

METACOGNITION AND READING COMPREHENSION

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Critique by

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Introduction

This paper is aimed to argument, expand and critique some points that were held in the article “METACOGNITION AND READING COMPREHENSION” written by Alireza Karbalaei, 2010, an EFL teacher and Ph. D Graduate in ELT from the Department of English Language, Islamic Azad University. We organize the paper in three sessions. First, we explore the policies for teaching reading in the EFL; contextualizing into a more specific setting and supporting the ideas with the results from the ICFES exam. Then, we continue with the concepts of reading and reading comprehension which are focused on the way we recognize the words from a text and the way we relate those words with our previous knowledge towards making meaning out of it. Finally, we bring up the reading strategies used when approaching top-down and bottom-up processes.

Policies for Teaching Reading

In the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning process, education searches for students who possess the ability to be autonomous, solve daily problems, state an opinion and argument it with evidence (Pineda, 2004). “Educational success requires successful reading” (Dechant, 1991), learning to read is an important educational goal because the ability to read permits to expand knowledge, to satisfy personal needs, and to face daily situations such as reading newspapers, magazines, academic texts, manuals, job applications among others (Dechant, 1991). According to Karbalaei (2011) in the educational field, it has been implemented policies that demand what, how, and to whom teach reading in the classrooms, having the goal of improving the methods and materials that the teacher must use during the classes.

We want to bring Karbalaei’s idea into a more specific context taking into account that Colombian policies are also seeking for developing reading comprehension skills. The “Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés” (2006) mandated by the Ministry of Education (MEN, 2006) possess in an explicit way these kind of skills. The standards are policies written in a document with the purpose of guiding the EFL education in Colombia, what students must know and do in each grade of elementary and high school education and what competences they must develop during school life.

English standards document were written based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, and assessment; is a document designed by the British Council, which describes the level of proficiency a language learner must achieve during each stage of learning. Standards are organized according to skills; listening, reading, writing, and speaking, and according to the general and specific standards.

We will provide some examples of specific standards for the reading skill, which are consistent with the development of reading comprehension skills with the Colombian eleven grade students. The English standards are:

- The learner identifies the author's point of view.
- The learner identifies words related among them about familiar topics.
- The learner assumes a critical position toward the author's point of view.
- The learner makes inferences from the information of the text.

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that these policies are demanded by the Ministry of Education; in the real learning reading processes it is not evidenced good results that demonstrate the implementation of these policies and the way they are conducted. One proof of this statement is the result of the ICFES (Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior) exam that is a nation-wide standardized test for high-school students, in which it is showed that a significantly bigger percentage of Colombian students from 11th grade have reached "average" and "poor" levels, and that only 1,2% of the 11th population scored high levels in Spanish reading comprehension; taking into account that reading comprehension is a main component to be evaluated in the ICFES test. These results show that a significant small percentage of Colombian high-school students have the ability to analyze and evaluate statements and texts which present similar viewpoints that a student would find in real world.

We want to demonstrate, with the previous evidence, that policies are not enough when teaching reading in the EFL classrooms if they are not properly implemented by institutions or by teachers.

Reading and Reading Comprehension

There is a distinction between reading and reading comprehension. Literal understanding differs from meaningful understanding in the way that “it is possible to comprehend the words but not the meaning of a sentence and to comprehend the sentences but not the organization of the text” (Alderson, 2000 pag.15). As readers make the process of word recognition, they are thinking about the information given on the text during a process of relating prior knowledge, reflecting on the information given, and engaging them into discussion with the text (Alderson, 2000)

Karbalaei states that “reading is the result of the interaction among the reader, the text and the context in which reading takes place. When comprehending a text successfully, the reader must utilize metacognitive knowledge”. We disagree with the way that he approaches the concept of reading because he does not contextualize nor conceptualize what reading comprehension means having in mind that reading is only taken as a decoding process different from making meaning out of the text.

To understand a text, the readers need more than identifying and pronouncing words in a printed page, it is also required to associated words with meanings and receive the message which the authors is proposed to say (Snow, 2002). Comprehension comes out only “when the reader’s construction or representation of text agrees substantially with the writer’s representations or his intended message” (pag 9), it also demands a numbers of cognitive processes which conveys recognizing letters and words to interpret the message and adjust it to reader’s world knowledge (Nation & Frazier, 2005).

Thus, the author mentions the background knowledge but he does not expand in the importance of using this prior knowledge into the reading comprehension process.

It is important to stand out that prior knowledge plays a crucial role in reading comprehension. The effects of activating prior knowledge state that prior knowledge affects reading comprehension in three ways: first, it helps readers to make inferences about the reading. Second, it focuses on the information that is important in the text about the topic of interest, and finally, it provides a plan to recall to that information after reading the text. Therefore, in order to construct meaning out of a text, readers must link the information and data given in the text to their prior experiences and concepts they have about the world (Applegate, Quim and Applegate, 2002; Tomasek, 2009). “To read to learn effectively, students need to integrate new material into their existing knowledge base, construct new

understanding, and adapt existing conceptions and beliefs as needed” (Strangman and Hall, 2004, pag.2).

