

WE ARE LITERATE PEOPLE BUT DO WE KNOW HOW TO READ?

Theories and Skills of Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the revision of the literature related to the reading skills as a background and reading for comprehension as the final desirable product of practising reading. This includes an overview of reading theories, reading skills, and reading strategies and the difference between them. Reading theories such as top-up, bottom down and interactive model are discussed in detail. Reading skills such as scanning, skimming, intensive and extensive reading are defined and explained. Reading strategies which can be noticed by external observer since they involve physical behaviour such as marking the text, pausing or rereading and non-observed behaviours like structuring sentences, clauses or using background knowledge in prediction are presented . And finally, the difference between strategies and skills with the focus on the distinction between the two terms by describing strategies as a deliberate action practiced by readers to solve difficult problem or achieve certain purposes from reading, and skills as unconscious behavior is highlighted. The study offers important pedagogical recommendations for teachers and curriculum designers. Explicit teaching of reading strategies and when to use reading skills may contribute to the development of reading for comprehension and other English language skills.

Key words: reading comprehension, skills, strategies, theories

1.1. Introduction

Reading and writing skills are of a considerable importance in the modern world. Not everybody has to be a perfect writer. Reading, however, is a skill everybody has to master to progress in our modern life style. Academic success cannot be achieved if individuals have poor reading performance.

Fluent reading has many other benefits. It helps in improving writing skills, listening skills, and improving spelling accuracy, (Leung, 2002; Mason and Krashen, 1997). Learning a foreign language can also be enhanced by reading since “a great deal of language learning– lexis, syntax, rhetorical organisation– would be accomplished via reading” (Urquhart and Weir 1998, p.24). Thus, reading is a unique skill; teachers, researchers, and curriculum designers are recommended to work hard to guarantee that students’ reading performance in all education levels can develop fully.

This paper will focus on the revision of the literature related to the reading skills as a background and reading for comprehension as the final desirable product of practising reading. This includes an overview of reading theories, reading skills, and reading strategies and the difference between them. The discussion here covers the following headlines:

- 1. The nature of reading**
- 2. Theories of reading**
- 3. Types of reading**
- 4. Reading strategies**
- 5. Differences between reading skills and reading strategies**

Many pieces of information need to be available to the reader in order to achieve full understanding of a written text. Some of them are brought to the text by the reader, i.e. knowledge of the world (schema), and other information exists in the text. Since reading is an interactive process

among all the information available, the reader actively uses models such as bottom-up and top-down processing or the integration of both to extract meaning from text. But before the reading theories and reading skills are presented and explained it is necessary to define the reading skill and how satisfactory comprehension is achieved.

1.2. The nature of reading

Human language consists of four main skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Around the age of five a healthy normal child can speak their mother tongue fluently. This happens without any systematic learning because speaking is acquired by mere exposure to the target language.

Reading and writing, on the other hand, can only be learned through systematic instruction. That is why illiteracy remains high in the world population. Thus, reading and writing skills require instructors, reading materials and a place to practice these activities. Teachers are trained to transfer the knowledge of reading and writing they have to students who come to school with the hope of joining the ‘literacy club’ as Smith (1985) calls it. The questions now are what is the nature of knowledge students learn when they come to school? And what are the goals they are planning to achieve?

Smith (1985) argues that there is no accurate comprehensive definition of reading since reading as a concept is largely influenced by the context in which it is used. One can read a book twice, but it is not guaranteed that s/he comprehends its message satisfactorily.

According to Smith (1985, p.101) a good definition of the concept ‘reading’ should include illustration, description, and analysis. Because of these characteristics definitions such as “reading is the identification of written words” or “reading is the comprehension of the author’s thoughts” are not comprehensive enough to include the characteristics mentioned

above. The kinds of reading materials we are exposed to everyday, and the purpose behind our reading and even the types of reading skills and strategies we practice, govern the definition of the concept 'reading'.

Even if we limit our reading to books for academic purposes, still there are books which we just scan or skim or just read a section or a page. Beside this, the word 'reading' has been used metaphorically in situations such as reading palms, reading tea cups and reading faces. Again, defining reading as the decoding of written words does not cover the metaphorical use of reading.

