى اخر . كما ويبين التحليل ان الطلاب نادرا ما يستخدمون استراتيجيات التلخيص والتركيب .

Introduction

The way reading comprehension was seen has changed dramatically over the past years. Some linguists used to view the process of reading as processing each letter, joining them into words, searching for what those words mean, storing the meaning in short-term memory, and at the end accommodating word meaning to compose initial sentence meaning and then the meaning of a larger part of a text. (Gough, 1971. p.26 & Durkin, 1980.p.481).

This way of analyzing the process of understanding written texts was highly opposed by other scholars who focused on the significance of context in determining the meaning of words.

This notion was then further expanded to discuss the significance of text-based events that existed outside the written material like the title, side headings, pictures and any illustrations as variables in the process of understanding. (Reynolds *et al*, 1993.p.195).

The idea of variables was later widened to even include non-text components such as the reader's aims, objectives, background knowledge, and perspectives. This was a start to a more comprehensive view to all the factors that determined the accomplishment of a successful attempt to understand a written text. Shortly thereafter, it became clear that the background knowledge that each individual reader brought to the reading situation was a primary context variable involved in reading comprehension.

Reading is no longer seen as a rigid process that begins with decoding and ends with understanding. It is much more comprehensive and flexible to engage the reader and what he reads in one frame of strategies that exist sometimes in certain sequence to enable the

readers reach the underlying, deeper meaning of the sentences, the paragraph and the entire text. (Brantmeier, 2002, p.14 & Miller, 2003,p.58).

1. General Strategies in understanding written texts

Interests in reading comprehension strategies began to grow as a part of the new scientific understanding of cognition that emerged in the latter decades of the twentieth century .Linguists, interested in this domain, confirmed that a reader is an active participant with the text and he/she makes sense of how ideas based on the text relate to one another by interpretive interactions between what the reader gleans from the text and what he or she already knows.

Studies proposed that readers actively build meanings as mental representations and store them as semantic interpretations held in memory during reading. These representations enable the reader to remember and use what had been read and understood through the usage of certain comprehension strategies (Zimmermann & Keene, 2007, p.63, Harrey & Goudvis, 2007,p.44 and Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002,p.20).

Central to all of the recent research is the idea that such strategies are means to an end, not an end in themselves. They are no more than tools that readers employ in the service of constructing meaning from a text (Brantmeier, 2002, p.12 & Almasi, 2003, p.73).

Although many linguists mention different strategies that exist during the process of reading, most of them agree on the following:

1.1 Usage of prior knowledge

This means that readers search for connections between what they know and the new information they encounter in the text they read (Pearson *et al*, 1992, p.45).

Readers cannot understand any text without thinking about what they already know. The amount of background knowledge and experience is what each reader brings to existence while reading.

Making connections means that a student has engaged with a text and is able to relate it to a broader context. Linguists often refer to three types of connections: text - to- text, text – to - self, and text – to - world. Text – to - text connections mean that a student is able to link two texts together. Text-to-self connections are based on the student's schema and are highly individual. Finally, text-to-world connections link what the student is reading with the "real world". (Keene, 2008, p.32).

When the readers make connections from their experience to the text they are currently reading, they have a foundation upon which they can place new facts, ideas, and concepts. As readers read, they consider how it fits with what they already know. In this way, they build upon the schema they already have developed.

1.2 Questioning

It is the strategy that propels readers forward for when readers have questions, they are less likely to abandon the text. Proficient readers ask questions before, during, and after reading. They question the content, the author, the events, the issues, and the ideas in the text. (Miller 2003, p.58).

Questioning can be used for many purposes, including setting a purpose for reading, monitoring comprehension, clarifying meaning, and extending understanding. Teachers might have students browse text and pose questions prior to reading. During reading,

students might ask and answer both literal and make connections. After reading, questions serve as the starting point for a discussion about a particular text.

