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**Some Gaps in the Current Studies of Reading in
Second/Foreign Language Learning**

Syed Hossein Fazeli, M.A.

Abstract

The ability to read written material is very important in the civilized world. In a society characterized by globalization and technological change, where knowledge is becoming increasingly important, reading ability is a key skill for active participation. The intent of the current study is to set out the nature of reading alongside express importance of reading and reading comprehension. The importance of the present study is to explore the current studies of reading in order to find out some common main gaps in such studies. Such gaps are related to reading, reading comprehension and reading strategies, vocabulary and fluency.

Keywords: reading, reading comprehension, reading strategies

Introduction

To most people reading seems a simple process, but there are many sub-component processes which are involved in reading that leads it to be as a very complex skill. As Rayner and Juhasz (2006) assume all of such components involved in reading

are important to investigate in order to understand how the process work and how the skill develops.

Both teachers and researchers have attempted to identify the mental process of reading and the activities that readers use in order to construct meaning from a text. What is “reading”? , who is a “reader”? And what is the action of “read”?

On Reading

It seems only logical that a text about teaching and learning of reading would begin with definitions of what reading is, who reader is, and what the action “read” is. “Reading”, a complex activity, can be defined in a number of ways based upon the particular aspect of the reading skill examined. “Reading” is defined as “the action or skill of reading” (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008, p.1196). It is defined also as “the skill or activity of getting information from books” (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1995, pp. 1178-1179). It can also be defined as “the ability to comprehend the thought and feelings of others through the medium of written text” (*The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 1994). Gibson and Levin (1975) assume that reading is extracting information from text. Urquhart and Weir (1998) define “reading” as the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in form via the medium of print. Goodman (1988) discusses it as receptive language process which is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning a reader constructs. Jenkinson proposes “reading” as an act of responding to printed symbols (as cited in Chapman and Czerniewska, 1978). Grellet (1981) suggests that understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently. Another definition of “reading” is the construction of meaning from print (Torgensen, Wagner & Rashotte, 1999).

Who is a Reader?

“Reader” is defined as “a person who reads” (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008, p.1196), as “someone who reads for pleasures, esp. a person who reads a lot” (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1995, pp. 178-1179), or similarly “a person able to read” (*The New Lexicon Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, 1995, p. 837).

Review of Literature

There is enormous research done on reading in the last fifty years. Also the research conducted over the last past half century has changed our view of reading as a mere process of decoding.

Strang discusses the nature of reading process and the ways of teaching and learning of reading (as cited in Chapman and Czerniewska, 1978). Also Jenkinson

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mentions that much has been written about the teaching of reading (as cited in Chapman and Czerniewska, 1978).

Since the 1970s there have been many changes, both in the kinds of books used in teaching reading, the ways they are used by the teachers, and the ways to learn to read and comprehend. During 1980s, there was a tendency to use schemes more flexibly. Trends in 1990s point to some blurring of earlier rigid distinction between reading schemes and other books.

Eskey (1992) reports that reading research in the 1970s and early 1980s was characterized by a search for more accurate and more revealing models of the reading process. Much research in the 1970s and early 1980s aimed at identifying the psycholinguistics of reading. Gibson and Levin (1975) report that reading has received more attention than any other aspect of education.

The Importance of Reading in English

The ability to read written material is very important in the civilized world. In a society characterized by globalization and technological change, where knowledge is becoming increasingly important, reading ability is a key skill for active participation. Reading proficiency is the royal road to knowledge and it is essential to the success in all academic subjects. Shaywitz (2003) states that reading comprehension is an important life skill. It is one of the most important domains in education, because it is the best predictor of success in higher education and job performance. Reading ability is necessary for many occupations and a prerequisite for future and life-long learning (Elley, 1994).

Reading Styles

The flexibility of the reading process had led researchers to identify number of reading styles which have great importance in language learning and teaching. Gibson and Levin (1975) discuss that the ability to read well is the basis for success in school and later.

Alderson (1984) emphasizes that in many parts of the world a reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important to academic studies, professional success, and personal development. In such situation, in countries around the world, school systems require students to learn English for access to information and for the eventual ability to compete economically and professionally. For good or bad, this situation reflects of a reality of early twenty-first century (Crystal, 1995; McGroarty, 2006). Millions of students are expected to learn English as an additional language to some extent (Crystal, 1995, p.7). Alderson (1984) proposes that this is particularly true of English as so much professional, technical and scientific literature is published today in English. In fact, it is

frequently the case that the ability to read English is required of students by their subject departments.

Comprehension, Vocabulary, Fluency and Strategy in Reading

The students may understand each word separately, but linking them together into meaningful ideas often does not happen as it should. Reading can be challenging, particularly when the material is unfamiliar, technical, or more complex. Moreover, for some readers, comprehension is always challenging. Comprehension refers to the ability to go beyond the words, to understand the ideas conveyed in the entire text.

Researchers have described the powerful, positive relationship between vocabulary and comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Davis, 1944). In such situation most researches on reading focus on the effective reading strategies that increase students' comprehension. Aebersold and Field (2005) emphasize that to become better readers, students need to become aware of how they are reading and what they could do to improve comprehension. Also, Koda (2005) mentions that comprehension occurs when the readers extract and integrate various information from text and combine it with what is already known.

For many people reading text means reading books, papers, signs, etc. In a general sense, reading happens when people look at a text and assign meaning to written symbols in that text. Grabe (2009) discusses that the role of word recognition training for reading comprehension is more complex. The ability to comprehend critically what one reads depends on his knowing the meaning of a large number of words he sees in print. Vocabulary knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading achievement (Richek, 2005). In this way Aebersold and Field (2005) propose that knowing vocabulary is important for getting meaning from a text. L2/FL readers frequently say that they need more vocabulary so they can understand the meaning of the sentences. The understanding of grammatical structure enables readers to understand the relationship between words, but it does not provide access to the meaning of the sentences. Also Adams (1990) discusses that many studies over 20 years have demonstrated that word recognition is major predictor of later abilities and Klein (1988) suggests that although we undoubtedly have much yet to learn about the role of vocabulary in reading, it still represents one area where research has been substantial over the years. Grabe (2009) proposes that the effective use of context for word recognition purposes requires knowing most of the words in the environment. Correlation and factor-analytic studies over the years have high correlations between vocabulary and reading ability. Jenkinson believes that effective word recognition is basic to all progress in reading, and the development of understanding of word meaning is basic to reading comprehension (as cited in Chapman & Czerniewska, 1978). Spencer & Hay (1998) emphasize that word recognition is an essential component in the mastery of reading. Bromley (2004) reports that vocabulary knowledge promotes reading fluency, boosts reading comprehension, improves academic achievements, and enhances thinking and communication. Baker (1989) suggests that the

reader can learn about an unknown word in context by relating it to the meaning of words that surround it.

Thus, it is consistently demonstrated in L2/LF reading research that automated word recognition skills are a sufficient condition for successful reading comprehension.

Fluency is thought to consist of both accuracy and automaticity for better comprehension of text (Grabe, 2004; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). That is, fluent readers are able to identify words in text quickly and accurately with a minimal amount of attention. Developing fluency in L2/LF reading has become a significant and salient issue for pedagogy in L2 settings (Grabe & Stoller; Nation, 2001); however there is little research on reading fluency (Grabe, 2004).

During the 1970s, the term *strategies* signified a form of mental processing that deviated from traditional skills-based reading. Strategies are commonly defined more simply as processes that are consciously controlled by readers to solve reading problems. A major contribution of reading strategies of fluent reading is their increasing automaticity, as a reader becomes more proficient (Anderson, 2009; Block & Pressley, 2007; Sinatra, Brown & Reynolds, 2002 as cited in Grabe, 2009). Most researchers agree that teaching repertoires of reading strategies improves comprehension and recall of information from text (Farstrup & Samueles, 2002). There is general agreement that instruction focusing on students' learning is more effective than individual strategy instruction (Baker, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley & Afflerback, 1995; Pressley & Fingeret, 2007 as cited in Grabe, 2009).

There is a great deal of evidence for the importance of reading strategies. One source of evidence is that successful readers know when and how to use deliberate strategies to repair comprehension (McNamara, 2007). Anderson (2000) assumes that reading ability can be improved by teaching how to read for particular purpose.

Some Main Gaps in the Current Studies on Reading

Although there is a welter of studies about reading and related topics, there are so many areas that have not been considered and discussed at all in detail. Such areas are observed as gaps of current studies of reading in this study. The gaps in current studies of reading are more than these gaps discussed here in this study. Some of these gaps are:

1. Clearly, learners' characteristics play important role in reading comprehension as well as learning and language learning. In the studies on reading, there is not much focus on the correlation between the learners' characteristics and success in reading comprehension *through* reading strategies. It is difficult to find even the correlation between the learners' characteristics and application of reading strategies directly in the current studies.

2. Since, mostly the current studies of reading were done among advanced and intermediate language proficiency learners and the outcomes of these studies were applied (generalized) for low language proficiency learners as poor language learners, the problem arises that normally the poor language learners do not know when, where and how to apply a particular strategy, as these are applied among advanced and intermediate language proficiency learners as good language learners. Therefore it is wrong to apply (generalize) the scientific outcomes which are obtained from good language learners. The studies should specific studies among poor language learners and their outcomes should be specified for such learners.

3. Reading comprehension can be affected by learners' factors such as gender and intelligence. However there is not much focus on the correlation between the factors that influence learners and their success in reading *through* the application of reading strategies. However, there are some studies about application of reading strategies and learners' factors.

4. In the studies on reading, there is not specific focus why the learners apply the same particular reading strategies more or less.

5. There are studies on the application of particular reading strategies by the learners as general information but from a technical point of view, there are not specific studies. For example there is not a technical study that deal with learners shift from one or some particular reading strategies to another, how this shift would affect reading comprehension.

6. The focus is on good language learners because normally the poor language learners are not advanced in applying the strategies. The gap in such studies is that there is not much focus on how to motivate the poor language learners to begin and continue applying the strategies of reading, and how to help the poor language learners to select particular strategies to be succeed in reading comprehension through such strategies.

7. There are not complete similarities or differences among a group of language learners; and similarities and differences are varied from one learner to another. In such situation, reading strategies employed should be treated as individual strategies and these should be considered from the individual learning point of view, but the reading strategies are discussed in the current studies as group strategies and from group learning point of view either directly or indirectly.

8. The vocabulary knowledge is discussed from two points of view, firstly vocabulary knowledge and secondly use of vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge includes passive knowledge which is different from using vocabulary knowledge which is considered as active knowledge. In the studies on reading, there is not much focus on which reading strategies help the learners to have better skill in using

vocabulary and which reading strategies help the learners to acquire knowledge of vocabulary.

9. The types of reading strategies applied among the language learners are discussed in many studies, but there is not much focus on how to apply such particular reading strategies consecutively for long term learning and what kinds of procedure need to be applied.

10. New reading strategies for language learners are suggested. Researchers do not show how to connect such new reading strategies to the reading strategies already in practice. This will help better adjustment of the learning process.

11. Studies on reading strategies are geared to specific formats and procedures. Flexibility of the strategies for use in a variety of situations and among a variety of learners is not discussed much.

12. The process of reading and reading strategies is studied and discussed from learning point of view, but the correlation between reading strategies and acquisition process as a natural process needs to be studied, discussed and focused upon.

13. We also need to make a distinction between the nature of the target language: second or foreign language.

14. Focus on how reading strategies developed in language learning classes affect reading in other course papers which the learners have studied before or study simultaneously. In such situation, it is necessary to be specific on probable effects of other course papers on reading strategies as variables, whether directly, indirectly, consciously or unconsciously. Otherwise it is difficult to make any valid claim about the applications and outcomes of reading, reading comprehension, and reading strategies.

15. The majority of the studies on reading includes the application of reading strategies by the learners. However, there is not much focus on specific studies on teachability characteristics and evaluation of the teachability of such strategies. In other words, it is necessary to research on the possibility and evaluation of teaching particular reading strategies, and how teachers can teach it to the language learners for application in reading comprehension.

16. There is lack of balance and high correlation among teachers' approaches, methods and techniques relating to types of reading strategies. There is wide variation from some minimum level to some maximum level of range and from one language teaching class to another.

17. Emphasis on protecting the environment has led to many changes in content and cultural learning. There is not much focus on the correlation between reading strategies and such environmental studies *through* reading strategies point of view.

18. Intentional (explicit) and incidental (implicit) learning of vocabulary are two types of learning. Both have their own specific uses, but in the studies on reading, there is not much emphasis on the relations and correlations of such vocabulary learning and reading strategies.

19. Target language to be taught may come as a second or third language, or it is taught through mother tongue or a language other than mother tongue. In such situations, what type of procedure and outcomes regarding the application of reading strategies would occur?

20. Communicative competence is a considerable phenomenon in language learning which is correlated with reading, reading strategies, and reading comprehension that need to be studied and discussed in application, procedure and evaluation of reading strategies.

21. Majority of application of reading strategies relates to success in academic courses and for examination purposes. In such situations, examination purpose is a variable which may affect the outcomes of reading strategies. Here, this question arises if the purpose of application of reading strategies is for life-long learning or for some specific and time-bound purpose. In these contexts, what outcomes would occur? When we compare application of reading strategies for examination purpose with life-long learning, what outcomes would be obtained?

22. Reading studies are about application of reading strategies. Teachers should be enabled to develop and identify conditions where specific strategies are gainfully employed by their class in general and individual students in particular. Such conditions should be studied, discussed and focused in order to have successful application, procedure and outcomes of reading strategies.

23. Motivation is a strong instrument for the learners to apply reading strategies. But there are not many specific applied studies on the correlation between motivation and reading strategies; how motivation can be useful and helpful empirically in application of reading strategies, and how the teacher can develop motivation of the learners to apply reading strategies more.

24. Motivation can be a beginning point for the application of reading strategies and there is need for using reading strategies continued as a procedure. In this way, it is necessary to study how to motivate the learners to develop the continuity of such procedure.

25. Pragmatics, semantics and other sub-fields of linguistics are useful and helpful in language learning. Based on such sub-fields, specific applied studies on reading strategies may be pursued. Moreover, the correlation between such sub-fields and reading strategies should be discussed.

26. There is difference between the language used social sciences and physical sciences. Common words can take on specialized meaning (Janet, 1999). Differences in the application of reading strategies in various disciplines may be studied.

27. Studies on reading are done mostly applying strategies to English. In order to arrive at general conclusions we need to apply similar strategies to a variety of languages.

28. The different scientific backgrounds, fields and majors of the learners may affect the application, procedure and outcomes of reading strategies. Correlation of varied backgrounds and fields of the learners and reading strategies may be pursued.

Conclusion

The nature of reading procedure, and the approaches, methods and techniques of teaching reading have been the subject of much debate. The sheer volume of the literature and the welter of topics and findings on reading and related subjects is incredible and the researches were conducted over the last past half century has changed our view of reading.

In current studies on reading, various theoretical and applied research have been done to explore the nature of reading, reading comprehension, reading strategies , and other related subjects. But, among such studies there are some main gaps which were discussed in this study.

This study contributes to our understanding of the gaps among the current studies on reading in second/foreign language learning procedure. Further research is needed to better determine the strength of the association among reading strategies.

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Seyed Hossein Fazeli, M.A.
Department of Studies in English Language Teaching
Azad Islamic University, Abadan Branch
Abadan City
Khuzestan Province, Iran
fazeli78@yahoo.com

Research Scholar in Linguistics
Department of Studies in Linguistics, KIKS
Language in India www.languageinindia.com
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Seyed Hossein Fazeli, M.A.
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University of Mysore
Mysore-570006, Karnataka
India

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