Getting closer to a better definition is Nuttal's (1996, p.4) which states that the purpose of reading is "to get meaning from a text". Still, this definition also has its limitations. Smith (1985, p.102) reports that "there is a lot of information in much of [written materials] that we do not get, for the very good reason that we do not want it". As an example, he mentions the telephone directory and the daily newspapers. The information printed in these materials and many others are consciously ignored by many readers. Efficient readers pay attention only to the prints which fulfill their needs. Actually, most of us are selective readers.

After his argument against the definitions mentioned above, Smith suggests that reading is asking questions of written text and reading for understanding is a matter of getting the asked questions answered. A reader approaches a written text with a question or questions in their minds, and they deliberately look for just the information they need. This principle can be applied to include all written materials. For example, metaphorical and abstract expressions such as reading palms could be dealt with in the same way; asking questions and seeking answers. It is very important, however, to ask the right questions taking into

consideration the types of texts. In addition, a reader usually asks questions with clear and precise purpose in her/his mind and with certain limit of schema and linguistic knowledge of the language in print.

Nunan (1999) describes reading as an active process and compares it with listening skill saying that there are a lot of similarities between them. He highlights that both listening and reading involve highly complex cognitive processing operations. Nunan (1999, p.249) observes that, An enormous amount of time, money and effort is spent teaching reading in elementary and secondary schools around the world. In fact, it is probably true to say that more time is spent teaching reading than any other skill.

The highly complex cognitive processing operations are affected by many factors. Some of them are knowledge of the world, purpose of reading, reader's motivation, reader's interest, and reader's knowledge of the language or text type (Nuttal 1996).

These characteristics are included in Harris's (1979, p.27) definition of reading which states that,

Reading may be defined as the attaining of meaning as a result of the interplay between perceptions of graphic symbols that represent language, and the memory traces of the reader's past verbal and nonverbal experiences.

Thus, meaning is not always something explicitly existing in the text; it is the outcome of the interaction between the reader and the writer by using textual features such as cohesive devices as a medium to make the meaning explicit.

This interaction is divided by Ozono and Ito (2003, p.284) into three levels:

1. Linguistic level– all the language units start from words such as coordinators and subordinators', phrases such as 'on the other hand' and sentences existing in the text interact with each other by using the linguistic knowledge of the reader to form textuality.
2. Cognitive level– models such as bottom–up, top–down and interactive models integrated together, and with linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world to create meaning.
3. Interpretive level– this occurs between the reader and the text or indirectly between the reader and the writer through the text. Many strategies such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review) are used for correct interpretation of the text message.

However the reader may find a text difficult if:

The code i.e. the language of the writer is different from the reader.

The writer and the reader do not share the same schemata or the knowledge of the world.

The terms and expressions used related to specific field are strange to the reader.

The reader's vocabulary is limited.

The last point is quite common among foreign language readers.

Thus, reading is an interactive process between the reader and the text with prior question(s) in mind in order to extract meaning from a written text and achieve satisfactory comprehension. The ability to integrate the information related to knowledge of the world and the correct interpretation of the textual features such as connectives and prepositions speed the achievement of comprehending the message the writer wants to convey.

For the reader to achieve comprehension, s/he has to

Penetrate beyond the verbal forms of text to the underlying ideas, to compare these with what one already knows and also with one another, to pick out what is essential and new, to revise one's previous conceptions, Lunzar and Gardner (1981, p.38).

The process which leads to comprehension as defined by Lunzar and Gardner is explained by the following theories.

1.3. Reading theories

Davies (1995, p.57) uses the term "model" to refer to "a formalized, usually visually represented theory of what goes on in the eyes and the mind when readers are comprehending (or miscomprehending) text". What goes on during reading process the moment reader's eyes fall on the print to the final interpretation which takes place in the brain has been the major concern of linguists and psycholinguists for a long time. Many explanations and theoretical models have been suggested by them. Some of the "theories" depend on experimental studies using L1 and L2 readers as subjects. Many major reading process models have been recognized as an acceptable diagnosis of reading process phenomenon.

A model is defined by Davies (1995, p.59) as "a systematic set of guesses or predictions about a hidden process, which are then subjected to 'testing' through experimental studies". The following revision of the reading models is chronologically arranged in order to follow up their development and closely describe the reading phenomenon. These models will be briefly reviewed since reading process is not the focus of this study (comprehension is the focus). Yet, it is important to include them here since they explain the stages which precede and affect comprehension (i.e. the final product of reading).