1.3 Making inferences

This strategy means that readers think about and search the text to construct meaning beyond what is literally stated. Successful inferring involves both schema and clues from the text. It enables reader to draw a conclusion or make interpretation that is not explicitly stated in a text. According to many linguists, inferring allows readers to make their own discoveries without the direct comment of the author. Readers infer when they take what they already know, their background knowledge and merges with clues in the text to reach a conclusion, surface a theme, predict and outcome, arrive at a big idea, and so forth.

1.4 Visualizing

Visualizing means that student or readers create images based on what they read. These images involve any or all of the senses and might change over time as the reader becomes more deeply involved with a text. This strategy enables him / her to see an essay, a short story, or play come to life in his / her "minds eye". Visualizing will enhance the other reading strategies students use. (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 45).

Linguists confirm that visualizing gives the reader further opportunity to interact with the text, and make it more readers own. Visual images, though, do need to be based on the text (visualizing is not fantasy). Images change with subsequent reading, or after discussing the text. Students may have new ideas or ways of making sense of a text. This happens because the interpretation and understanding of a text evolves.

1.5 Determining importance

By the use of this strategy, readers try to figure out the essence of a text. When people read different texts, they focus on the characters, actions, motives, and problems that contribute to the whole unity of the theme. So, in the sea of words that exist in any text, students continually try to sort and analyze information according to their importance. (Zimmermann & Keene, 2007). Teachers often assist their students in analyzing everything from text features in nonfiction material to verbal clues in novels to help them sift easily through the real value of different bits of information in the text.

Learning to determine the importance of the information presented in the book, as block argues, is one of the most effective ways to understand the information that is being presented and also allow the student to decide which information is important and should be learned and which information is supplementary to the text and not as important.

1.6 Synthesizing

To synthesize is to take the relevant key ideas or concepts from a text, create necessary mental images, combine them with prior knowledge, in order to infer meanings that may or may not be explicitly stated by the author, and thus think about the new information in ways the reader had not engaged in before synthesis, according to Miller is "all the things that go in the mind of the reader to transform the elements of processing text into a greater understanding" (Miller, 2003, p.60).

When readers synthesize what they have read, they are generally capable of articulating and sharing with others their newfound knowledge or ideas. Therefore, it is the ultimate

goal of reading and at the same time the most sophisticated of the comprehension techniques because students move from meaning of the text, to integrating their new understanding into their lives and world view (Zimmermann & Keene, 2007, p.65).

1.7 Summarizing

This strategy is about retelling the information and paraphrasing it. When readers summarize, they need to sift and sort through large amounts of information to extract essential ideas. Summarizing requires students to recall what they have read from the story and put it into their own words, pick out important ideas and notions from the text and place it in the correct order in their summary. Summarizing is, in fact, identifying main thoughts, leaving out insignificant ideas, creating topic sentences, and removing redundancy. (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002, p.20).

2. Analysis of Comprehension Lessons

The following is an analysis of three comprehension lessons during which different passages, from the students' text book, were tackled. The analysis illustrates the strategies used by the students at certain stages of the comprehension process. Sentences said by the teacher, hereby (T) and the students (S) were registered carefully to ensure the precise content and sequence of them. Moments of comprehension failure are referred to as (CF) with reference to the reason behind them.

The passages discussed are "The Last One", p.195, "Escap", p.201, and "Trapped in a Mine", p.215. These passages are chosen from the students' text book "Practice & Progress" by L.G. Alexander, Longman: 1967.

2.1 Text-1-

The last one?

"After reading an article entitled "Cigarette, Smoking and your Health I lit a cigarette to calm my nerves. I smoked with concentration and pleasure as I was sure that this would be my last cigarette. For a whole week I did not smoke at all and during this time, my wife suffered terribly. I had all the usual symptoms of someone giving up smoking; a bad temper and an enormous appetite." (Alexander, 1967, P.195).

T : What is the writer talking about in this passage?

