

Reading Comprehension: Theories and Strategies Toward an Effective Reading Instruction

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Abstract

Comprehension is a vital component in the reading process and is associated with a learner's success in school, and even in life. However, research shows that many students are struggling to comprehend what they are reading, especially texts that require higher order thinking skills. Several factors could be ascribed to this problem and one of them is the insufficiency of teachers in terms of pedagogical knowledge. Many of them felt unprepared to teach reading skills and strategies; they focused more on assessing students' reading comprehension rather than teaching them how to comprehend better. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to present some of the theories that explain how reading comprehension occurs. It also reviews the different researches conducted on teaching reading comprehension strategies specifically on how to comprehend single and multiple texts. Further, this paper argues that it is imperative for reading teachers (including content area teachers) to have operational knowledge on the different strategies in teaching reading comprehension and how to strategically apply these in their instruction, particularly when reading multiple texts to improve their students' critical thinking skills.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, strategies, theories, reading instruction, single and multiple texts comprehension

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1. Introduction

Many studies have shown that reading comprehension is an important factor in a student's success in school (e.g., García-Madruga, Vila, Gómez-Veiga, Duque, & Elosúa 2014; Sircey, 2017). This definitely extends to the field of work and thus, affecting one's quality of life. Further, it is also regarded as the end product or outcome of all the reading acts (Carmine, Silbert, Kame'enui, Tarver, Jungiohann, 2006; Duke & Carlisle, 2011). The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) defined reading comprehension as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning" (p. 11). This, however, is not as simple as it may seem.

Extensive research has shown that many students who are in elementary grades and in high school (or even in the tertiary level) cannot even decode automatically; how much more comprehending a text which requires higher order thinking skills (e.g., Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2009). This problem could be attributed to the insufficiency of mentors in terms of knowledge in instructional theories and pedagogies (Newman, 2008) to help their students comprehend effectively. Distinctively, Scott (2009) emphasized that many significant studies (e.g., Gill, 2008) repeatedly demonstrated that learners are not taught how to comprehend text and that educators felt unprepared to teach reading skills and strategies. Research also shows that most teachers focused on assessing the reading comprehension level of their students and not on teaching them how to comprehend better (Gill, 2008). This paper provides a brief review of researches conducted on teaching reading comprehension strategies and its theories. It advances the value of comprehending multiple texts in order to develop higher order thinking skills (e.g., critical thinking skills) among learners.

2. Theories in Reading Comprehension

There are theories which append reading comprehension. The following discussion centers on two of the most crucial theories in reading comprehension.

2.1 Comprehension as a Thinking Process

Woolley (2011) claimed that comprehension is a very complex process which involves cognitive activities like summarizing, predicting, evaluating, synthesizing, etc. Hermosa (2006) emphasized that "comprehension involves thinking" and "as there are various levels in the hierarchy of thinking, so are there various levels of comprehension" (p. 41). It is also important to note that the higher the level of comprehension, the higher the level of thinking. There are five levels/dimensions of reading comprehension: Literal, Interpretation, Evaluation or Critical Reading, Integration or Application to Self/Life, and Creative Reading. Distinctively, each dimension "is cumulative in that each builds on the others" (Hermosa, 2006, p. 56).

The first level, *Literal Comprehension*, refers to a basic type of understanding in which a reader employs information directly stated in the reading material. However, he/she should possess word recognition skills before this level of comprehension can transpire (Hermosa, 2006). *Interpretation*, which is the second level, needs “a higher level of thinking because the questions are concerned with answers not directly stated in the text but are suggested or implied” (p. 57). Thus, the reader’s skill in making an inference (usually denotes reading between the lines) is considered indispensable. The third level, *Critical Reading or Evaluation*, involves drawing the reader’s own judgment. This includes two aspects: (a) the content or theme which relates to “its accuracy, value, truthfulness, objectivity, recency, relevance” and (b) elements of style which refers to “the use of language and literary devices” (p. 58). *Integration or Application to Self and Life*, which is the next level, emphasizes reading “for use and values clarification” (p. 58). Fundamentally, how a principle, philosophy, or theory could be applied for practical use within the context of the reader’s life is deemed essential in this level. Lastly, *Creative Reading*, which utilizes “divergent thinking skills to come up with new ideas or alternate solutions to those presented by the writer” (p. 59). Some examples might be changing the ending of a story, the main idea of a narrative into a poem, or performing a play, etc.