1.3.1. The bottom-up model

By using laboratory languages, Gough (1972) carried out an important empirical study for collecting evidence about the actual stages of the reading process. Adult fluent readers were the subject of his experiment. His findings revealed that reading begins with the smallest writing unit. For him reading is "letter by letter progression through text, with letter identification followed by the identification of the sounds of the letters until words, their syntactic features, and then meaning are finally accessed" (Davies, 1995, p.60).

In this model it is suggested that textual cohesive reference is the second to attract the reader's attention. As textual cohesive item, reference, for example, is easily recognized by the reader since they are essential key words in the text which need correct interpretation. These cohesive ties strengthen the cohesion of the text and signal the semantic relations existing in the text which saves time and effort of readers. Teachers apply this model under "phonic approach", the technique which focuses on letter to sound correspondence.

By following up the application of this model in teaching reading many limitations have been observed. Smith (1994) argues that with the large number of grapho-phonetic rules constraint spelling- to- sound correspondence of English words makes this model difficult to apply in teaching reading. Beside this, several psychologists demonstrate that the processing phases suggested by Gough are difficult for short term and working memory to deal with without confusion (Goodman, 1970).

Due to the limitations mentioned above, psycholinguists such as Smith (1971, 1973) and Goodman (1970) have changed the focus from letter-sound correspondence to other sources of information internal and external to the text. Goodman (1970) proposes the following model.

1.3.2. The top-down model

This model is well-known as a psycholinguistic “guessing game” which was first established by Goodman (1970). Leaving behind visual decoding, Goodman emphasizes prediction as the core of the reading process which is followed by confirmation or correction. Davies (1995, p.61) describes Goodman’s model as “a series of four primary cycles: optical, perceptual, syntactic and meaning, with meaning in the controlling role”. Thus, by focusing on the meaning, Goodman (1970) presents a clear contrast to Gough’s (1972) focus on a letter-by-letter progression.

In Goodman’s study, L1 readers in their primary language learning stages were used as the subjects of his study. This was contrary to Gough who used adult fluent readers as participants to his research. This means that participants of both studies differ in age and language proficiency. Goodman uses grammatical items to predict meaning. For example, he suggests that the ability to interpret the explicit presence of textual cohesive devices in the text increases the possibility of successful prediction.

The emphasis of Goodman (1970) on prediction and guessing at the expense of other text information and the difficulty teachers have come across in applying it have exposed this model to serious criticism. Because of the simplicity of Gough’s model many teachers reject Goodman’s and return back to letter-by-letter process (phonic). Critics argue that choosing L1 beginners to represent the performance of fluent readers is not useful in teaching reading since both groups are different. Furthermore, applying this model to the second language teaching of reading “produced a somewhat distorted picture of the true range of problems second language readers face,” (Davies, 1995, p. 62). This does not mean that this model

is not applicable in L2 teaching of reading. Eskey (1988) observes that second language readers benefit from this model.

The observed problems which have been increased in the application of the bottom-up and top-down models have encouraged linguists and psychologists to look for a better alternative which can describe the actual process of reading.

1.3.3. The interactive model

Rumelhart (1977) was the first to suggest that both the above indicated models can function together simultaneously by engaging all the information available in the text and in the reader's mind in an interaction process. This 'parallel process' as Davies (1995) describes it, can lead to comprehension which is the final product of the reading process. Davies (1995, p.63) argues that "this model is currently the most influential model underpinning both L1 and L2 approaches to reading." It has the advantage of using all sources of information- visual, orthographic, lexical, semantic, syntactic, and schematic. According to this model, the process

Begins with a flutter of patterns on the retina and ends (when successful) with a definite idea about the author's intended message. Thus, reading is at once a "perceptual" and "cognitive" process. It is a process which bridges and blurs these two traditional distinctions. (Rumelhart 1977, p.573)

The importance of this model is latent in its flexibility of moving from one piece of information as 'visual' to another as 'orthographic' even for inexperienced readers. This is what promotes it as a good alternative to both the bottom-up and top-down models. In this model, there is no emphasis, for instance, on guessing at the expense of other sources of

information. All information external and internal to the written text has the chance to contribute in the reading process and achieve comprehension.

