

Connecting Word with World: Reading as an Act of Cognitive Exploration

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Abstract

In spite of the many methodologies tried out in the last two centuries in India, the teaching-learning of English is still heavily dependent on reading. The main reason may be attributed to the fact that all subjects including science and technology have their mainstay in reading both in classrooms and at home. Even then, adequate attention has not been paid to reading instruction at the primary and secondary levels; as a result, when the learners reach the tertiary level where they are supposed to work on their own by reading and referring to books and journals, most of them end up as miserable failures just because of their poor and inadequate reading habits. While teachers focus only on the final outcome, tests and

examinations solely depend on the learner's net result of reading which is expected to get reflected in writing. A serious attempt to follow the reader in his course of reading may reveal the myriads of complexities which the act of reading passes through. This paper is just an attempt of making teachers of English aware of the fact that a learner's success or failure in his academic pursuit is almost determined by his reading efficiency. Therefore this paper outlines the intricate cognitive processes involved in reading a second language.

Key words: Comprehension, Cognition, Meaning Making Process, Schema.

Introduction

Till the mid-twentieth century, reading was considered a complex process of decoding symbols which are encoded in a text. Approaches and methods which dissected language into skills for pedagogic purposes prescribed transactional strategies on how each skill should be treated in the class. In the case of reading, which has always been the mainstay of Indian education, little attention was paid on the intricate cognitive processes involved in reading beyond the level of deciphering the code and arriving at the 'given meaning'.

It was only in the 1970s onwards we started realizing the deep exploration needed on the part of the reader reads and interprets the text. The processes of reading get entangled while decoding the symbols which would vary in myriad ways as each decoder will be interpreting the text according to the exposure and circumstances that he has been exposed to. So the results are bound to be varied, interesting and challenging to one studying the cognitive aspects of reading:

The problems which learners face while reading a text, simple or complex, and the teacher who guides the reader through the text become still more complex when the task undertaken happens to be an unfamiliar language. That is to say, reading in a second

language must be treated as still another act as distinct from reading a first language, and therefore, the cognitive processes get still more entangled with the linguistic difficulties inherent in learning a second language.

This paper intends to explore the cognitive processes which the reader passes through while decoding the symbols to derive the meaning and highlights that reading is an act of cognitive exploration.

Background of the study

Getting initiated into reading in the first language itself has not been a pleasant experience to many children; especially to those belong to the first generation literates as common in Indian classrooms. Lack of previous experience at home, unscientific approaches and the absence of individual attention at school, negligence of helpless parents, socioeconomic factors which prevented access to interesting reading materials—all these together sent boys and girls out of school after ten or twelve years of stay at school, or mid-way as drop outs. While reading in a second language, the learner encounters still more severe problems. While the intricacies of deciphering the code in the first language remains as a solid stumbling block, the additional burden of the unfamiliar conventions of a strange language still pull them to back benches, and later into backwardness in life.

A much late arrival in human development, namely literacy offered new modes of both perceiving and representing reality. As a result, we started perceiving and comprehending the world around us through reading as well, thus we get a new mode of getting informed of the world in terms of space and time. Reading begins when we start to identify and manages signs of things. Reading helps us to perceive the microcosm of the world around us. A child who starts reading the word in fact starts reading the world.

Therefore, the most important objective of instruction in reading according to this paper is connecting the word with the world.

The reader interacts with whatever he reads and relates whatever experiences he has with the text or signs to grasp the idea. More over the reader perceives idea according to the knowledge of the society he belongs to. All reading involves different mental actions and different destination also. Thus there occurs not only a mere mental action but an intentional mental action.

Exploring reading on behalf of the ESL teacher

At the surface level, reading is an act of decoding concrete visual symbols into abstract concepts. But, is it just a signifier-signified relation, with a one-to-one correspondence? Do the script and message posit themselves at extreme ends, as commonly believed so that the act of reading can get them wed-locked? Or, are there cognitive positions before, after and in between? How do the writer's schemata get embedded in writing and how do they get re-activated in the reader's schemata? An inquiry into these and similar questions may help the ESL reading teacher to look at the learner struggling with reading and meaning making, more empathetically.

Reading as a bundle of complex cognitive processes, engages the reader in the act of decoding symbols to derive their own product. The processes which lead to the product themselves are the shaping force behind the product. Thus, the text assumes the lowered status of the raw material since the message is the product.

In a situation like n India where reading still remains the main mode of learning, it naturally will render later progress in speech and writing, the ultimate use of language becomes more accurate (Thompson and Wyatt, 1952). Moreover reading involves a delicate balance between attending to forms, the meaning, the style and semantic information and

assembling all these parts into some coherent and structured whole (Lesgold and Perfetti, 1981). Defining reading is not very easy as it involves the text, the reader and the interactions between the reader and the text (Rumelhart, 1977). The essence of reading involves perceiving independent item, then assimilating their inter relationship, then integrating, at last grouping them into main ideas. Therefore reading is a means of learning.

Reading is not only the symbolical translation of thoughts, events, and circumstances, it is a reader-dependent process. The multiplicity of interpretations of the same phrase and even the metaphysical interpretations of the depicted words can even vary from culture to culture. More than that, it even stays with the previous experience of the person. So reading stays something metaphysical, dependent on the context of the situation and the background of the person who reads the text.

What is reading to a reader? It is a bridge for the reader to reach new realms – a real cognitive exploration. For example, while reading a story the decoder explores and interprets new thoughts which the encoder might not have mentioned or even directed the decoder to reach such an innovative destination, through his writing, but it is a cognitive exploration of the reader. The reader uses pre-existing knowledge structures or schemata to extract the idea from the new piece (1985 Anderson, R.C). At the same time, there form new schemata modifying the old ones and then come new thoughts, creative ideas and interpretations. Actually reading requires creativity and critical analysis.

