

## **THE READING PROCESS: AN OVERVIEW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many of us regard reading as an activity that we do almost every minute in our lives as something that is very simple. To many, reading means to comprehend what has been printed on a piece of paper that has been written by a writer. Reading to a linguist is more than comprehending printed text. There are some complex activities that take place in the our brain when we read. What are the activities involved in the process of comprehending a text? Sometimes there are even models and strategies involved in the effort of trying to understand a text. This article discusses reading from the point of view a linguist so that the process of comprehending a text will become clear to us all.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Reading has often been considered a complex activity as nobody really knows exactly what goes on in the brain that helps make people understand what they read. One thing for sure is that in the process of comprehending a text, different readers use different reading strategies or reading model, depending on the readers themselves. Whether they are good or poor readers, all of them definitely apply certain strategies while reading takes place. Basically when readers read and respond to the graphic rather than acoustics signals, it suggests that readers are to do these two things, then only reading skills can be promoted. In doing so, the students will come across three distinctive reading models and use certain reading strategies.

Reading models describe what the readers do in reading (this includes the eye movements, thinking of past experiences and so on) a text (Barnett 1989). In the reading process, there are three distinct models used in explaining the stages of comprehending a text. They are:

**a) Bottom-up Model**

In this model, readers are posited to gain understanding of the text by first starting with a character to identify morphemes which are then added together to make words and these words are then combined to make sentences (Trollope 1995). This model stresses on the skill of decoding the alphabetic writing system in order to achieve comprehension. This results in the reader “sounding” the letters and the words in order to read. After the decoding of the phonological symbols has taken place, then only the sound of the larger unit gradually being built up. The attempt to get the meaning of the text will be completed after all the steps mentioned have been completed.

Moore (1984) mentions that Bottom-Up Model suggests that reading as translating letters and words into spoken language and then into meaning. This model of reading is based heavily on the text being read. As a result it is text-based processing (Silberstein 1987) or data driven (Carrell & Eisterhold 1987). In the process of achieving comprehension of the text, readers must first recognize and register the symbols of letters used in the text. Then, what has been recognized and registered will be mapped to match with what has been stored in the Pattern Recognition Routines (Gough 1972). This item is then decoded and compared with the readers’ lexicon. The Bottom-Up Model is found to be very time consuming and tedious as it places heavy burden on short-term memory. As a result, this model has been criticized as it makes reading a very slow and laborious process (Davies 1995). In addition, this model does not account for the use of skimming or predicting to make sense of the text (Barnett 1989). Generally, this model is more preferred by the slow readers because they spend a lot of time decoding what is being read.

**b) Top-Down Model**

The second model, known as the Top-Down Model would be in the reverse order of the first. This model views reading as making prediction about the text based on prior experience or background knowledge and then checking the text for confirmation or refutation of those predictions (Carrell 1988: 101). As a result, it is conceptually driven (Carrell and Eisterhold 1983). This is directly related to the schemata theory which states that the process of interpretation is guided by the principle that every input is mapped against some existing schema and that all aspects of the schema must be compatible with the input information (Carrell &

Eisterhold 1987). This is also relevant to what Krashen (1988) defines as the comprehensible input, which students will take in what is related to their background knowledge. In the effort to understand what is being read, readers will decode less but predict more using all the available information by comparing to the background knowledge that they have. In order to make sense of the text, the readers will go through these four steps laid down by Goodman (1967) as reported in Barnett (1989). They are:

**(i) Predicting**

Readers predict the grammatical structures based on their knowledge of the language and semantic concepts to obtain its meaning.

**(ii) Sampling**

Readers sample the text to confirm their prediction. (This is in direct contrast to the Bottom-Up reading model because they do not need to see every word or letter).

**(iii) Confirming**

Readers confirm their guesses.

**(iv) Correcting**

Readers revise their prediction if necessary.

Although this model does enhance the readers comprehension, sometimes it fails to account the readers who can be frustrated by a text with a large amount of unfamiliar vocabulary (Barnett 1989) or readers who are able to understand the text for which they have little background knowledge (Stanovich 1980). Readers will most likely use this model as it enhances comprehension. In order to cater for the frustrated readers who face problems with vocabulary, the third reading model was introduced.

**c) The Interactive Model**

The third model emerged due to the needs of complementing certain issues that are not addressed completely by the two models mentioned earlier. For example, in the issue of identifying lexical and grammatical forms. No matter how rapid and accurate identification of lexical and grammatical forms skills are, this does not guarantee smooth transfer of

identified forms into the second language. This is true even for good students who have developed strong Top-Down skills in their native language. It can be solved if they have developed a stronger Bottom-Up foundation of basic identification skills. In other words, readers need to apply both models mentioned previously in order to comprehend what is being read.

Therefore, the introduction of the Interactive Model covers readers from both ends, the slow and the fast readers. This model proposes that readers are not seen to progress in just one direction in understanding the text but as being able to alternate approaches as necessary (Barnett 1989). This means that a reader will alternately use the Top-Down and Bottom-Up models in order to comprehend text. Moore (1984) says that the act of reading is viewed as the interaction between the letters and words of the text. If readers use the Bottom-Up model only, their reading will be at a very slow pace and this may lead to boredom, and this does not guarantee that they will understand the text being read as opposed to readers who apply to Top-Down model only. Readers need to apply both reading models; as these models are the kinds of processes that cover issues pertaining to the reading process adequately, the Interactive model is introduced. It can be the most preferable and practical model to be used while reading because of its ability to cover problems faced by students from both ends in interacting with the text in order to comprehend it.

With those models being used in explaining the reading process, the comprehension of the text being read is still questionable. In order to get optimum comprehension, appropriate reading strategies must be adopted.

## **READING STRATEGIES**

Wallace (1992) defines reading strategies as ways of reading that are employed flexibly and selectively, which vary depending on the text, type, context and purpose of reading. In order to comprehend what is being read, readers will incorporate the use of the three models mentioned in achieving comprehension.. Block (1986) classifies reading strategies into two levels: general comprehension and local linguistics strategies. General comprehension strategies refer to the Top-Down model where it is a reader-centered strategies while the linguistics strategies deal with the readers attempt to understand specific linguistics units. This is related to the Bottom-Up model and it is text-centered strategies (Upton 1997).

Reading strategies of good readers differ remarkably from those of poor readers ; and the strategies of native speakers of English typically differ from those of second language speakers (Bowen et al. 1985). Wongbiasaj and Chaikitmongkol (1995) cite

The strategies adapted from Oxford (1990) as the cognitive strategies for learning. This involves activities done by the learners in receiving messages, structuring and processing them, coping with unfamiliar words, and improving reading ability. Examples these kinds of strategies are getting the idea quickly (receiving messages, highlighting and analyzing data-structuring and processing message), using clues (coping with unfamiliar words) and practicing naturalistically (improving reading ability).

As most research stresses on good readers' reading strategies, it is found out that good readers will scan for specific information, skim to get the initial overview of the text, and be prepared to read and re-read with greater attention to those parts of the text; which are particularly relevant to their purpose (Wallace 1992). At the same time they try to make the connection with the text by using their linguistics and schematic knowledge in trying to comprehend a text. Poor readers on the other hand, focus more on "decoding" the text-based elements of a text because their proficiency is not at a point where automatic processing of these elements can occur as it does in good readers (Upton 1997)

Learners might adopt any reading strategies such as rereading, inferencing or synonym substituting as long as they are comfortable with the strategies chosen in order to achieve comprehension when they read. No matter what kind of reading strategies applied, one fact remains that those strategies mentioned are closely related to these following activities:

### **i) Predicting**

Predicting is an important linguistic skill in reading comprehension. Readers must predict if they want to comprehend the text. The meaning of the word in any particular text will depend largely on the context in which it occurs. Therefore, contextual clues in a reading passage are important elements in order to aid comprehension.

Words themselves can have many meanings in English. The readers are usually unaware of the ambiguity unless they predict the meaning from the context. With the background knowledge, readers can make sure the prediction or guess made is an appropriate one. Smith (1978) calls prediction as the prior elimination for unlikely alternatives. It is not, therefore, random guessing, but the utilization of one's background knowledge to make the most possible meaning of a particular word and disregarding the unlikely alternative. Nuttall (1982) gives the example of two men. One who knows a bit about carpentry and the other does not know anything about carpentry. The man who knows little (though little) carpentry will be able to make a table

quickly than a man who does not. If the instructions are not clear or the shape of a piece is baffling, then his experience will help him conclude that "it must fit there or its function must be that". Readers will then apply the same strategy while reading a text in order to comprehend it.

The readers sense an experience which will help them predict what is the meaning of a word or what the writers is likely to say next, just as we sometimes complete another person's sentence when speaking. Readers who can think along with the writer in this way will find the text relatively easy. They may not be conscious of predicting. The experience of thinking that we understand a text when we suddenly become aware of that a word or a phrase does not fit into the pattern and we have to re-read and re-adjust our thoughts. This is what Goodman (1967) and Nuttall (1982) call a psycholinguistic guessing game. For example, reading is a constant making or remaking of hypotheses.

Predicting is about asking questions on what is being read and comprehension in getting these questions answered. The questions readers ask vary with the material being read hence making prior knowledge is so important. If we do not know the right question to ask of the text being read, then, we will not be able to read the text. The other element that will help to comprehend the text better will be the vocabulary.

## ii) Vocabulary

The ability to understand every single word in the text is one of the major factors contributing to reading comprehension. The readers therefore should be given texts that do not present too many vocabulary problems even if they have to read difficult texts. Constant stopping to look up for new words may actually make one a less effective reader and referring to the dictionary constantly will not only slow down the reader reading process itself but also may interrupt the thinking process in interacting with the text. It is better for the readers to be able to get the approximate meaning of new words based on the context rather than consulting a dictionary which will only slow down the reading process. Moreover, the meaning of the words will become more precise with every subsequent occurrence of the words. Vocabulary is no doubt a major factor in reading comprehension as to be able to know a word in its fullest sense (context) means that the readers can associate experience and concept with the words encountered (Heilman, Blair & Rupley, 1990).

### iii) **Skimming and Scanning**

Skimming and scanning are two common strategies used when people talk about reading process.

The purpose of skimming is to get an overview of the content and organization of the text ( Bowen et al, 1985). It can be used to build up the readers' confidence by showing them how much they can learn by simply looking at some prominent parts of a text, they should be able to understand the text.

Scanning on the other hand is focused on retrieving what information is relevant to our purpose ( Grellet, 1988). In other words, we scan for specific information.

Skimming and scanning are closely related to each other in a reading process because one will normally inflict on the other when reading process takes place.

## **CONCLUSION**

Once the readers are able to incorporate all these; the reading models and strategies, they will experience a gradual progress in improving their reading speed as well as comprehension. This is the natural results of vocabulary and comprehension development.

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