S1: Smoking

T : Just smoking?

S1: Yes, no, cigarettes. The use of cigarettes.

T : The use of cigarettes?

S1: To take or have a cigarette.

T : Is the writer a smoker ?

S2: yes.

T : How do you know?

S2: The sentence is "I smoked with concentration". **(CF) the student could have avoided comprehension failure by connecting what he reads with his prior knowledge. The title of the passage is "the last one", which means that the writer is a smoker and this is his last cigarette.**

T : Another suggestion?

S3: Because he says "I was sure that this would be my last one." **(Inferring meaning).**

T : So?

S3: The word "last". My father is a smoker and he always says "This is my last". (**usage of prior knowledge, connection-to-world**).

T : Ok. Why does the writer say in line 3 "I lit a cigarette to calm my nerves"?

S4: He is angry. (**Inferring meaning**).

T : Why do you think he is angry?

S4: He doesn't want to smoke.

T : So why does he smoke?

S4: I don't know. (**CF**) **The student could have known the answer to this question by using his prior knowledge about smokers who ,in general become angry once they try to stop smoking.**

T : Who knows?

S5: He cant stop.

T : Stop what?

S5: Smoke.

T : Why cant he stop smoking?

S5: Because like other people smoking. They don't stop. (usage of prior knowledge, connection-to-world).

S6: But why does the writer say in line 5 "I was sure that this would be my last cigarette." So, can he stop.? (**Questioning**).

T : Who has an answer?

S5: No, he cant.

S7: Yes, he can.

T : Give me reasons for your answer.

S7: He can. He says "sure" which means he can. (**inferring meaning**).

T : Now, the writer of this passage is a smoker who wants to stop smoking. Did he stop?

S8: Yes, he did.

T : Was it easy for him?

S8: No.

T : In which line does the writer say that things were hard?

S8: Line 7, "my wife suffered terribly". (**Inferring meaning**).

S9: I think it is line 9, " a bad temper and enormous appetite." (**Inferring meaning**)

S10: Sorry, why is he unhappy? He stopped smoking. Right? (**Questioning**)

T : Who can answer him?

S8: He is with her. If he is unhappy, she will be unhappy. (**Visualizing**)

T : So, you are imagining that if someone is unhappy, he will affect the person or people living with him.

S8: Yes.

T : O.K. Now we understand that when he tried to stop smoking, things became hard and it wasn't easy. Do you want to add any other information?

S11: Yes, he wanted to stop smoking after reading the paper about smoking. (**Determining importance**).

T : Very good. So that was the reason behind his decision. Anything else?

S5: Why does the writer in line 5 mention the time? (**Questioning**).

T : Can anyone think of an answer to this question?

S7: I think he is saying that although he stopped smoking for only a week, yet it is very difficult. (**Inferring meaning**)

T : Very well. Thank you all.

2.2 Text-2-

Trapped in a Mine

" Six men have been trapped in a mine for seventeen hours. If they are not brought to the surface soon they may lose their lives. However, rescue operations are proving difficult. If explosives are used, vibrations will cause the roof of the mine to collapse. Rescue workers are therefore drilling a hole on the north side of the mine. They intend to bring the men up in a special capsule." (Alexander, 1967,p.215).

T : What is this passage about?

S1: It is about some men, workers, who are being in a mine for a long time and some people are trying to help them. (**Determining Importance & Summarizing**).

T : Very well, what else?

S2: They will die. (**CF**) **the student should have used the strategy of (synthesizing) for the sentence below the picture in the book is 'the men are cheerful' which means that they know that they will be saved.**

T: Why do you say so?

S2:They are not brought up.

T:Could you read the first line?

S2:Yes, six men have been trapped in a mineIf they are not brought up..... .

T: So?

S2: No answer.

S2: They can't go out .It is a mine which is a place underground. (**Usage of prior knowledge, connection –to-world**).