Another fact we disagree with is related to the reading cognitive processes where the author states that “the context of reading is usually understood as consisting of two types of cognition: First, one's knowledge of strategies for learning from texts, and, second, the control readers have of their own actions while reading for different purposes”. We do not agree due to the fact that a cognitive process is a wider field, not only it involves two types of cognition but it involves the following aspects. To comprehend, a reader must have a wide range of capacities and abilities. These include cognitive capacities (e.g., attention, memory, critical analytic ability, inferencing, visualization ability), motivation (a purpose for reading, an interest in the content being read, self-efficacy as a reader), and various types of knowledge (vocabulary, domain and topic knowledge, linguistic and discourse knowledge, knowledge of specific comprehension strategies) (Snow, 2002)

The author does not specify the characteristics of a proficient and non-proficient reader. He points that “It is the combination of conscious awareness of reading, strategic reading processes, and the actual utilization of reading strategies that distinguishes skilled from unskilled readers.” In fact, we want to expand the ideas the author states. First of all, while proficient readers use reading strategies more frequently (Oranpattanachai, 2010); connect their past experiences with the text (Tomasek, 2009); use their minds actively to build meaning (Moore, 2008); usually reflect on the meaning of the text long after they have read it (Rice, 2006); the non-proficient readers lack sufficient vocabulary and syntactic knowledge (Oranpattanachai, 2010); fail to relate their background knowledge to the meaning of the text (Warsnak, 1996) and they do not engage into conscious, active comprehension strategies before, during and after reading (Pressley, M. & Wharton-McDonald, 1997).

Bottom-up and Top-down Processes and Reading Strategies

Reading is an active process, a dialogue between the text and the reader, where the main focus is to extract meaning from a text and to connect information with reader's background knowledge. In reading, two main approaches have been distinguished to explain the nature of learning to read: “The bottom-up processing focuses on developing the basic skill of matching sounds with the letters, syllables, and words written on a page, and the top-down processing focuses on the background knowledge a reader uses to comprehend a written text” (Villanueva de

Debat, 2006, pag 8). Alderson (2000) and Wallace (1995) consider that bottom-up approach conveys to decode and recognize printed words and top-down approach targets on the meaning of the text, to predict or guess its content using reader's prior knowledge.

Another issue to expand according to what Karbalaei (2010) states is the concept of other reading learning processes such as Top-Down and Bottom-up. The author does not pay much attention to explore these important approaches having in mind that these processes are the ones that help a reader get into the comprehension and understanding of a text.

According to Madariaga & Martínez (2010) "reading involves processes at different levels, from recognition of graphemes, to the interaction of global ideas from the text into the reader's knowledge" going through developing the basic skills of matching sounds with letters, syllables, and words written to the using of prior knowledge in order to comprehend a written text.

Authors like García Madruga, Martín & Luque (1997) suggest that the teaching of reading comprehension should consist of two stages: the first one should focus on learning and mastering the basic abilities of word understanding; the second one, which has to do with strategy and metacognitive control, should focus on the construction and integration of the text's significance in the reader's memory. With this, we can point that the reading comprehension process not only needs a cognitive and metacognitive process but also needs the use of some reading strategies that lead readers into the understanding of a written passage.

We agree with the author when he cites Block (1986) stating that reading strategies point out how readers conceive a task, what are the textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read and what they do when do not understand. Besides, they reveal a reader's resources for understanding (cited by Block, 1986 p. 465). However, he lacks mentioning specific reading strategies that are important for a reader to get into a high level of comprehension and meaningful reading.

On the first hand, some examples of bottom-up reading strategies could be such as "working out meanings of words from understanding the parts of the words; make use of grammatical structure to get at meaning; look up the unknown words in the dictionary; need to understand meaning of every vocabulary in the text; and to skip words or parts not understood" (Oranpattanachai, 2010). On the other hand, some top-down strategies are related to "try to get the main idea; predict what will come next; use general knowledge to get meaning; have feeling and reactions emotionally to the text; link the present information to the other pieces of

text; and finally link what is read to the word and world knowledge” (Oranpattanachai, 2010)

Conclusion

To sum up, we can say that even though the author mentions relevant issues in the EFL, ESL settings, there are some others that he does not link to the main topics of the text, causing that the reader gets lost while reading. An example of this is that we did not understand the connection the author did among the English learning process, reading, communicative competence, socio-affective strategies and some other concepts. Bearing in mind that the author mentions them at the end of the article, he does not give the appropriate introduction or contextualization during the text.

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