2.2 Schema Theory

Proponents of this theory emphasized the critical role of the reader’s background knowledge and experiences or technically known as “schemata” in reading comprehension (Armstrong & Newman, 2011). It also claimed, “that everyone’s schemas are individualized” (Tracy & Morrow, 2006, p. 51). Thus, meaning or the degree of meaning resides in the reader. A person who does gardening most of his/her life will have elaborate meaning or will easily learn new knowledge about this topic. There are three types of schemata mostly used by a reader: script knowledge, knowledge of text structure, and knowledge about language.

2.2.1 Script Knowledge

It refers to “everyday information stored in memory” which usually “derived from repeated experiences with people, places, events, and situations” (Hermosa, 2006, p. 121). It also includes knowledge about procedures or methods of doing things like building a house, training a dog to jump over a fence, teaching students to comprehend multiple texts, etc.

2.2.2 Knowledge of Text Structure

Text structure indicates “aspects of texts (complete messages) that signal how the content is related” (Hermosa, 2006, p. 122). There are two basic levels: (a) *text cohesion* which refers to when the interpretation of some aspects of the text relies on the interpretation of another. This is usually seen with the use of “referential relationships among sentences” which “lead to the integration of meaning within the entire text” (p. 123); (b) *general structures used to organize the major and minor parts of a message within a particular genre* which concerns on narrative and expository texts. In a narrative text, it aims to entertain and appeal to the reader’s imagination. It is dependent on story grammar and metaphor patterns to create meaning. While expository text the goal is to teach, describe, or explain. It anchors “on the relationships of superordinate and subordinate topics, major and minor ideas, and patterns of argument or reference” (p. 123).

2.2.3 Knowledge About Language

This type of schemata concerns knowledge of graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic system of a particular language. Further, knowing how these systems operate within a given context or social setting is also important. This is because “language cannot exist outside of context” (Hermosa, 2006, p. 122). This is known as the pragmatic system of the language. Moreover, there are educators and researchers who supported the importance of knowing or understanding the context of the reading episode, both the sociological and the cultural aspects, as applied to reading comprehension (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). Another important feature of the schema theory is “that a spoken or written text does not in itself carry meaning” (Hermosa, 2006, p. 120), and that meaning emerges through interactions among different perspectives/voices or schemata (or texts), which give substance for reading comprehension. And these interactions, most of the time, create tensions or conflicting views, and the more intense these could get, the higher the quality of comprehension would be (Wilkinson & Son, 2011).

3. Strategies in Teaching Reading Comprehension

Research on teaching comprehension strategies could be grouped into four waves of studies. These are the following: First Wave: Single Strategy Instruction, Second Wave: Multiple Strategies Instruction, Third Wave: Transactional Strategies Instruction (TSI), and The Fourth Wave: Dialogic Approaches (Wilkinson & Son, 2011).

3.1 First Wave: Single Strategy Instruction

These researches which focused on the effects of teaching students' individual comprehension strategies in comprehending a single text were done in the 1970s and early 1980s. These were conducted using an experimental design. Some of these strategies were: identification of main idea, story theme identification, self-regulation, semantic mapping, use of expository text structure, and use of mental imagery. Many of these studies "have targeted special population of students who were at risk for academic failure or who were learning English as a second language" (Wilkinson & Son, 2011, p. 362).

3.2 Second Wave: Multiple Strategies Instruction

These were conducted in the 1980s which highlighted the effects of teaching students' multiple strategies in comprehending a particular reading material or materials which is/are not comprehended concurrently but as a single entity (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). For example, *Reciprocal Teaching* in which students are asked to apply strategies such as questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting (Oczkus, 2018). Another is the *Direct Explanation Approach to Strategy Instruction*; the teacher explained a group of strategies to students, modeled how to use these strategies, and involved them in guided and independent practice (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). *Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)* is another example and this is a mixture of reciprocal teaching and cooperative learning (Abuhasna, 2015), targeting learners with disabilities and second language students. This employs four comprehension strategies: brainstorming and predicting, monitoring understanding, identifying main ideas, and generating questions and reviewing key ideas. Furthermore, modeling and guided practice in pair or small group are also utilized (Wilkinson & Son, 2011).