Davies (1995, p.56) highlights that “the model provides a basis for investigations of the performance, and indeed the processing strategies of different groups of readers under different conditions, L1 or L2”. Both L1 beginner readers and readers of the foreign language can benefit from this model since the former have the advantage of exposure to all sources of information, so it is a useful training for them, and the latter need to be aware of both top–down and bottom–up models.

Recently, Rumelhart (1984) recognized that knowledge of the world (schemata) deserves more attention since the reader “can only interpret visual information and words by relating these to [her/his] prior knowledge and experience;... prior knowledge and experience is seen to be ‘packaged’ into an infinite number of both general and specific units or schemata,” (paraphrased by Davies, 1995, p.66). Because of this, Rumelhart modifies his model by strengthening the focus on the semantic level of processing. He suggests “schemata theory” as an ideal approach to full explanation of reading comprehension process. The flexibility and practicality of this model do not protect it from further investigation and evaluation which have led to the suggestion of another model by Rayner and Pollatsek (1989).

1.3.4. The bottom–up interactive model

As the label suggests, the focus of this model is placed on the processing of visual information. Following Rumelhart’s experimental procedures Rayner and Pollatsek (1989) chose fluent adult readers as subjects of their empirical studies. Their findings were different from Gough’s model in that this model engages interactive features. This interaction occurs throughout the process between the top–down and bottom–up models. Sophisticated

laboratory studies have investigated the relationship between eye movements and cognitive process. Rayner and Pollatsek (1989) observed that in every eye fixation the reader's vision is limited to about fifteen characters i.e. about one to three words. Fluent readers can automatically recognize the words which give them the chance to quickly interact with higher level sources of information. This explanation of the process does not mean, as Rayner and Pollatsek insist, that they have got all "the truth about reading", nevertheless, this model does add to Gough and Goodman models some new aspects of reading.

1.3.5. The model that incorporates affective factors

Affective factors such as attitude, motivation, affect and physical feelings are not considered by all the models mentioned above. Mathewson (1985) attracted attention to these factors and suggested that such factors are directly engaged in the reading process. In this model, the reading process begins at the level of making the decision to read. When approaching a written text certain attitude which is governed by the reader's values, beliefs and interests, is created. This attitude is influenced by the features of the text such as content, format, and the form of the text. General attitude such as the text's importance and liking are also involved.

Mathewson treated motivation as a distinctive variable and included the desire to know and understand the aesthetic need under it. Moods, sentiment, and emotion are considered as components of the variable affect. The last variable is the physical feeling. This factor arises "from outside sources [and] sometimes occurs during reading, or physical feelings related to the meaning of the reading material itself sometimes intrude themselves into the reader's consciousness" Mathewson (1985) quoted by Davies (1995, p.73).

During an academic investigation of the application of the models mentioned above by overseas postgraduate students in a British university, Hedge (1991) observes that some students adopted the bottom-up reading process, a second group engaged in the top-down process and another group integrated both of them. In addition, she notices that L1 and L2 readers used all models simultaneously during the course of reading the same text, especially when they were exposed to difficult texts. Hedge does not suggest a new model after examining the current ones; however, she offers a descriptive framework of reading behaviour. Instead of the label model, Hedge proposes a “mode” for the framework of the reading behaviours she identified. This framework consists of six modes as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Hedge’s (1991, p. 304) modes of reading

Reading mode	Description of reading behavior
Interactive	Uses all available knowledge sources from text to content, genre and world knowledge
Top-down, relative data exclusion	Uses predominantly concept [world, genre, world knowledge] to the relative or selective exclusion of text data.
Top-down, deferred interactive	Uses all available knowledge sources from text to concepts but processes top-down before bottom-up before synthesizing to attain an interactive network of comprehension.
Bottom-up, non- recursive	Uses predominantly text data to the relative exclusion of conceptual knowledge and does not reread or consider previous text.
Bottom-up, recursive	Uses predominantly text-data to the relative exclusion of conceptual knowledge but does

	reread or consider previous text
Bottom-up recursive, deferred interactive	Uses all available knowledge sources from text to concepts but processes bottom-up, recursive before top-down, before synthesizing to attain an interactive network of comprehension.
Bottom-up, non-recursive, deferred interactive	Uses all available knowledge sources from text to concepts but processes bottom-up, non- recursively, before top-down before synthesizing to attain an interactive network of comprehension

As mentioned above, beside the linguistic information existing in the text, it has been noticed that for the reader to extract the correct meaning s/he has to bring to the text external information related to their knowledge of the world. This factor constitutes a vital component of source of information to all the reading models mentioned above with the exception of the bottom-up model.

