

Reading in English as a Second Language: A Review

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Introduction

An examination of relevant literature on the above subject reveals that little attention has been given to the variables which may influence the process of reading by learners of English as a second language (ESL). This is especially true with regard to research involving learners at the intermediate and more advanced levels. In this paper I argue that a possible explanation for the dearth of relevant research is that for a long time reading has held a low priority in the ESL classroom. Agard and Dunkel (1948) have made the observation that from the very beginning stages of teaching English to non-native speakers, ESL specialists have tended to concentrate on the students' mastery at the elementary levels of English whilst ignoring the serious problems confronting students at the higher levels. Seliger (1972) has noted that teachers of English as a second language seem to deal adequately with the mechanical aspects of teaching the student to read. However, they often neglect to give priority to the ability to read well, i.e. with comprehension.

When writing on the same subject, Heaton (1975) has expressed concern over the fact that efficient reading skills had been pushed into the background because too much emphasis had been given to the early stages of second language learning. Robinett (1978) has also referred to the general lack of research into the reading behaviour of second language learners, specifically those learning English as a second language.

Reading and the audio-lingual approach

In the fifties and sixties reading was overshadowed by the audio-lingual approach in second language teaching and learning. First created by the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), the audio-lingual approach with its emphasis on oral skills was quickly introduced into second and foreign language classrooms. The general feeling was that if the army could be successful in teaching foreign languages to military personnel by emphasizing the spoken language, then teachers and educators dealing with non-native speakers of English should similarly establish the oral skills before embarking on the teaching of reading.

Not surprisingly, applied linguists and second language educators began to emphasize the importance of listening and speaking activities and students invariably were exposed to intensive sentence pattern drills. The usefulness and relevance of the audio-lingual approach to second and foreign language classroom situations were hardly ever questioned. In so far as reading was concerned, it was considered a skill complementary to speaking and listening. Reading continued to be neglected even when the shortcomings of audio-lingually oriented programmes became obvious, i.e. when the pattern drills were found to be ineffective for communication outside the classroom.

Influenced by both Bloomfieldian structural linguistics and Skinnerian operant conditioning, a number of the early advocates of the audio-lingual

approach to second language learning widely supported the notion that language is a habitual verbal behaviour best acquired through oral practice. Not only was there this emphasis on speaking but the general view was also that it was necessary to separate the aural-oral skills from reading and writing because the written form of the language was assumed to be responsible for the intrusion of errors into pronunciation, structure and consequently, into understanding. For example, Brooks (1964) maintained that it was not likely that good language would result from the heterogenous mixture of the four language skills. Similarly, convinced of the usefulness of a behavioural or a response-oriented learning theory, Scott (1966) went so far as to suggest that the teaching of reading should be based on habit formation in order that responses to the stimuli be automatic.

The key point to be made is that interest in second language reading is relatively recent. It can be traced back to the time when more and more of those directly involved with second language pedagogy reacted rather strongly against the audio-lingual approach. At this time too, cognitive psychology, transformational grammar and psycholinguistics began to gain widespread acceptance, prompting revisions or rejection of the audio-lingual principles in second language learning.

A developing interest in second language reading

Following the shift in emphasis, a large number of researchers and practitioners who were more supportive of cognitively-oriented theories of learning, began to observe, and rightly so, that the teaching of reading to second language learners had not increased in proportion to the demand for it. Opposed to the notion that reading is a passive skill involving merely a graphic decoding/encoding process, they have stressed the fact that *how* second language learners comprehend text should be of broad and vital concern.

Sharing the same view that the audio-lingual methods are limited in more ways than one, Norris (1970) even made the claim that the written language had been put aside almost to the point of becoming extinct in second language classes. He added that, 'Some students never seem to be taught to read English at all' (p. 18). Commenting on the same subject, Lapp and Flood (1978) maintained that second language teachers have tended to place too much emphasis on the learning of formal rules about language as well as the memorization of individual lexical items without the benefit of context. Other than the above cited writers, many others have also referred to the past emphasis on audio-lingual methods in second language pedagogy, claiming that those methods have resulted in more work being done on the learners' facility with spoken language rather than their ability to comprehend written materials (Paulston and Bruder, 1976; Saville-Troike, 1973; Eskey, 1979). Saville-Troike (1973), for example, has argued that the teaching of reading should not wait until the student has developed a high level of proficiency in speaking the language, thus suggesting that the development of aural-oral skills does not necessarily contribute to improved performance in the ability to comprehend what is read.