3.3 Third Wave: Transactional Strategies Instruction (TSI)

TSI stressed transactions between readers and text and among participants. Students are taught a set of strategies which includes predicting based on prior knowledge, generating questions, clarifying confusions, constructing mental images, relating text content to prior knowledge, and summarizing. Most of TSI researches conducted made use of experimental design and showed positive results (Wilkinson & Son, 2011).

However, these are not without flaws. Some of these are: (a) heavy emphasis on comprehension strategies which weaken student's comprehension since most of their mental capacity is deflected in understanding a particular text (Beck & McKeown, 2006; Sinatra, Brown, & Reynolds, 2002; Wilkinson & Son, 2011); (b) instructions become too mechanical as seen in the studies of Baker (2002) and Moats (2004), in which comprehension strategies become an end rather than a means to achieve comprehension; (c) reading strategies "are difficult for teachers to sustain in the classroom" (Wilkinson & Son, 2011, p. 366) because logically, it needs lasting dedication and commitment; and (d) "teaching strategies can take several years for teachers to learn to do well, requires a considerable amount of classroom time, and may conflict with teacher's prior beliefs and practices" (p. 367).

3.4 The Fourth Wave: Dialogic Approaches

This wave of reading researches which is labelled as "dialogic" comes as a response to the above limitations of reading strategies instruction, and the belief "that comprehension was a more fluid, context-sensitive process that required a more dynamic, flexible approach to instruction" (Wilkinson & Son, 2011, p. 367). The following are some examples.

3.4.1 Content-Rich Instruction

This integrates strategies and the richness of the subject matter/content. An example of this is the Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) which includes activating background knowledge, questioning, searching for information, summarizing, organizing information graphically (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Klauda, 2012). However, these strategies are taught within a rich context of collaborative inquiry in science where students create knowledge goals and connect these to real-life situations (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004). Another is the In-Depth Expanded Application of Science (IDEAS) which integrates language arts and reading the instruction for two hours every day, making use of science concepts and comprehension skills and strategies like concept mapping which connects new knowledge to prior knowledge (Wilkinson & Son, 2011).

3.4.2 Discussion

Though a traditional classroom strategy, it is characterized as "more open-ended, collaborative exchanges of ideas among participants for the purpose of improving student's understanding and interpretation of texts" (Wilkinson & Son, 2011, p. 369). Some studies show that the experience of discussing what we read with others is a different experience than reading it alone (Dressman, 2004; Long, 2003). Further, Park (2012) stressed that "reading together makes visible how readers respond differently to the same text depending on what they bring to it and

makes possible for readers to be challenged, supported, and even transformed by the interpretations, perspectives, and life experiences of others” (p. 209). This is particularly true in a wide range of readers like in a class. In addition, the teacher should make use of praise or feedback after a student shared his/her idea or interpretation (Zentall & Lee, 2012).

There are different perspectives that underpinned this approach and these are: (a) sociocognitive perspective which makes it possible for learners to make their opinion public, weigh the ideas of others, and find common ground among conflicting views (Almasi, 1995); (b) the sociocultural perspective enables learners to recreate or add knowledge from text and adopt means of thinking (e.g., skills) (Wells, 2007); and (c) dialogic perspective makes students understand more because of tension and conflict or even competing voices encountered in the discussion of text/s (Nystrand, 2006).

Chinn, Anderson, and Waggoner (2001) stressed that one of the things to consider in conducting a discussion is the degree of control exerted by the teacher versus the students and the dominant stance toward the text. The *stance* here “refers to a reader-focused response to the text” (Wilkinson & Son, 2011, p. 369). It is classified into *affective* and *effluent* (Rosenblatt, 1978) including its specific strategies. Some of these, particularly under affective are Book Club, Literature Circles, Grand Conversations, and others in which the discussion highlights the reader’s emotive and spontaneous response (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Under effluent are Instructional Conversations (Goldenberg, 1993) and Questioning the Author (Beck & McKeown, 2006) in which the focus of the discussion is on “the ideas, information, directions, conclusions to be retained, used, or acted on after the reading event” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 27).

