

Teaching reading comprehension strategies

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Abstract

The academic debate nowadays is focused on producing an applied science of learning, aiming to teach students how to learn and be strategic in their acquisition. The aim of the study is to identify and discuss the reading comprehension instruction approach applied in the Albanian system of education. Findings from 10 classes of Albanian language and literature with students of third grade were directly observed and analysed, in order to gather evidence based on indicators and instruments that assess the way of reading comprehension. Findings were categorized according to strategy use; the frequency of their application in different classes was counted and represented in percentages. In this paper we will try to respond to questions like: What are students' main barriers of comprehending? Does the instructional approach respond to students' needs and level of comprehension? Are teachers prepared to teach comprehension strategies? Furthermore, examples of procedures on how to deliver instruction of comprehension strategies in natural contexts will be represented. Results from teacher practices during lessons of reading comprehension confirmed that teachers use limited teaching strategies to deliver lessons. They mainly use strategies to test comprehension; while the approach of teaching students to read independently and strategically is an unknown practice.

Keywords: reading comprehension, good readers, poor readers, metacognitive strategies, strategy instruction.

Introduction

Referring to the National Report of Assessment 2014 carried out by the National Agency of Exams in Albania, 42.07% of fifth graders fail to expand meaning of a sentence; 77.98% of students fail to distinguish the most important information, while 19.39% fail to find the main idea of the text. Improvements in literacy haven't been significant and rapid from one year to the other, fostering us toward an analysis of the way teachers instruct reading comprehension. Referring to the National report 2015 37% of students fail to make prediction based for characters or events; 62% of them fail to evaluate the content and identify the author's purpose, while 74% fail to interpret and evaluate the events.

The first part of the paper will focus on the evolution of reading comprehension approaches. The second part will discuss practices of comprehension as observed during classes and the third part will provide specific instructional examples and procedures that demonstrate implementation of metacognitive strategies in real texts.

Methodology

For the purpose of this paper data from direct observation of 10 different classes (450 minutes) of Albanian language and literature with students of third grade were taken,

upon the ways comprehension instruction is delivered. The school were randomly assigned and findings were analyzed based on indicators and instruments to assess the way reading comprehension is instructed. Findings were categorized according to strategy application. The frequency of strategy application in different classes was counted and represented in percentages. Also analysis and conclusions were carried out over teachers' instruction of reading comprehension.

3. Literature review

3. 1. Definitions of reading comprehension and factors that influence its improvement

There are several definitions that surround reading comprehension. Researchers agree that there is an organic connection between decoding and comprehending. Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive ability that is based on the elaboration of new information and the ability to integrate it with previous knowledge, creating new schemas and new perspectives. The idea of interrelation between reading and comprehension has been reinforced by (Durkin, 1993), who defines reading comprehension as the "essence of reading". Durkin also sees reading as an interactive process between the reader and the text, which involves more than one component. He defines reading comprehension as "intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader" (Durkin, 1993). The interaction that happens during reading includes three factors that play a decisive role in the way readers comprehend. The reader influences the reading comprehension with elements like: prior knowledge and experience, decoding skills, motivation, attention span, strategies he uses etc. The second component is the text and the complexity it represents, comprising gender, esthetical aspects, structure, subject, coherence, cohesion, vocabulary, clarity, voice, language, grammar, fluidity and so on. A third element, to be taken into consideration is the context and the value we associate to time, place and context of the events. All these elements impact the way we understand.

National Reading Panel (2000) discusses other variables that influence comprehension. In their perspective they pay attention to components such as vocabulary development, use of strategies and teachers training. The panel considers reading comprehension as: a cognitive process that integrates complex skills and cannot be understood without examining the critical role of vocabulary learning and instruction and its development; active interactive strategic processes are critically necessary to the development of reading comprehension; and the preparation of teachers to best equip them to facilitate these complex processes is critical and intimately tied to the development of reading comprehension.

3.2. Reading comprehension strategies

Comprehension strategies are specific procedures that guide students to become aware of how well they comprehend as they attempt to read and write. (NRP, 2000). Current research highlights the importance of metacognitive strategies which are used to feed cognitive skills Metacognition refers to being aware of your own thoughts. It is about people' awareness of their cognition; that is, their thoughts about

their own thinking. (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). If readers do not pay attention to their thinking, while reading it means that they are not interacting with the text, they are not reasoning, judging, and integrating knowledge. Reading comprehension strategies should not be considered as ends, but they should serve as mechanisms that facilitate comprehension. The focus should not be on the definition and the role of the strategies but on the ability to use them appropriately. As indicated by the Gerald Duffy and Laura Roehler teachers do not teach individual strategies but focus instead on helping students to (1) view reading as a problem-solving task that necessitates the use of strategic thinking and (2) learn to think strategically about solving reading comprehension problems. There isn't a hierarchy of strategies, and rigid rules on combining them, they vary according to readers' specifics and comprehension failure. Utility of multiple-strategy approach, where the reader uses several strategic procedures accordingly, while interacting and trying to create meaning has proved to have a significant effect in increasing reading comprehension. These strategies are considered the most effective in helping poor readers to increase comprehension: *Activating background knowledge; Predicting; Comprehension Monitoring; Making Inferences; Generating and Asking Questions and Summarizing.*