For the same reason mentioned above, both Eskey (1979) and Paulston and Bruder (1976) maintain that although it is easier to teach someone to read a language he can speak, especially for learners who already know a good deal of English, reading may be the most important skill to master. Without

denying what is already obvious, i.e. that the four basic language skills traditionally characterized as listening, speaking, reading and writing are interdependent, Eskey (1979) has proposed that written material should be made more appropriate to the needs of the non-native students and should not be limited or determined by their aural-oral abilities or needs. A point to be noted, however, is that Eskey (1979) in his model programme for teaching reading, has made it clear that whilst he emphasizes the need to view reading as important for its own sake, this does not necessarily preclude the need to develop the aural-oral skills.

Writing in connection with reading instruction and the fact that it should be meaning oriented, Hatch (1974) made the assertion that in the case of advanced readers

'while word recognition is important, one should not waste time on visual perception since this is a skill students possess at this level. Instead, once basic skills in reading are acquired, we should relax our emphasis on recognition of small units and concentrate on the larger process' (p. 78).

Recent studies in the area of ESL reading

Included among some of the more recent contributors to the field of second language reading are Cowan (1976), Clarke and Silberstein (1977), Rigg (1977a, 1977b), Cziko (1978, 1980), Clarke (1979), Ulijn (1980), Flick and Anderson (1980), Elley (1981), Deemer (1978), Groebel (1980), Hudson (1982), Johnson (1981, 1982), Carrell (1983a) and Carrell and Wallace (1983). Although most of the work undertaken by them are exploratory in nature, they warrant close attention because they provide some useful insights and perspectives into second language learning in general and into reading comprehension in particular. Unlike the writers before them who have sometimes based their assumptions on mere observations, several of this latter group of researchers have been actively engaged in research and have been able to provide some useful empirical evidence. Generally speaking, they have attempted to examine the differences and similarities between learning to read one's native language and learning to read a second or a foreign language (Cziko, 1978, 1980; Ulijn, 1980). Based on a comparison of the results of both native and non-native groups of readers, they have concluded that the second language reading process is basically similar to native language reading in that both natives and non-natives use all three cue systems in the text, i.e., the graphonic, the syntactic and the semantic. They maintain that an important distinction between the two kinds of reading centres around the use of the semantic level information in the text.

Many of the studies mentioned above have not directly examined how certain variables may influence second language reading comprehension performance. Instead they seem to be confined to examining whether a psycholinguistic perspective of L1 reading can be used to explain the L2 reading process. For example, from the results of his study, Cziko (1978) has concluded that despite some basic similarities, there are significant differences in the way native and non-native readers comprehend text. He found that when reading silently a text written in the non-native language, the reader typically cannot make full use of the semantic level cues in the text. Especially when compared

to the native readers, the non-natives have been found to direct proportionately more attention to syntactic and graphonic information and considerably less attention to the meaning in the passage. The performance of the more advanced non-native readers, however, seem to closely approximate the performance of the natives.

In many respects, a recent study by Cziko (1980) is similar to the one mentioned above. Only the nature of the experimental task was different. While in the earlier study subjects were required to silently read comprehension passages, the later study involved oral reading. From this second experiment, Cziko, again, found that the non-native subjects differed in their measured comprehension performance from the native speakers of French, the second language learners with a higher level of competence in French scoring higher than those at the intermediate level. Why the last group of readers was less successful is not difficult to understand considering that their competence in the target language is not the same as that of the first and second group of readers.

From both his experiments, Cziko speaking students as well as second language learners with a high level of competence in French have the ability to process text in a top-down manner. As mentioned by Cziko (1980), this category of readers are able to draw on both graphic and contextual information when reading. By contrast, beginning and intermediate level students learning French as a second language, seem to use a bottom-up strategy as indicated by their heavy reliance on graphic information.

To summarize, then, Cziko (1978) has made it explicit that the difference in the performance of different proficiency groups of non-native readers is more with respect to the ability to use the semantic and discourse constraints than the ability to use the syntactic elements. He has shown that when reading anomalous texts, both the advanced second language learners of French and native speakers of French scored significantly higher than the lower level learners. On the other hand, all subjects, regardless of their proficiency level, seem to be able to make good use of the syntactic elements.

Similar to Cziko, several other investigators have sought to examine whether native speakers of English and subjects whose native language is not English employ similar psycholinguistic strategies in reading. For example, based on the results of his investigations, Clarke (1979) has pointed out that although assumptions about the unitary nature of the reading process or what he referred to as 'reading universals' (those aspects of the reading process that are not affected by the particular language being learned) may be justified, the role of language proficiency may be more crucial to L2 reading than L1 reading. Ulijn (1980) takes a similar position, that is, the level of proficiency in the target language determines the extent to which the text is comprehended. He has asserted that undeniably there are certain similarities between L1 and L2 reading but the latter is less of a psycholinguistic guessing game because the reader is hindered by an imperfect knowledge of the target language.