T : But the writer is saying "if they are not brought to the surface soon". Does anyone of you have any information concerning rescue operation?

S4: rescue operations are not easy, I mean they are all difficult. We see in T.V this. (**Usage of prior knowledge**).

T : Are they all difficult?

S4: Yes, all.

S5:We see on T.V operations, rescue operations that are very difficult.

T : What makes them, I mean rescue operations, hard?

S6: maybe there is a fire which is dangerous. Even if it is not a big fire, it is still dangerous and rescue operations will be not easy. (**Usage of prior knowledge**).

T : Good, what else?

S7: Sometimes accidents happen, like car accident and it is a hard situation also.

T : So most of the rescue operations are hard and the one, we are reading about is hard too. Why?

S8: Because the place is amine, a small covered place. This is even more difficult that any place. (**Visualizing**).

T : Do you think the rescue team will succeed in helping the workers?

S9: Yes.

T : What makes you so sure?

S9: Because they should. And I always read about such matters and at the end they all rescue others. (**Usage of prior knowledge. Connection-to-text**).

S10: Sorry, not all of them.

T : What do you mean?

S10: I mean sometimes they try but they cant.

T : Why cant they?

S10: Because we are human. We cant do everything. (**Usage of prior knowledge. Connection-to-world**).

T : O.K. Now some people are in trouble and in need of help and the rescue team is trying to help. Because the place is a mine, the rescue team should think of the best way to do their job.

T: What do you understand from the sentence in line 4: "They intend to bring the men up in a special capsule."?

S11.They will not help them.

T: What do you mean?

S11: The team can't help them. (**CF**) **The student should have used the strategy of (making inferences) to avoid comprehension failure.The sentence in the passage is,"If there had not been a hard layer of rock beneath the soil,they would have completed the job in a few hours".A logical inference of this sentence is that the team was able to help the trapped men.**

T: What makes you think that they can't help them.

S11: Because they "intend" not can.

T: What does intend mean?

S11: I don't know.

S8: Intend means they will. I mean they will have a plan .Any operation should have a plan. (**Visualizing**).

T: We'll continue next time.

2.3 Text-3-

Escape

"When he had killed the guard, the prisoner of war quickly, dragged him into the bushes. Working rapidly in the darkness, he soon changed into the dead man's clothes. Now dressed in a blue uniform and with a rifle over his shoulder, the prisoner marched boldly up and down in front of the camp. He could hear shouting in front of the camp itself. Lights were blazing and men were running here and there." (Alexander, 1967, p.201).

T : Now, before reading the passage, lets start from the title, " Escape". What do you think the passage is about?

S1: I think it is a prison and someone or people ran away from it. (**Visualizing**).

T : O.K.

S2: Or maybe some person made something bad and I mean not in a prison, he or she escaped from the police. (**Visualizing**)

T : Very well, any other answers?

S3: Maybe he is a child who is running away from school. (**CF**) **The student should have used the strategy of (making inferences) and build a logical opinion from the picture that shows a guard holding a rifle and walking in the dark.**

T : Well, all these expectations could be right but once we read the first line of the passage, we realize immediately what the title refers to. So he is a prisoner a war prisoner, who has escaped from prison.

S3: Sorry, does the word "escape" mean that he really escaped? (**Questioning**)

T : Who can answer this question?

S4: Yes ,maybe No.

(**CF**) **The student could have used the strategy of (summarizing) to reach the right answer.**

S5: I don't think so. Maybe the police will catch him.

T : I think you are right. The word escape doesn't necessarily mean that the prisoner really escaped. Now, the sentence in line 2 is "Working rapidly in the darkness". Who can explain this short sentence?

S6: rapidly means quickly (**Inferring meaning**). Quickly because the prisoner doesn't have time. I mean any prisoner wants to run away soon before someone sees him. (**Usage of prior knowledge-connection to-world**). So it is dark because it is night.

T : night? Why night?

S6: Night is dark.