3.3 Approaches of teaching reading comprehension

Scientific research on reading comprehension has introduced different instruction approaches starting with practices of teaching strategies individually and advancing to combining them accordingly to barriers readers face. Independent and strategic reading were given importance in many studies, emphasizing the gradual release of responsibility. The reader that internalizes these strategies with the teacher assistance, achieves a gradual internalization and independent mastery of those processes (Palincsar & Brown, 1984)

Studies also have found out that transference of metacognitive strategies good readers use is possible and it can be taught. The best way to pursue meaning according to Duffy, is through conscious, controlled use of strategies. The same claim is made by other researchers, who emphasize the idea that skilled reading comprehension does not rely in using strategies separately, but it involves an ongoing adaptation of multiple cognitive processes. Other studies have focused on self-regulation of cognitive and metacognitive processes. Becoming an independent, self-regulated, thinking reader is a goal that can be achieved through instruction of text comprehension. The approach houses all levels of students. The data suggests that students at all skill levels would benefit from being taught these strategies. (Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996). Individuality conditions the way readers use strategies since they are diverse and share different previous learning experiences, which is why it can be concluded on personalized combination use of strategies, taking into consideration the context of each reader. According to (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) to become good readers, most students require explicit, intensive, and persistent instruction Principles of flexibility, intuitive selection, combination, decision making about what, where and when to use the strategies are of a great help while making decisions on how to understand.

3. 4 How prepared are teachers to instruct comprehension strategies?

Some questions rise while we try to analyze the role of teachers in instructing reading comprehension.

Are teachers prepared to instruct comprehension strategies? How much time do they devote to teaching strategies? Do they explain the benefits of using the comprehension strategies? Do teachers model and demonstrate the use of multiple strategies appropriately during reading? Do they teach students how to monitor comprehension? Do they tell students what strategies to use, when, and how to switch them accordingly to the barriers of learning. Do they scaffold and provide feedback to students while using strategies in real texts?

Unfortunately, these questions were left without response in our study. During comprehension instruction it wasn't found any evidence of teaching reading strategies and using them, before, during or after reading process. Even though theoretically, researches have advanced in their ideas of strategy refinement as mentioned earlier, we do not know much about the time devoted to strategy instruction. To what extent teachers incorporate the instruction of the strategies in their practices? Durkin's (1979) highly cited observational studies of reading instruction in grade 4 showed that teachers, in fact, spent little time on comprehension instruction. Only 20 minutes of comprehension instruction was observed in 4,469 minutes of reading instruction. This lack was echoed by Duffy, Lanier, and Roehler (1980). The teachers do not explain, model or demonstrate students' skills, strategies, or processes that they could use in reading to comprehend what they read and to be successful in learning information in the text. The same findings come from other studies, which show that students were provided with opportunities to practice comprehension strategies, but were not actually taught the strategies nor the utility value of applying them (Pressley, 1998). In this situation we should consider the importance of teachers' preparation to deliver effective strategy instruction. Training teachers how to teach students to learn and use the strategies in real situations is essential. Teaching the strategies is the first step, but telling students how to transfer them in naturalistic texts is of a major importance when it comes to making use of the strategies. (NRP, 2000) suggests practicing strategies with readers in naturalistic settings. Also (NRP, 2000) claims that teacher characteristics influence successful instruction of reading comprehension. Further research is needed to identify traits of successful teachers and their impact in the implementation of reading comprehension strategies.

4. Results

4. 1 Frequency of reading comprehension strategy application

Activating and Using Background Knowledge This strategy aims at activating prior knowledge and using that knowledge to make connections and understand easily the new information.. Research has established that readers' existing knowledge is critical in determining their ability to comprehend what they read. (Anderson & Pearson 1984) It was observed that in 87 % of cases teachers activate prior knowledge, enabling the students to connect previous experience of information to the topic introduced, but it should be mentioned that the strategy is not applied independently

by students as an effective way that facilitates their comprehension.