What has been implied by Ulijn (1980) is that a psycholinguistic model of reading seen as a process involving the ability to derive meaning from a printed text through the simultaneous use of graphophonic, syntactic and semantic information (Goodman, 1970, 1973) is not really adequate to describe the pro-

cess of second-language reading. While we can assume that native readers know the grammar of the language and can draw upon this knowledge in their reading, the non-native language reader is seriously handicapped. He will be less equipped to make the series of guesses from the various 'cue systems' existing in written language that is required in reading.

Also, arising out of research in this area, Macnamara (1970) has made the claim that bilinguals if given similar problem-solving tasks in their weaker and stronger languages would be able to perform the operations described in the native language texts but not in the foreign language texts. On the basis of his findings, he has concluded that in their weaker language, subjects have to concentrate on visual or syntactic information in the text at the expense of full semantic comprehension. Oller (1972) has also supported the view that non-native readers of a language process text differently from native readers. This processing difference, according to him, seems to be directly related to the limited ability of the non-natives to utilize the contextual constraints in the text. In this study, he compared the eye movements of native speakers of English with those of readers who have a native language other than English and has attributed the more frequent and longer fixations of the non-native subjects to their need to concentrate on the low level cue system in the text.

A review of the literature on second language reading reveals that there is little research examining whether L1 reading skills or abilities are transferable to L2 reading. There are, however, those who suggest, more or less cautiously, that there is a transfer of reading skills between languages (Deemer, 1978; Clarke, 1979). The argument is based on the assumption that reading involves some basic skills that can be used in any language. Based on the results of a preliminary study, Deemer (1978) has supported the position that there exists a general reading skill which is transferable to the new language being learned. Though the results of his study are not strongly conclusive, in the sense that in the second part it involved only two subjects, Clarke (1979) found that good L1 readers were also good L2 readers. What is important to note is that the work done by these psycholinguists has provided new directions for approaching and understanding the second language reading process.

In the study undertaken by Groebel (1980), native speakers of Hebrew and native speakers of other languages who were also university students in Israel read three texts written in English. Each of the texts had five multiple-choice questions designed to test reading skills such as finding the main ideas, finding supporting information, making inferences, drawing conclusions, recognizing the writer's tone and attitude and applying ideas found in the text. Groebel (1980) found that the correlation between comprehension in Hebrew and comprehension in English was statistically significant. From this, the investigator has concluded that reading skills in the native language constitute a source of possible transfer to second language reading. Interestingly, she also noted that the scores in English were lower for the non-native speakers of Hebrew who were mainly of Arabic and Russian descent. This, according to Groebel, raises the possibility that unknown factors may be involved. One such factor may well be that of the effects of disparate systems of orthography

Prior knowledge in second language reading comprehension

Compared to the extensive investigations into the role of prior knowledge

in the comprehension of text by native speakers of English, there is relatively little research examining the effects of the same variable in second language reading comprehension. The study conducted by Hudson (1982) has made a very significant contribution to the field of second language reading. Hudson has initiated an examination into the role of prior knowledge, specifically into the question of schema activation and its effect on the comprehension of text by second language learners. Hudson (1982) seems to have widened research possibilities in an area which previously had been virtually unexplored. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that despite this extension in research, at the present time, what facts are known about the nature of prior knowledge and its role as a key variable in the process of second language reading is still so limited and fragmentary that no easy generalizations are possible.

The underlying premise of the study by Hudson (1982) is that prior knowledge can affect reading comprehension in English as a second language. In the study, three groups of subjects with varying levels of proficiency in the second language read passages after they had received different forms of intervention, all designed to directly invoke a schema. The first form of intervention was that of requiring subjects to read the passage, take a test, reread the passage and then take the test again. The second form was that of providing subjects with relevant vocabulary or word meanings prior to reading and being tested. In the third method, subjects were shown pictures related to the general topic of the passage and then asked to make predictions about the content.

Hudson found a highly significant effect for type or form of intervention. While the pre-reading treatment was more effective at the beginning and intermediate levels, readers at a more advanced level seemed to benefit most from the Read-Test/Read-Test procedure. From this, Hudson has justifiably concluded that the more advanced ESL learners depend less on schema which is invoked directly. Hudson added that this is because they have more facile or robust networks into which meanings may be fitted. They appear to be able to self-reconcile through the text more effectively. In other words, when compared to the lower level readers, the more advanced readers seem to be able to utilize contextual information when attempting to organize material while reading.

