

**AIN SHAMS UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

**DIFFICULTIES IN READING COMPREHENSION
SKILL AND WAYS OF OVERCOMING THEM**

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**BY
NAGAH YOUSUF MAHYOOB SULTAN**

**Under the supervision of

Prof. Amal Ibrahim Alkary
Department of English
Faculty of Arts
Ain Shams University**

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Students Name	: Nagah Yousuf Mahyoob Sultan
Degree	: Doctor of Philosophy
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‘advertising’ which were mentioned in both sentences rather than reading and thinking about the relation between the two sentences .

Other examples that stress students' ignorance of the function of linking words was students' wrong reordering "5" before "D" in spite of their correct matching. This happens due to the word ‘finally’ at the beginning of sentence "D" which has been assumed that it should be placed at the last sentence of the paragraph. Another example can be noticed from both levels students' failure to realize the opening sentence which is "B" in their choices "B" with "1". Most of 1st (10%) and 4th (16%) year students' order was "1" before " B " due to the same reasons.

Subjects seem to have had little practice in identifying the cohesive devices of reference as manifested in the serious errors they have made in this area. Further, most of the subjects failed to identify text organization and to retrieve the schema knowledge of the given text.

Recent research literature has proved that shared knowledge can help students recognize and understand that different types of text use text organization, language structures, vocabulary grammar, level of formality differently (Singhal, 1998).

Recognizing discourse types, therefore, is essential for effective comprehension. It allows students to predict the continuation of the discourse, and gives them a purpose for their reading. So gaps in students’ knowledge of a FL culture are considered as important

because the lack of schemata, shared knowledge or contextual information can affect students' comprehension.

4.4 The Yemeni readers' reading processes and the models

It was hypothesized (Chapter " 1 ") that the Yemeni readers follow a decoding model of reading, and that besides trying to confirm this hypothesis, the empirical research will also try to investigate if the readers employ strategies based on the psycholinguistic as well as the interactive models. For some readers, making sense of a passage means being able to question linguistic codes as well as question content / information. For others, it means being able to extract the main idea from the passage. Actually, as is well known, comprehension includes all of these and more. It also includes the ability to integrate already existing knowledge with what is being read.

In my elaboration on the various reading strategies, I have tried to explain that the solution of a problem depends solely on what for a reader posits itself as a problem in reader-text interaction. That the problem-identification has been mainly on word and on the content levels has further been consolidated in the strategies these readers use in their solution of problems. Yet the picture that emerges from the finding is not a simple one. For example, it will be surely inaccurate to place all the Yemeni readers within one single model. Abstract models of the reading process in general are models of the ideal, completely fluent reader within completely developed knowledge systems and skills; whereas the SL reader is, almost by definition, a developing

reader with gaps and limitations in both these categories. Let us, however, examine the Yemeni readers reading with reference to the three models outlined in chapter '2' .

4.4.1 The decoding model

Among the most prominent design of this pattern is their tendency to tackle the text at word-level. This pattern is what has been described in the reading literature as bottom-up', or an over-reliance on text-based processing (Fillmore, 1981). The text-based processing of a text involves decoding the individual words and their lexical meanings and decoding the syntactic structures of each sentence and their grammatical function. What causes such unidirectional biases in text processing in reading among the Yemeni readers or in readers of similar backgrounds, or in SL readers in general? It is difficult to find an answer to this major question with reference to (a) theoretical orientations and concepts, (b) linguistic deficiencies and, (c) reading deficiencies.

(a) Theoretical orientations and concepts .

The concept or misconception of a reader in this study has been described as the readers' theoretical orientation, and these orientations have been shown that they are guided by the concepts they have regarding reading in a SL. for example, readers who believe in a word – centred approach, focused their attention on print and tried to decode every word in their attempt to understand a piece of text . This proved to be the pattern with the majority of readers. The underlying reason for this behavior has to be explained in the context where reading is taught and learnt .

The theoretical concept of a reader is the result of the instruction in reading he is exposed to. If redress are instructed right from their early years of learning the language that the most efficient way of getting meaning out of SL text is to tackle the vocabulary, and if this behavior is consolidated over the years by similar methods, then vocabulary is bound to be the most salient feature of a text for these readers. Such approaches to the teaching of reading breed a certain prototypical behavior in readers who then become over – concerned with such units as sounds, words and phrases. Even after leaving school and joining college, when reading in SL becomes more self-dependent than teacher – dependent, the trend of word – boundedness continues. Monitoring of comprehension remains greatly related to understanding of words and phrases . In other words, the teaching of reading contributes in no small measures towards the beliefs readers hold. In fact, the effect of instruction on the use of reading strategies has been pointed out by many analysts (e.g. Alderson, 1984 , Carrel, 1988, Kliezen, 1991, Kary, 1995). In his conclusion Kliezen has clearly raised the issue

“ Further research needs to address development issues, such as at what point (.....) and whether strategy use is the same for all students at the same level or depends on the reading instruction they have received . ”

(P. 83)

In their reading lessons teachers, as experience has shown, usually start by explaining the difficult words in a text. Teacher explanations of reading lessons are vocabulary explanations. In their

effort to make the words understood, teachers usually resort to the first two of the four following procedures :

- 1- Immediate association: Here the teacher use an object, picture or BB sketches to make words – meaning explicit to readers
- 2- Translation : Where method '1' proves futile, translation is a favorite substitute, especially with abstract words and phrases.
- 3- Definition : It is one of the ways in which a word is usually explained, though most teachers consider it as a waste of time and effort to try and explain a word by using a number of other words.
- 4- Context : This is a very rarely used method of explaining meaning of words .

If we now consider the reading strategies used by readers in reading texts (the questionnaire an the tests) or in solving their reading problems, it becomes clearer why, for instance, the lower – level strategies are the features of classroom reading , and why 'translation' and 'glossary' have got the highest percentages of reading facilities.

(b) Linguistic deficiencies

The important role of language competence in English for successful ESL reading is too obvious. Clearly text – based processing cannot take place at all without appropriate skill levels in decoding the syntactic structures, and particularly , the content vocabulary of a reading text .

There is no doubt about the linguistic problems of the readers in this study. At least more than (50 %) of the readers in both levels have been designated as poor readers .The highest responses of 1st and

4th year students' reasons of reading difficulty were given to 'language problems' (82 %) and (55 %) respectively . These are instances of what has been termed in reading literature as ' linguistic ceiling', ' threshold level' or ' short – circuit hypothesis' (carrell et al , 1988). According to Goodman (1988) readers may short – circuit in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons .

“ In general, readers short – circuit when they can't get meaning or lose the structure; when they've been taught or otherwise acquired non-productive reading strategies , or when they are not permitted to terminate non-productive reading . Theoretically, a short circuit can occur at any point in the process. (...) I suspect that many of these short circuits result from instruction.

(PP .20 – 21)

As regards the threshold hypothesis , Cummins (1979) points out that the threshold can not be defined in absolute terms, but it is actually likely to vary depending upon the demands being placed upon the learner by any given task; the more demanding the task, the higher the threshold is likely to be.

Alderson (1984) adds that the threshold is also likely to vary with the stage of cognitive development of the learner, and with his level of available background knowledge. This leads us to the other type of deficiency, i.e. reading skill deficiency.

(C) Reading skill deficiencies

For those readers who face very little or no problem with the language, the deficiency can be described as a reading skill deficiency. Readers may know all the words and grammatical structures of a sentence or paragraph and yet cannot comprehend what they have read. It is the result of learning the elements of the language without understanding the process which one utilizes to communicate with these elements, a case of linguistic competence versus communicative competence (Hymes, 1971).

Yet another cause of over – reliance on the text in comprehension is the absence of relevant knowledge structures to utilize in top – down processing. If the schemata do not exist for the reader, they cannot be used. Examples can be observed from 1st (18 %) and 4th (73 %) year groups when they rank ‘difficult subject matter’ as their most severe complaint which causes reading difficulty.

Therefore, in the above example, as they try to make sense of their reading, readers rely on potential lexical knowledge (their main forte) trying to draw inferences. In doing so they demonstrate lack of procedural knowledge in that they draw on irrelevant knowledge sources or combine cues from various linguistic levels in an unfortunate way (Kary, 1988). When such behavior fails to provide them with further confirmation or responses from within the text, they tend to give up. These are instances where comprehension of a message entails drawing information from both the message and the internal schemata until sets are reconciled as a single schema or

message in which the constraints of both the graphic message and the internal schemata are satisfied.

These could be the main reasons for the Yemeni readers' reliance on text – based processing .

4.4.2 The psycholinguistic model

Goodman's (1967) model of reading as a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' in which the reader reconstruct, as best as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display' (1971 : 135) does not seem to be working with the Yemeni readers. Goodman views this act of the construction of meaning as being an ongoing, cyclical process of sampling from the input text, predicting, testing, and confirming or revising those predictions , and sampling further. We have seen (chapter '2') that in his model the reader need not use all the textual cues. The better the reader is able to make correct predictions, the less confirming via the text is necessary, that is, the less visual perceptual information the reader requires .

The two major strategies that this model is based on are 'guessing' and 'predicting' .

In this study, the use of guessing and predicting has been found to be problematic for most of 1st and 4th year students (49 % versus 47 %) , (45 % versus 43 %) respectively . Being text – bound and inefficient to read without the help of textual clues, the readers in this study confirm the belief that reading problems are also attributed to imperfect knowledge of the language. In Yorio's (1971 : 108) words

“ The reader’s knowledge of the foreign language is not like that of the native speaker; the guessing or predicting ability necessary to pick up the correct cues is hindered by the imperfect knowledge of the language; the wrong choice of cues or the uncertainty of the choice makes association more difficult; due to unfamiliarity with the material and the lack of training .”

4.4.3 The interactive model

The last model was the interactive one. This model (Widdowson, 1984 b), builds on the perceptual cycle but puts equal weight on linguistic clues. The language user , however , does not .

“ deal with text as linguistic data (...) but as indication of communicative intent.”

(P. 87)

In other words, the model gives equal importance to the textual clues.

“ If the actual reader is prepared to play the role that the writer has cast him in , then he will seek to recover the underlying discourse from the textual clues provided . ”

The core of the model is apparently background knowledge and schema of the reading materials. It is only when the reader possesses enough of these, he can be described as a reader in this interactive

model. It certainly describes the L₁ reading behavior of my readers, as we have already seen earlier. But meaning in SL for the Yemeni readers lies in the linguistic cods first and only then in the information provided.

**“ Because we can see only what we know
how to look for, it is these schemata
(together with the information actually
available) that determine what will be
perceived . ”**

(Neisser, 1976 p. 20, quoted
in Widdonson, 1984 b : 92)

Therefore, as regards to the three models, the Yemeni readers' SL reading can be described as closer to the decoding model than the other two . Their L₁ reading , on the other hand , is more in line with the Widdowson model. Any reading model that one can propose for the SL reading of the Yemeni readers should, therefore, build on the basis of the two models that manifest themselves in either language since it now seems safe to conclude that it is difficult to accommodate the variety of perspectives on comprehension within one of the above models. Consequently, I need to emphasize that when I say that their reading behavior can be described in the decoding model, this may sound biased towards word level processing and may not generalize to sentence or other text level processing. The readers in my study use much ineffective processing, as stated throughout my discussion , notably bottom – up type .