Process of Reading

Let us now look at the process of reading, which involves decoding, deciphering and identifying words. According to West(1926) reading is a process of sight, sound and sense. It is not just making noises; rather the reader has to get the idea or the message from the print. Actually one reads text with a particular world of knowledge, understanding and experience.

The text evokes voices, memories, knowledge and experiences from the present or other times and places. The reader always tries to relate what is read with his existing knowledge and understanding. The reader might have found himself having an internal conversation with the author, silently agreeing or disagreeing with what is read. Readers use many strategies like content-clues, schemas to decode symbols to derive meaning,

Reading is a bi-fold process where one fold contains the sensory process and the other fold is the mental process that is perceptual, conceptual or thinking process. If one could be conscious of the process of reading, one could adopt different strategies for reading. According to Carrell(1989), Carsiobetal(1990), and Shih (1992), becoming aware and conscious regarding our own reading process is a powerful tool for developing reading ability and efficiency. Reading comprehension process focuses on three elements: the background knowledge processed by the reader, contextual aspect relevant to interpreting the text and the reader's intent. Reading is a code breaking process, where there is no guarantee that the decoder receives what the encoder intends.

Cognitive processes involved in reading

Among the bi-fold process of reading one is mental process that is perceptual, conceptual or thinking process. Thorndike states that reading involves some sort of organization and analysis as in thinking, it includes learning, reflexion, judgment, analysis, synthesis problem solving behaviour, selection, inference, organization, comparison of data, determination of relationship and critical evaluation of what is being read.

To read the printed word is a natural urge of most human beings. There is a psychological inquisitiveness behind the tendency to read. Printed marks on the paper evoke some sort of a mental process in the reader. A letter or a word is a secret code and there is a human instinct that leads everyone to decipher the code to get the message. Each mark

produces some concept that is already there in the mind of the reader. The order in which these images and concepts are evoked and the context in which they are called for and the relations between these images and concepts help the reader to grasp new meanings.

Reading involves auditory manifestation of ideas—whether reading silently or aloud. In order to represent auditory symbols, a reader employs visual means. The basic task in reading is therefore to inculcate in the mind of the reader the connection between the visual signs and the sounds they represent. Reading always involves two important elements, the reader and the text. A third element is also there but it is in the back stage, that is the writer. While reading a text, there occurs an interaction between the reader and the text. The place of the writer is in the thought of the reader. The interaction takes place to decode the encoded message. Obviously the writer also will be there in the interaction, as an omnipresent. After encoding the message the writer leaves the decoding process to the reader, thinking that the reader too may follow the same route of the maze. Sometimes it does not happen either because of the wrong signals or of the unfamiliarity of the strange language. But the decoder walks through another route and reaches new realms, forms new schemata

According to Dechant and Smith, 1977 effective reading includes not only literal comprehension of an author's words but also an interpretation of his mood, tone, feeling and attitudes (p.237). Thus effective reading involves all the higher mental processes like recall, reasoning, evaluation, imagining, organizing addressing problems solving etc. Thus it is clear that for a better conceptualization the reader should possess the knowledge of vocabulary, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and the sense of cluster of words; otherwise, the reader may get deviated and fails to attain the goal.

Visual perception and eye movement are important in reading process. Research studies show that attention to top down control of visual information processing and saccadic eye movement of cognitive process have a great impact on reading acquisition. (Schuett,

Heynwood, Kentridge, Zihl, 2008). Similarly, the attention span of the reader and how the reader perceives things are important. Limitations in these areas affect reading. (Adams & Snowing, 2001, Purvis & Tannock, 2000). The quality of phonological processing plays an essential role in children's early understanding of the alphabetic principle (Anthong & Francis, 2005). Usually word decoding problems are highly associated with phonological awareness. Studies have shown that there is a substantial relation between phonemic awareness and word recognition and word spelling (Swanson, Trainion, Neoechea & Hamill, 2003). Some studies say that phonemic awareness is a critical component in understanding the alphabetic principles. In addition to attention and perception, working memory is one of the aspects of information processing, which is a cognitive point of view (Seigneuric Ehrlich, 2005). The processing of phonological information is thought to have an inner rehearsal which allows the phonological information needed for the processes of word decoding and reading comprehension to be retained longer in memory. Associating sounds with letters is important in reading. Then only the reader can translate the letters (graphemes) into sounds (phonemes)

Another cognitive process involved in reading is the knowledge of grammatical order and the placing of words. This will help the reader think and select the words needed. It also helps to structure sentence constructions. Yet another faculty at work in the process of reading is memory. Working memory helps to retain and retrieve information which supports reading.

Usually a reader goes through morphemes in casual reading, where the cognitive exploration helps the reader to recognize the actual words needed, their classes (parts of speech). In addition to the knowledge of vocabulary the reader should have the intellectual capability to know the particular meaning of the word in a particular sentence. This also makes reading an act of cognitive exploration. Therefore all the above mentioned cognitive processes function in reading.

Differentiating and recognizing the words, sentences and expression used in the text is an ability related to cognitive processes. If any decline happens in this process one fails to decrypt grammatical and lexical units of language in the text. Lack of vocabulary and background knowledge forms a great stumbling block for effective reading.

Growing up to be a reader is a lengthy process that begins before formal instructions. Children with intact neurological system, raised by parents so caring and having reading habit develop effective reading easily.

Conclusion

The more the teachers become aware of the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in reading, the more empathetic they tend to be towards second language readers. Any failure in reading may be attributed to one or a cluster of deficiencies in the processes. A teacher who just waits at the finishing point, unaware of the efforts made by the reader in the course of the long distance running may not be doing justice to her learners.

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