Predicting This strategy involves the ability of readers to get meaning from a text by making informed predictions. In 62% of cases teachers ask students to predict of what might occurs and monitor if their prediction matches to the events, but students do not apply this strategy independently in their reading. They tend to evaluate these predictions continuously, and revise any prediction that is not confirmed by the reading

Comprehension Monitoring This strategy involves the ability of readers to know when they understand what they read, when they do not understand, and to use appropriate strategies to improve their understanding when it is blocked (NRP, 2000). The reader learns how to be aware or conscious of his or her understanding during reading and learns procedures to deal with problems in understanding as they arise. Specific repair strategies include rereading, reading ahead, clarifying words by looking them up in a dictionary or asking someone. In 74% of cases teachers spot anomalies and explain the inconsistencies met during reading, but this practice is not internalized by students when reading independently. It was observed that teachers provide explanations for unclear vocabulary. This is the only strategy taught to students when they encounter new vocabulary.

Making Inferences This strategy aims at retrieving meaning even though it is not explicitly expressed in the text. Readers continuously draw conclusions from information that is not directly stated. Students are not taught to use this strategy, but teachers in all cases were observed to provide meaning behind implicit information

Generating Questions This strategy involves readers asking themselves questions while reading a text and try to construct meaning. The ability helps them to integrate information, identify main ideas, and synthesize information. Evidence from the observation proves that in 100% if cases teachers apply the questioning-answering technique, but they never apply the strategy of "question generating", asking students to ask questions themselves as they read.

Summarizing This strategy involves the ability of readers to synthesize information, to discriminate important from less important information. Students are mainly required to identify main idea and rarely to summarize what they read. Only in 20% of cases teachers apply graphic organizers to clarify meaning and set relations between the events, but the strategy hasn't been taught to students.

4.2 Example of a narrative text

Piano Lessons

Susie loved to hear her older sister, Emma, playing piano. Listening to the pretty notes and watching Emma's fingers press the keys made Susie want to play music too. But every time Susie asked to play, her mother would tell her that it took hard work to learn to play piano well. Emma made it look easy. Susie was sure she could learn to play even though she was a few years younger, so she decided to show her mother that she was ready for the responsibility. Susie helped her mom around the house by washing the dishes and dusting. "Mom, can I take piano lessons?" Susie asked. "Susie, as long as you know that you have to practice every day, you can take piano lessons," her mom said. Susie was so excited. She could not wait to play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," one of her favourite songs. In no time, she thought, she would

play as well as Emma! Susie was excited and nervous for her first piano lesson. When she finally got there, she was surprised; her teacher had flashcards and a book for her. Susie did not know there were so many other things to learn about the piano before you could begin to play it. She had to learn each of the notes, or the sounds, that the piano makes. Then, she had to learn which key on the piano made each note. There were even Italian words she had to learn! Her teacher showed her everything she needed to learn before the next lesson. During that first lesson, Susie never even got to touch a key on the piano. "Don't people get to play piano at piano lessons?" she wondered. The next day, when Susie got home from school, her mom had her snack all ready. Susie ate it fast and started to run outside. "Where are you going?" her mom asked. "Outside to play kickball," Susie said. "Bye mom!" "Not so fast, you must study your piano flashcards," her mom said. "Then, you can play." "But mom, everyone is playing kickball," Susie whined. "Susie, this is what you wanted; you have to do your work first," her mom said sternly.

https://projects.ncsu.edu/project/lancet/third_grade/Piano3.pdf

4.2.1 Application of strategies modelled loudly

"Piano lessons", what it may be about? Maybe someone is taking piano lessons, or something happened during piano lessons. Let's see. (Prediction) I will read this text because sounds interesting, I like music and I am interested to start getting piano lessons. (Establishing a purpose for reading) Piano lesson, yes I have heard that some people take "piano lessons" Hannah, a girl from my school at the fourth class. I wonder if it is hard. (Connecting) Ok, there are two sisters and the oldest one plays piano. (Paraphrasing) Ah, the younger sister wants to take piano lessons, maybe she is starting to play music too. Let 'see. (Prediction) Is her mum discouraging her? (Question generation) Susie thinks the opposite because of her sister. Is Susie trying to prove her mother wrong? What is the connection of playing the piano with being young? Maybe Susie thinks that only old people could play the piano. (Identifying inconsistency) - Responsibility, - what does it mean, maybe I have to ask mummy, or look it up in my dictionary. What is the connection between doing housework and piano lessons? Oh, I see doing housework relates to responsibilities. (Inconsistency/inference) Well, Susie has high expectations. I see the task is more engaging than Susie thought. Maybe she will quit, let's see. Flashcard, I have to look up this word also. Ok she has to learn, notes, sounds, correspondence of keys to notes, Italian words. (Paraphrasing) It is obvious that Susie like the idea of playing the piano, but not to work hard to get skilled. I get it. Oh, maybe it relates to responsibilities. It is not easy to take responsibilities; it needs a lot of work. That must be the main idea. I am not very good at taking responsibilities neither but I should work harder and not give up. (Expanding and connecting information to personal experiences) I don't think that Susie was right to give up easily. I will summarize it. Susie likes a lot to play the piano, because her sister is good at playing piano. She thinks it is an easy task. Her mum tries to explain, but Susie insists and starts taking lesson planning. But the acquisition is hard and Susie does give up. Her mum tells her about the importance of taking responsibilities. (Determine and summarize important ideas and supportive details)