To state briefly again, among the important findings of the study undertaken by Hudson (1982) was the one that stated that the effect of intervention in terms of prior knowledge seemed to be more strongly evident among ESL readers who were at the beginning and intermediate levels compared to those at the more advanced levels. If the more advanced L2 readers were able to 'self-reconcile' through the text, those at the beginning and intermediate levels were not able to do so. Apparently, this latter group of readers have to rely much more on improved and induced reading strategies designed to invoke a particular schema. Since this is the case, Hudson has argued that what he has referred to as 'externally-induced schemata' can in fact override language proficiency as a factor in comprehension. He has also stressed the fact that the language proficiency of the L2 learners may be only one determinant of reading comprehension. The other, prior knowledge related to the content of the passage, may be an equally important variable influencing how L2 learners comprehend text.

Another study which has shed some light on the role of prior knowledge in ESL reading comprehension is that undertaken by Johnson (1981). The investigator has shown that the cultural origin of the text itself had more effect on comprehension than the level of syntactic complexity of both adapted and simplified passages. Stated in another way, the major finding was that when the subjects have relevant prior knowledge, in the sense that the cultural origin of the text is native to them, they were able to overcome the language difficulty of the passages. On the basis of such a finding, Johnson (1981) has stressed the need to consider the non-textual elements in L2 reading.

A more recent study by Johnson (1982) examined the effects of both familiarity with the content of the informational input and direct instruction in dealing with related vocabulary. Subjects were found to be able to recall more information as well as make more correct inferences from sections of the passage which contained familiar material in comparison to sections containing unfamiliar material. Interestingly, however, exposure to meanings of preselected vocabulary words as found in the selections, did not seem to affect the comprehension of ESL readers. From the evidence provided by Johnson, it can be aptly summarized, that in the case of ESL readers, familiarity with the cultural context of a reading selection provides useful information necessary for a more accurate interpretation of text.

Carrell (1981) found that there were statistically significant differences in the comprehension ratings of Japanese and Chinese subjects when reading native, European or American Indian culture stories. Together with data from an earlier experiment, Carrell has concluded that the cultural origin of the story may influence the comprehension and recall of text by ESL readers.

More recent studies in the area, undertaken by Carrell (1983a) and Carrell and Wallace (1983), have found no significant effects of prior or background knowledge in ESL subjects' reading comprehension. Contrary to expectations, the study found that among subjects whose native language is not English, the understanding and recalling of a text is not dependent on prior knowledge. Unfortunately, in both studies, the authors have offered very little in the way of a theoretical explanation for their findings.

This divergence between the findings of the studies undertaken by Hudson (1982) and Johnson (1981, 1982), and the studies done by Carrell and associates mentioned above is highly significant. The findings are also in sharp contrast to readers' comprehension performance in Carrell's earlier studies (1981a, 1981b) already mentioned, as well as those which have involved both native and non-native speakers of English (Steffensen, Joag-Dev and Anderson 1979).

Given these contradictory findings, there is a clear need for more research evidence to support a schema-theoretic view of second language reading in which prior knowledge is seen as a powerful variable influencing reading comprehension performance. In the studies by Carrell (1983a) and Carrell and Wallace (1983), the way prior knowledge has been assessed is questionable at best. Their exclusive reliance on the use of Bransford and Johnson's (1972) vague and ambiguous passages such as 'Washing Clothes' and 'Balloon Serenade' may have confounded the results. To all intents and purposes, the 'Washing Clothes' passage, deemed as familiar material remained incomprehensible to the subjects in the study simply because of its extreme ambiguity. There is also the remote possibility that there are cultural differences in the

seemingly simple task of washing clothes.

It is highly probable that the passages used were not anywhere near the extremes of a familiarity-unfamiliarity continuum. One serious limitation of the study undertaken by Carrel (1983a) had to do with the treating of the familiarity variable as dichotomous, not continuous. Another limitation arises from the use of material of contrived ambiguity: the findings may not be generalizable to instructional materials normally used in classroom settings. If more 'natural' texts had been used the author would have been able to contribute more significantly to our understanding of the second language reading process.

Also to be noted is that a written recall procedure as used by Carrell and Wallace (1983) may not be the most appropriate measure of reading comprehension performance of non-native subjects. It is possible that the subjects' limited written production skills in English may have affected comprehension performance. As has already been found over and over again, ESL learners' receptive language competence is far in advance of their production ability (Goodman, 1978). From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that given the limitations in the design, Carrell (1983b) and Carrell and Wallace (1983) have not been able to focus satisfactorily on the effects of prior knowledge in ESL subjects' reading comprehension performance.

Summary

This paper has attempted to review a number of research studies which have examined various aspects of the research interests of those who are concerned with potential explanatory variables which may explain how ESL learners comprehend textual material written in English, the target language. The review reveals that more attention needs to be directed towards the specific role of prior knowledge. A better understanding of the role of prior knowledge, in addition to other variables, can offer useful insights to teachers and educators as to what constitutes difficulty in comprehending English texts by non-native speakers of the language.

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