1.4. Types of reading

Types of reading concern the skills or reading styles a student who reads in a native or a foreign language has to be aware of. The knowledge of using these skills automatically saves a lot of time and effort and facilitates the extraction of meaning from written text. Oral reading is excluded from dealing with here since these skills are directly related to silent reading.

These skills include intensive reading, extensive reading, scanning, and skimming.

An efficient reader varies her/his reading activity according to the information s/he is looking for. S/he may move quickly through the text in order to get, for instance, a name; this is what linguists call scanning or s/he may want to know the main idea of the text; skimming.

Nuttal (1996) suggests that a reader can approach a written text in different ways. This could vary in speed and purpose of reading. Whether a reading activity takes place inside the classroom under the guidance of a tutor or away from the instruction environment are other factors which affect the type of reading. The former is called intensive reading and the latter is called extensive or free reading. Experience and the type of text play an important role in facilitating comprehension.

1.4.1. Intensive reading

Reading under the guidance of a tutor is the main factor in this reading skill. The aim of this skill as Nuttal (1996, p.38) highlights is “to arrive at an understanding, not only of what the text means, but how the meaning is produced. The ‘how’ is as important as the ‘what’”. The reader silently analyses the text carefully looking for the grammatical relations and the semantic relations which are signaled by language items such as lexical cohesion to construct the correct meaning of the text. As Brown (1994) explains, the reader looks for grammatical forms, discourse markers, and other surface feature structure details for the purpose of understanding literal meaning, implications, rhetorical relationships, and the like.

Intensive reading or narrow reading, as some linguists call it, is a deep analysis under the teachers’ supervision seeking key vocabulary and other conceptual links to construct a meaningful message. The knowledge of the topic and the familiarity with the grammar of the text are key factors in

facilitating reading activity. Comprehension is achieved with ease if the reader has read a similar text before, which is written by the same author. What distinguishes this skill is that the classroom is the place of the activity and textual surface features such as cohesive devices and other key words are the target of the reader.

Reading and rereading are important in locating the key text items and getting correct interpretation of the text. Logical relations as problem-solving and cause and result are some of the text relations the reader works to discover and link together for accurate text interpretation. This could be done by recognizing textual items such as reference, prepositions and relative clauses...etc. and interpreting them correctly. In this type of reading usually short texts of no more than 500 words are used. Text language should be closer to the language level of the reader and serves the purpose the instructor wants to teach.

It is the responsibility of the teacher to choose the text which suits the language level of his/her students and motivate them to read with ease and enthusiasm. His/her direct supervision of the reading activity is vital throughout the duration of the reading. The teacher is required to train his students to practise intensive reading and to read independently. Feedback and encouragement are very important especially when students are exposed to texts with many new vocabulary.

This type of reading is not immune from criticism. Many limitations have been observed when applying this technique in teaching reading. Critics such as Macleod (2004) argues that the choice of short texts as reading materials gives students little time to practise reading. In addition, using the same materials constrains the freedom of the choice to read different texts and forces, at least some of the students, to read texts above their

language level. Furthermore, the choice of the reading text by the tutor ignores the interest of individual students. And finally associating intensive reading with testing could create a negative attitude toward reading, and short texts do not include enough language variety which makes language benefits from these texts limited. This is why another complementary reading skill is needed.

1.4.2. Extensive reading

Extensive reading is a type of reading activity which is practiced away from the classroom and instruction environment. Reading materials are usually chosen by readers to guarantee suitable choice to her/his purpose and interest. The aim of this skill is to achieve a general understanding of a text (Brown, 1994), and build a self confident and interested reader.

In this reading skill the reader seeks the main ideas or the message of the author and does not concern with the grammatical and lexical details. As Macleod (2004) states, it is a general understanding of a text with no focusing on new and individual words.

Palmer (1917) cited by Macleod (2004) was the first who proposed the term 'extensive reading' to differentiate it from other reading activities such as intensive reading. Susser and Robb (1990, p.2) describe it as:

Reading a) of large quantity of material or long texts; b) for global or general understanding; c) with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text. Further, because d) reading is individualized, with students choosing the books they want to read, e) the books are not discussed in class.

The tangible benefits of extensive reading and the role it could play in second language programs were observed and a call for adopting extensive reading as "standard practice" in foreign language reading courses was heard (Nuttal, 1996; Macleod 2004). Nuttal (1996), again, stresses the benefits which could be gained by implementing an extensive

reading programme. Reading capacity, positive attitude, self motivation, and language learning in general are some of the advantages of this skill.

Language learning is different from language acquisition in that the first is formal and the second is natural and unconscious. Man acquires a lot by being exposing to language in different forms. However, only limited knowledge is learned. And since extensive reading is practiced in natural environments away from instruction, it can be classified as a part of language acquisition which puts this skill in a better position in promoting reading habit.

Regarding the quantity of reading materials it is suggested should be used in extensive reading, there is no consensus on the number of words/hour per day, or books per week /months, or even the number of readers per year. Suggestions vary from a few pages a day to two books a week. Many variables are involved in this argument. They may involve the type of the programme, language level of the students and the materials used. However, quantity is not vital in this skill. Susser and Robb (1990, p.3) suggest that,

Quantity of reading is not an absolute number of hours or pages but depends on teacher and student perception of how extensive reading differs from other reading classes; this will vary according to type of program, level, and other variables.

Many language teachers have adopted this reading skill as one of the main approaches of teaching reading because considerable progress in reading habits has been observed by applying this approach. This progress creates a positive attitude towards reading and encourages readers to read more and become independent readers. In fact, more reading produces better

general knowledge of the world and high grammatical competence of the target language.

However, it is important to teach students how to use the appropriate reading strategies before they are asked to practice their independent reading out of the classroom. For example, students should learn how to interpret reference in their reading process. The ability to identify these items and recognise their function in signaling the semantic relations existing in the text are vital to easy and productive reading. As Nunan (1999) recommends, items such cohesive devices should be taught in order to benefit from their presence in written texts.

All the advantages mentioned above do not render this extensive reading skill from criticism. Many teachers and linguists have noticed that it is time-consuming and could create a negative attitude toward the reading habit if the written materials are wrongly chosen. Readers may challenge more difficult texts but fail to comprehend them correctly. In addition, graded readers could give a deceiving impression of the actual reading accomplishment.

Finally, depending on this model to develop reading skill and language competence in a society where reading is not a daily habit of its members has little production, since this activity is not an essential part of their pleasure.

Considering the benefits of both the reading types; intensive reading and extensive reading, teachers can use both at the same time. Students could be asked to read a text extensively and while in the classroom they can discuss the same text together and write a summary of it. As Nuttal (1996, p.38) emphasises “intensive and extensive reading are complementary and both are necessary”.

1.4.3. Scanning

In order to locate specific information such as a date, a name or a symbol a reader moves eyes quickly through the text until s/he finds the target. The reader usually approaches the text with prior knowledge to the form of the item they are searching for which saves time and effort. Scanning “involves the checking of specific items and hesitations at selected parts of the text” (Davies 1995, p.137). Looking for a telephone number in a directory of more than thousand pages is a hard task unless the seeker has enough knowledge about the first and the last name or the code of the city. All literate people need this skill especially in fields such as science and technology where numbers and symbols are commonly used. Second language learners need to learn the proper use of this skill to develop reading and language performance in general.

1.4.4. Skimming

Getting the general meaning and how text is organised to make the message of the text clear are some of the purposes of a reader using skimming technique. Lunzar and Gardner (1981) define skim reading as a rapid style used mainly to establish what a text is about before selecting the written material for reading.

Skim reading differs from normal reading in that it is practiced quickly and does not include reading every detail. This activity may include reading the title, introduction, and the first paragraph. That could be followed by reading headings and subtitles. Looking at pictures and graphs could be useful. This means that the reader does not have to read every word in the text but focuses only on the key elements which have explicit and direct relation to the main topic.

The ability to use the paragraph connectives when practicing this skill could be useful since they can guide the reader, for instance, directly to

the conclusion of the text when s/he recognises expressions such as in conclusion or in summary.

In summary, it can be said that,

...it is difficult to draw clear boundaries between the types of reading termed skimming and scanning; in real life, scanning inevitably involves some skimming (and skipping) of large sections of text, and skimming reciprocally must embrace some scanning.

Davies (1995, p.137)

1.4.5. Drawing inferences

With the skill definition reported by Urquhart and Weir (1998, p. 88) which considers a skill as “a cognitive ability which a person is able to use when interacting with written text”, drawing inference is classified as one of the reading skills. In agreement with this, Lunzar et al. (1979) and Munby (1978) also included this cognitive activity in their taxonomy of skills. For a successful inference, readers need to use textual information, as a signpost to guide them with more efficiency towards the message the writer wants to convey. Semantic relations such as cause and effect could be easily recognised by the reader if it is made explicit by one of the causal conjunctives such as because, thus, and so.

When practicing the above mentioned skills the reader behaves automatically and unconsciously to achieve certain reading aims. The behaviours which are intentionally and consciously practiced by readers to solve a problem or monitor the reading process are the focus of the following discussion.

1.5. Reading strategies

To facilitate extraction, storage, and retrieval of information from a written text a reader needs to use certain reading strategies. These strategies are defined as “learning techniques, behaviours, or actions; or

learning-to-learn, problem-solving, or study skills” (Oxford and Crookal, 1989, p.404).

Reading strategies are of two types: learning strategies which are used to help in learning and reading comprehension strategies which are applied to upgrade comprehension. Singhal (2001, p.1) highlights that, “strategies are processes used by the learner to enhance reading comprehension and overcome comprehension failure”.

Hosenfeld (1977b) cited by Davies (1995) uses the term ‘strategy’ when it refers to strategies such as guessing, evaluating, summarising...etc.

A hot debate has been going on for some time about whether the term ‘strategy’ refers to an activity which is deliberate and conscious or whether this activity involves unconscious behaviour.

Davies (1995, p.50) suggests that “a strategy is a physical or mental action used consciously or unconsciously with the intention of facilitating text comprehension and/or learning.” It is believed that practical experience in teaching reading supports Davies’ (1995) definition since it represents the actual behaviour of many students. It is a comprehensive definition even though it does not have clear explanation of when the reader switches from conscious to unconscious behaviour and which behaviour is natural and which one is the exception.

1.5.1. Types of strategies

Davies (1995) states that there are strategies which can be noticed by external observer since they involve physical behaviour such as marking the text, pausing or rereading and non-observed behaviours like structuring sentences, clauses or using background knowledge in prediction. Drawing all strategies, observable and non-observable

together, Davies (1995, p.51) proposes the following five types of classification as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Reading strategy types as classified by Davies (1995)

	Strategy	Process
1	Control reading process	By involving consciously or unconsciously in an observable behaviour such as marking text, pausing and reflecting.
2	Monitor reading process	By approaching a text deliberately to extract the meaning and evaluate the reading process.
3	Interact with text	By raising questions and expressing feeling.
4	Utilize source of information: textual	By recognizing the linguistic features of the text, activating the linguistic knowledge of the reader, and matching it with the text linguistic features which are taking the form of repetition of words, text structure and grammar in general.
5	Utilize sources of information: external	By recalling knowledge of the world which relates to the text topic.

This classification does not mean that every category functions independently from others. In actual practice, a reader may use more than one strategy at the same time. Text difficulty and reader's language proficiency play the major role in the application of the suitable strategy.

Knight et al. (1985) listed thirteen strategies readers can use in reading activity with different frequencies. They are: a) rereading, b) selectively reading, c) imaging, d) changing speed, e) assimilating with personal experiences, f) concentrating, g) assimilating with passages, events or thinking about previous events, h) noting / searching for salient details, j) summarising, k) predicting outcomes, l) self-generated questions, m) student perceptions of teacher's expectations, and n) rehearsal.

Empirically, many studies have investigated the type of strategies used by successful and unsuccessful readers. These studies have investigated how strategies are applied by readers and examined their reading proficiency.

Testing these strategies on 23 Spanish speaking ESL students, Knight et al. (1985) found that the strategy of concentration had the highest frequency of use while student's perceptions of teacher's expectations had the lowest frequency. They also noticed that FL readers use fewer strategies compared to native speakers. Awareness of these strategies and experience of the native speakers may be behind these findings.

1.5.2. The importance of reading strategies

Readers differ in the way of tackling a written text. Some of them consciously use systematic steps with the belief that understanding could be achieved fully and quickly by applying these techniques. Others approach the text without clear strategies in his/ her mind depending only on their experience and high language performance. Many linguists and language teachers believe that using strategies such as questioning, predicting, clarifying, and summarising facilitate comprehension and save time. This belief raises the question of how the reader can acquire or learn these strategies.

Song (1998) investigates the importance of using reading strategies by FL readers and whether training in using them could have any benefits. His subjects were classified into three groups; low, intermediate and high reading proficiency. His experiment findings suggested that low and intermediate readers benefit more from the training programme since it seems that prior to the training programme both groups had little experience in using any strategy. High group readers had already enough experience of utilizing reading strategies effectively.

From the above discussion it can be concluded that efficient readers do use strategies in their reading process. These strategies proved to be useful in facilitating comprehension. Readers use different types of strategies according to their interest and level of understanding. For poor readers, strategies can be taught. Poor readers can learn to recognise and use the reading strategies more effectively by a systematic teaching programme. For example, students learning English as a foreign language can be explicitly taught how to use language items such as reference and prepositions in their reading comprehension.

1.5.3. Differences between skill and strategy

The terms ‘skill’ and ‘strategy’ have been used interchangeably by many linguists and psycholinguistics to refer to the same reading activity. For example, skimming and scanning are sometimes classified as skills and at other times as strategies. Confusion may occur because of the vague image some linguists have of the nature of the reading process and how the reader engages in it. However, laboratory experiments and classroom observation have contributed to the clarity of this confusion and distinctive definitions have been proposed to both labels. Cohen (1986, p.133) suggests that “reading strategies refer to those mental processes that readers consciously choose to use in accomplishing reading tasks”. By

describing strategy as being a conscious activity Cohen distinguishes it from ‘skill’ which is indirectly understood as unconscious behaviour. Automaticity is one major characteristic of reading skills.

Carrell (1989) emphasises the distinction between the two terms by describing strategies as a deliberate action practiced by readers to solve difficult problem or achieve certain purposes from reading. In addition, Carrell (1989) intentionally uses the term strategies to propose the reader’s active role in the reading process, whereas automaticity of practicing skills may suggest the passive role of the reader. The ability to activate a certain strategy under certain circumstances is another characteristic of reading strategies. Cohen (1986, p.133) highlights that “... what distinguishes strategies from other processes is the element of choice involved in the selection”.

The terms ‘select’ and ‘control’ used by Carrell (1989) to describe strategies also emphasise the consciousness of the reader and her/his deliberate intention in using certain activity which is classified as ‘strategy’. Cohen (1986) observes that the reader is always able to describe and explain the strategy(ies) s/he adopts to achieve desired goals though the amount of attention the reader has fluctuates from practicing one strategy to another.

Urquhart and Weir (1998, p.96) support Cohen’s (1986) and Carrell’s (1989) points of view regarding the criteria they suggest for strategies and draw a clear line between skills and strategies by proposing the following criteria:

Strategies are reader-oriented while skills are text-consistent.

Where strategies represent conscious decisions taken by the reader, skills are deployed unconsciously.

Strategies represent a response to a problem while the same does not apply to skills.

To conclude, it can be said that skills are an acquired behaviour practised automatically by the reader, whereas strategies are deliberate performance selected and controlled consciously by the reader to achieve certain goals or to solve difficult problems.

1.6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the complex nature of the reading skills as a process and as a product. Different definitions to reading as a skill and reading comprehension were presented. Reading theories are discussed with focus on their advantages and limitations. Reading types are explained and differentiated from reading strategies. It has become clear that reading is a language skill which teachers and language curriculum designers need to take care of. Teachers are required to make reading a systematic habit among their students by choosing the suitable interesting readers (i.e. reading materials) and teaching them how to apply the proper skills and strategies mentioned in this paper. Curriculum designers are advised to include more drills and exercises in the course books about using reading skills and strategies. Extensive reading needs to be encouraged by offering reading materials such as stories, novels ...etc. in the libraries of schools and English language departments. By offering the facilities to encourage self reading we guarantee that all other language skills such as writing, spelling, and even listening can be developed.

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