4.3 Example of an expository text.

Dolphins and Porpoises

Do you know the difference between a porpoise and a dolphin? Both can be found in oceans all over the world, and both are in the same family of animals, which includes 40 other species. These ocean animals look similar, but they are very different types of creatures.

Porpoises are smaller than dolphins and are rounder in shape. They have rounded heads and short noses. Porpoises do not grow longer than 6 feet in length and weigh less than 300 pounds. The teeth of porpoises are blunt and do not have sharp points like the teeth of dolphins. Porpoises travel in small groups of 2 to 4.

Dolphins are much larger and have a more elongated shape than porpoises. Dolphins grow between 6 feet and 26 feet in length and weigh between 70 and 1500 pounds. They have sharp teeth and long noses. Dolphins travel in sizeable groups, called pods, with 2 to more than 100 members.

Most commonly seen off the coast of North Carolina is the bottlenose dolphin. This smaller dolphin generally swims close to the shore in groups of 2 to 12. The bottlenose dolphin is light coloured on the belly and dark coloured on the back. This special colouring is called an adaptation, and this helps keep the dolphin safe from other animals.

Dolphins and porpoises are sometimes hunted or accidentally caught by fishermen. Because the numbers of dolphins and porpoises have declined, these animals are protected and have been placed on a list of protected species. This means that people are asked to pay special attention to keeping dolphins and porpoises safe from harm.

<https://projects.ncsu.edu/project/lancet/third.html>

4. 3. 1 Application of strategies modelled loudly

"Dolphin and porpoises" I have heard about dolphins, but no idea about the porpoises. (Restating important unclear words) Dolphins they are beautiful creatures, they make sounds, they jump beautifully, they save people. (Activating existing knowledge) Interesting, I will get some information about porpoises and find out the differences. (Purpose for reading) Maybe they have things in common. Let's see. (Predicting) Do I have to consult the dictionary for the word "porpoises", or I will read it first, maybe it is explained on the text. The text start with the question I am struggling with. Difference, I have to compare these species. Sounds like an informational text. Maybe I need a graphic organiser: Venn diagram, or a chart to comprehend easier. (Compare and contrast). Ok, two obvious things in common, they can be found all over the world and they belong to the same family. Also they look similar. (Paraphrasing) Porpoises are smaller than dolphins, have rounder heads and shorter noses. I can't remember all the traits. I have to compare features and determine similarities and differences. I have to reread and put the criteria of comparison. (Fix up strategy). I will start with habitat family belonging, size, shape nose, weight, teeth, the way of travel, threat from people and protection. Ok, dolphins and porpoises belong to the same family; they live in oceans all over the world and are both endangered species. They have different shape, size, weight, head shape, teeth and associations to other members of their groups. The bottlenose dolphin, this kind has some special features he is adaptable, is distinguished by two different colours. (Summarizing important

information by grouping related ideas and concepts)

5. Summary of using metacognitive strategies during reading

As it can be seen two different texts are processed differently, and strategies differ respectively. Metacognitive strategies have been used according to specific features the texts represent, experience the reader brings with, and the context that surrounds the events or the reader. In subsequent lessons, the teacher asks students to apply the strategy on their own to other texts. (Honig et al., 2000) The teachers assist and scaffold students when facing difficulties during the activities and barriers of comprehension..

Conclusions

Even though scientific research has advanced in refining the use reading strategies, little attention is given to instruction of comprehension strategies. There are no rigid rules that dictate strategy use of tackling barriers in comprehension, but there are mechanisms that may be alternated accordingly to failures and difficulties in comprehending. It is critical to know how teachers can facilitate and maximize students' comprehension. The key element of instruction remains in the approach teachers chose to deliver these strategies in order to consolidate a lifelong skill, which relates to the idea of teaching students how to learn. Preparing teachers to instruct comprehension strategies is the key to the success of teaching reading comprehension. Results indicate that no attention is given to explanation, demonstration and adaptation of multiple reading strategies. Teachers do not teach students how to adapt cognitive processes accordingly to the difficulties they face in the process of reading. The efforts of teachers are mainly focused on assessing reading comprehension through questioning and answering strategy, to gather data upon students' comprehension, rather than teaching them to be strategic in their comprehension.

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