S7: It should be night.

T : Should be?

S7: Yes, because it is escape. It is easy in night. (**Visualizing**).

T : So, you are saying that any escape is easier at night, right?

S7: Right.

T : O.K. Now we have a prisoner who had killed a guard so that he can escape. He was doing something quickly in the bushes. What was he doing?

S8: He was changing his clothes.

T : Why?

S8: He wanted to wear the clothes of the guard.

T : Why?

S9: He wants to be a guard. (**Inferring meaning**).

T : Why?

S9: So that no one knows him (**Visualizing**).

S10: Because he can run away easily. (**Visualizing**).

T : Very well. For these reasons, he changed his clothes and marched bravely in front of the camp. Why bravely or boldly?

S11: Because he is a guard now, I mean like a guard so he is sure no one will know him. (**Visualizing**). But why did he stay in the same place? (**Questioning**).

T : Why do you think?

S11: No answer.

T : Anyone knows?

S7: Because he is thinking of staying for awhile, maybe. (**Visualizing**).

T : Is this the reason?

S7: Or maybe he is leaving but not now.

S12: I think he isn't in a hurry now because no one will know him.

T : I think this could be the reason for he looks like a guard now with a rifle and he is supposed to be staying in the same place of the real guard. Right?

S11: But the others know the real guard. So why is he staying? (**Questioning**).

T : It is still dark. Remember?

S11: Oh, yes.

T : The last two lines are describing the noise, lights, and the state of the men in the place. What had happened? We will answer this question next time.

The above analysis illustrates parts of the discussion between the teacher and the students during the process of comprehending some passages. As there are moments where the students ,with the help of their teacher, reach a successful understanding of what they read ,there are others where they fail to do so. The types of comprehension strategies are identified where used as well as the moments of comprehension failure with reference to the reason.

Conclusion

It is concluded that learners of the English Language, namely, first year students of the English Language Department/College of Arts & Letters in Cihan University, experience moments of comprehension failure during the process of understanding written texts because they do not use certain strategies which if used would ,definitely, help them avoid such moments. On the other hand, they reach a successful comprehension by the use of certain strategies which differ in kind, number of occurrences, and sequence from one text to another. It is also concluded that the students mostly use prior knowledge, making inferences, questioning, visualizing, and determining importance as strategies helping them in comprehending what they read .Whereas, they hardly ever use the other kinds like synthesizing and summarizing. Finally, the analysis illustrates and confirms the significant role of the teacher during the comprehension lessons. It is his/her awareness of how and when to interfere that assures the students' usage of the appropriate strategy at the appropriate time and consequently contribute to their understanding and critical thinking skills which help them review, analyze ,reflect , and respond to the information in the written texts.

References

- Alexander, L.G. (1967). Practice and Progress .Essex: Adison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Almasi, J.F. (2003). Teaching Strategic Progress in Reading .New York: The Guilford Press.
- Brantmeier, C.(2002) .Language Reading Strategies. Hillsdale, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gough, P.B. (1980).What Classroom Observation Reveal About Reading Comprehension .Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Durkin, D. (1979). Teaching Them To Read .Boston, Ma: Allen and Bacon , Inc.
- Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A. (2007). Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension For Understanding & Engagement. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Keene, E. (2008). To Understand New Horizons in Reading Comprehension. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Miller, D. (2003). Reading With Meaning: Teaching Comprehension. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Pearson, P. & Roehler, J. (1992).Developing Expertise in Reading Comprehension, 2nd Edition, Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

- Pressley, M. (2006). Reading Instruction That Work. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Reynolds, R.E. & Brown, K. J. (2001) .Individual Difference & Strategy Use. Englewood Cliffs: Prentic Hall.
- Trabasso, T. & Bouchard, E. (2002). Teaching Readers How to Comprehend Texts .Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zimmermann, S. & Keene, E. (2007). Mosaic of Thought. 2nd Edition, Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann.