

UNDERSTANDING READING COMPREHENSION FROM THE HORIZON OF SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

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A large body of literature on reading strategies have been focusing mainly on the cognitive and linguistic aspects. Consequently, the main criticism against these two aspects is that they overlook the sociocultural context of learning to a great extent. Hence, this paper presents a conceptual overview exploring reading comprehension imbued with sociocultural context to fill in the gap in the literature. This paper argues that sociocultural context has a great influence on the three interrelated elements of reading comprehension- reader, text and activity. It is hoped that this paper will encourage more empirical studies on reading-related activities from the sociocultural perspective. This will eventually expand the existing literature on reading comprehension which has been approached mainly from the cognitive and linguistic aspects.

Keywords: Cognitive, ESL classroom, reading, sociocultural theory, Vygotsky,

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading skill is one of the four major skills of language (Rahman, 2014) which is considered a basic life skill as well as the prerequisite skill for students to excel in their academic performance (Pugh, Pawan & Antommarchi, 2000; Grabe, 1991). Learning to read is a long-term development (Rand, 2002) and critical to students' academic success which has a tremendous impact on their emotional and social developments throughout life (Lyons & Pinnell 2003).

Over the years, various theoretical approaches towards reading have been established in the field of psychology and linguistics. However, most of the approaches do not provide sufficient guidelines for developing reading comprehension process (Troschitz, 2005). Developing and assessing learners' comprehension is still one of the main problems faced by teachers in ESL classroom (Ghafar & Dehqan, 2012). Awareness or knowledge of reading comprehension does not necessarily determine reading competence. Thus, there is a need for an approach that would enhance not only students' awareness of reading comprehension but improves their reading competence.

The sociocultural approach is one of the approaches that are capable of improving students' reading proficiency as well as knowledge of reading comprehension. However, it has been neglected by many scholars. Previous studies

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mainly focus on the cognitive and linguistic aspects of reading comprehension (Dehqann & Ghafar, 2014) and pay little attention to the sociocultural aspect. Therefore, this paper aims to highlight the importance of sociocultural aspects in improving learners' reading experience.

2. THE CONCEPT OF READING COMPREHENSION

Reading comprehension is conceptualized as the process of decoding and constructing meaning (Rand, 2002). It mainly focuses on the reader, the text, and the activity or the purpose of reading. Woolley (2011) defines reading comprehension as the process of obtaining meaning from text to get an overall understanding of what is described in the written text instead of obtaining the meaning from abundant words or sentences. With the advent of sociocultural theory, prominent scholars in the field, such as Coughlan (1995), Coughlan and Duff (1994), Frawley (1992), Frawley and Lantolf (1985) and Kozulin (2002) began to apply it in L2 reading. These scholars are primarily interested in extending the tenets of the sociocultural theory into the field of foreign language acquisition. For instance, scholars such as Ellis (1997) and Swain (2000) who have a strong research background in second language acquisition (SLA) incorporate the tenets of sociocultural theory in developing their SLA theories.

3. VYGOTSKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

The sociocultural theory was first introduced by a Russian scholar Lev Semenovich Vygotsky who was born in 1896. Vygotsky's works became prominent after it was first translated into English in 1960. Due to the practical implication and research purposes of the theory, a body of research studies employed it as their guiding theoretical frameworks ever since. The sociocultural theory attempts to explain human cognitive development with regard to social and cultural development. In the theory, the cognition of human and its development are connected together and cannot be separated from the culture and society. Sociocultural theory puts the emphasis on the social aspect and regards it as primary for cognitive development to occur. According to Vygotsky (1987), the continuous growth of human beings takes place in the social environment.

Lantolf and Poehner (2014) posit that sociocultural theory is not a social or sociolinguistic theory. It is instead a theory that explains human psychology as Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the "higher" forms of thinking which take place where human develops mediation appropriated through social activity to regulate their mental functions. The central principle of Vygotsky's theory is that human consciousness arises through the dialectal units of our brain and "auxiliary stimuli" appropriated during participation in social practice. For instance, when children appropriate a word, such as 'flower' in English, they do not imbue it with the same meaning that the word carries for adults (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014).

To be able to apply sociocultural theory in a learning context, teachers need to familiarize themselves with the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by Vygotsky. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is regarded as the central concept in sociocultural theory. It proposes that learning takes place in social environments through interaction with peers and more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD acknowledges the important role of teachers as mediators in helping the learners to develop. A learner has an actual level of development and a potential level of development. Teachers need to facilitate learners' engagement with the learning materials so that they can reach their highest achievement with the guidance from the teachers. For instance, without guidance, students can only comprehend one paragraph, but with guidance from peers or more knowledgeable other, the students can comprehend the entire text. The difference in what the students can do with and without the guidance is what Vygotsky refers to as ZPD. Hence, studies which are framed in sociocultural theory may explore what teachers should do in order to maximize their students' potential.

Another concept which teachers need to be familiar with in order to appropriately apply the sociocultural theory in their learning context is scaffolding. The term scaffolding is closely related to ZPD. In fact, scaffolding occurs only within the concept of ZPD. Scaffolding refers to the support given to a learner, by either a teacher or peers, in a learning process in order to attain ZPD. Wood (1988) defines scaffolding as a tutorial behavior that is contingent, collaborative and interactive. It is contingent because in the learning process one action influences and is influenced by other actions (by other learners). It is also collaborative because learners jointly achieve the result. It is interactive as it includes the activity of two or more people who are mutually engaged.

Although scaffolding is described as contingent, collaborative and interactive, Van Lier (2004) identifies six features of scaffolding that should be found in classrooms. These are:

1. Continuity: Tasks are repeated, with variations and connected to one another (e.g. as part of projects).
2. Contextual support: Exploration is encouraged in a safe, supportive environment; access to means and goals is promoted in a variety of ways.
3. Intersubjectivity: Mutual engagement and rapport are established; there are an encouragement and non-threatening participation in a shared community of practice.
4. Contingency: Task procedures are adjusted depending on actions of learners; contributions and utterances are oriented towards each other and may be co-constructed (or, see below, vertically constructed).

5. Handover/takeover: There is an increasing role for the learner as skills and confidence increase; the teacher watches carefully for the learner's readiness to take over increasing parts of the action.
6. Flow skills and challenges are in balance; participants are focused on the task and are 'in tune' with one another (Walqui, 2006, p. 165).

In reading comprehension, scaffolding refers to any help given to a learner in order to obtain meaning from text and get the overall understanding of what is described in the text. For example, before a reading comprehension lesson, a teacher can teach the meaning or pronunciation of a difficult word used in a text. Teachers can also give background knowledge of the text in order to help the students to understand the meaning of the text. At the end of the lesson, teachers can also ask students some questions which would also enhance their reading comprehension.

4. UNDERSTANDING READING COMPREHENSION FROM SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Within the sociocultural context, Snow (2002) identifies several factors that have an impact on the students' reading comprehension. These include the text, the activity, and the reader. Snow's model is presented in Fig. 2.1.

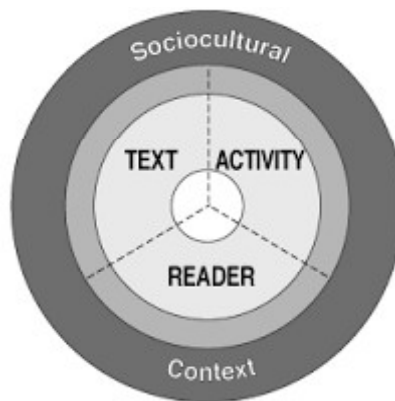


Figure 2.1: Factors that affect reading comprehension (Snow, 2002)

In the model, Snow recognizes that reading comprehension of text is the product of a complex combination of several interactive factors, and each of these factors, either individually or in combination need to be considered when designing reading interventions (Woolley, 2011). Each of these variables/factors is explained in detail in the following section.

In explaining the model, Snow states that the socio-cultural context includes all cultural practices within which the learners and learning context. The context

of the classroom and the purpose of the lessons provide a socio-cultural context within which meaning is constructed. Learners' experiences, background knowledge, and social/cultural identities are also part of the socio-cultural context because they play a role in shaping the learners' understanding of a text (Woolley, 2011). Researchers claim that readers' cultural beliefs and values influence their comprehension of the text (Kendeou & Broek, 2005). For example, readers' socio-linguistic group, or religious or political affiliation, will influence their views, thinking, and comprehension of text.

Text variable which is one of the variables that affects reading comprehension has two elements that need to be considered. The first aspect is what readers bring to the reading task in terms of their reading skill, language, cognitive processes, background knowledge, interests, goals, and understanding of the requirements of a reading task (Fletcher et al., 1990). The second aspect is textual features such as content, style, linguistic, and cognitive features as they play an important role in determining the comprehension (Fry, 2002). Therefore, the difficulty that readers experience while negotiating a particular text will be determined by the interplay of these elements.

When a reader engages in a reading activity, he/she has four different roles: (1) a code breaker, (2) a text-participator, (3) a text-user, and (4) a text analyzer (Freebody & Luke, 1990). To break the code, a reader emphasizes on the decoding of the words, and encoding of information, understanding the conventions of written, spoken and visual multimodal texts by recognizing, and using the surface features of print. Text-participation involves the making of meaning by drawing from the readers' social and cultural backgrounds and prior knowledge within literate contexts. As text-users, students understand the purposes of using texts in different ways for different cultural and social functions. The text analyzing role focuses on the ideas within the literacies.

Pardo (2004) suggests several ways that teachers could support students' reading comprehension within the sociocultural context. They should teach decoding skills and vocabulary, help students build fluency, build and activate background knowledge, motivate students, and engage them in personal responses to the text. Teachers should also provide explicit instruction of useful comprehension strategies. They should teach students to monitor and repair, use multiple strategy approaches, scaffold support, and make reading and writing connections visible to students.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH ON READING

The paper echoes sociocultural theory that learning occurs within a society through interaction between people to understand the world around them. The theory proposes that learning occurs in a social context mediated by language (Vygotsky, 1986) and scaffold or supports from peers and teachers are needed in the learning

process so that the learners can attain their ZPD. Therefore, researchers on reading comprehension should investigate the effectiveness of learning approaches that would engage and encourage the students to support one another in the learning process. Future research should also emphasize teachers' supports and their roles in monitoring students in the learning process. The focus of the research should be on how teachers and students work together to construct understanding of reading materials within the sociocultural contexts. Hence, sociocultural factors, such as students' background, educational level, complexity of the text, and their interaction with peers and teachers should not be ignored when researching reading process.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper elaborates on the definition of reading comprehension and ways of enhancing it in the sociocultural context. In doing so, the concepts of sociocultural theory which are scaffolding and ZPD are adopted as the framework to conceptualize learning process. This paper also presents some pedagogical ways through which teachers can scaffold their students to attain a ZPD level in the reading comprehension classroom. Some of the implications of implementing the sociocultural approaches in reading pedagogy and learning are also discussed. Lastly, this paper argues that there is a need for more empirical studies on reading comprehension from sociocultural perspective as social and cultural factors are indispensable in learning process.

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