3.4.3 Argumentation

Chinn (2006) defines argumentation as a “discourse in which learners take positions, give reasons and evidence for their positions, and present counterarguments to each other’s ideas when they have different views” (p. 355). An important tool in this approach is knowledge about the nature and function of an argument (Reznitskaya & Anderson, 2002). One example is the Collaborative Reasoning in which “students are encouraged to take a position on an issue, support it with reasons and evidence from the text and challenge other students with counterarguments and rebuttals” (Wilkinson & Son, 2011, p. 372). Another is Accountable Talk (Michaels, O’Connor, & Resnick, 2008) which covers a wide range of subjects and based on the Vygotskian notion of social interaction. Students are held responsible for their ideas and interpretations vis-à-vis the ideas of others. These ideas should be supported with evidence and good reasoning and presented in a civilized manner (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). Lastly, McNeill, Lizotte, Krajcik, and Marx (2006) developed a Scientific Explanation Framework intended for middle school students and aims to make scientific explanations viable and practical to students. This is based on three aspects: claim, evidence, and reasoning.

4. Single and Multiple Texts Comprehension

For many years now, the focus of reading instructions and researches is “the single-text paradigm” (Bråten, Britt, Strømsø, & Rouet, 2011, p. 49) or how to comprehend particular reading material. This material, as Bråten and colleagues argued, is thought and comprehended as a single entity, isolated from other materials except for the reader’s schemata, which are considered as texts – especially in the light of a new perspective (e.g., intertextuality). Thus various models, approaches, and strategies in comprehending a single text have been conceived (Wilkinson & Son, 2011).

However, it is apparent that this paradigm “still dominates in today’s research on text-based learning and comprehension” (Goldman, 2004 as cited in Bråten, Anmarkrud, Brandmo, & Strømsø, 2013, p. 49). This also includes the realm in educational instructions, especially in the tertiary level (Newman, 2008). Within this context, therefore, it can be argued that this is out of the league in today’s society, particularly the pressing needs and demands in comprehending multiple texts (Bråten et al. 2013).

In our present time, which is characterized as the information age, the reading contexts require integrating précis of certain subject or issue from myriad or multiple sources, including information from the internet (Rouet & Britt, 2011). Some of these data, as mentioned earlier, are conflicting in nature. Bråten et al. (2013) stressed that the challenge for the readers, therefore, is to “enjoy investing time and effort in intertextual practices that result in comprehension rather than confusion” (p. 9). Hence, a reader’s motivation, prior knowledge, and cognitive skills play a crucial role in this process. They defined multiple texts comprehension as “a coherent mental representation that integrates contents from multiple texts that deal with the same situation or issue” (p. 10). They also emphasized, however, that comprehension (e.g., synthesizing, integration, evaluation, etc.) is only achieved if “information across different texts is consistent, componential (e.g., information across texts is part of a larger whole not specified in any single text), or conflicting” (p. 10).

Therefore, it is logical to say, that comprehension, particularly global understanding of an issue or topic is impossible if a reader only condenses the meaning of each text (Moan, Baturiate, Juzenieine, & Porojnicu, 2012).

Further, Braten et al. (2013) concluded that in a multiple texts comprehension, “the comprehension of any single text in a text set is probably influenced by the fact that this text is not read independently but as one of a set” (p. 10).

Significantly Hynd-Shanahan, Holschuh, and Hubbard (2004) highlighted the importance of reading multiple texts, especially texts that have conflicting views, for it apparently has the capacity to improve students’ critical thinking skills. Newman (2008) elaborated this view stating that learners “learn to read and judge the value of text, to gather important information about the source, to consider the text in context, and to weigh evidence across multiple texts”; and predominantly, “through the use of multiple texts, students come to see a much broader, richer representation of a topic” (p. 33), especially learners who lack prior knowledge and experiences.

5. Conclusion

Reading comprehension is crucial in the teaching and learning process; it is aptly correlated with the learner’s academic performance (Sircey, 2017). However, it is a complex process (Woolley, 2011) and is affected by several factors (e.g., the reader’s prior knowledge and experiences) (Armstrong & Newman, 2011; Gill, 2008; Hermosa, 2006; Tracy & Morrow, 2006). It is therefore imperative for educators to have operational knowledge on the different approaches and strategies in teaching reading comprehension and how to strategically apply these in their instruction. Importantly, effective reading instruction could only transpire if a teacher is conversant with the different theories and researches in reading for it will definitely affect his/her decisions on what will happen in the classroom (Gibney & Murphy, 2010). Further, teaching students on how to comprehend multiple texts is considered essential (Bråten, Britt, Strømsø, & Rouet, 2011) especially in today’s digital age in order to improve their critical thinking skills (Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2009).

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