VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE, CONTEXT AND READING COMPREHENSION IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT: Vocabulary knowledge can be as important as the skill of using context for interpreting meaning and this process and the teaching tools for vocabulary teaching also can lead students to enhance such skills. These contextual clues are necessary to be applied through some specific activities aimed at discovering the meaning of unknown words. Nevertheless, it is assumed that not only lexical knowledge but also a great variety of reading strategies and activities are crucial in this process making students to reflect about their own knowledge. Students can be taught to be more active as they read in the sense of applying a variety of comprehension strategies like the ones that skilled readers report as they read. Thus comprehension can, in fact, be improved construing the meaning as a whole. Some debates have been focused on whole language and researchers continually try to improve learning and teaching to meet students' needs. There is a lack of consistency of research findings in the

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area of second language reading processes, in contrast with the fast growth and the huge diversity of the English language learning population.

KEY WORDS: Vocabulary; reading; acquisition.

RESUMO: O conhecimento de vocabulário pode ser tão importante como a habilidade de se utilizar o contexto para interpretar o significado, e esse processo, e as ferramentas de ensino no ensino de vocabulário podem levar os aprendizes a melhorar tais habilidades. Essas pistas contextuais são necessárias serem aplicadas através de atividades específicas focadas na descoberta do significado das palavras desconhecidas. No entanto, presume-se que não somente o conhecimento lexical, mas também uma vasta gama de estratégias de leitura e de atividades é crucial nesse processo para que os aprendizes utilizem-se de seu próprio conhecimento. Aprendizes podem ser ensinados a serem mais ativos na leitura, no sentido de aplicar uma variedade de estratégias de compreensão, tal como os leitores mais habilidosos fazem. Assim, a compreensão pode, de fato, ser ampliada na construção do significado como um todo. Alguns debates têm sido focados na língua como um todo e pesquisadores continuamente tentam melhorar a aquisição e o ensino para atender as necessidades dos aprendizes. Há uma falta de consistência nas descobertas das pesquisas no campo do processo de leitura de uma segunda-língua, em contraste com o crescimento rápido e a grande diversidade das pessoas que aprendem a língua inglesa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Vocabulário; leitura; aquisição.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is assumed for a number of researchers that meaning does not reside in words, sentences, paragraphs, or even entire passages considered in isolation. It is taken for granted that a disconnected discourse, taken out of context, consequently will lead to a misunderstanding of the supposed real meaning to be used. Readers possess, in varying degrees, knowledge related to the context of discourse that assists comprehension to take place beyond the surface of a text. It is important to know the two types of context influencing comprehension, knowingly, quality and quantity of general knowledge readers have that are very helpful to perceive a task or purpose of comprehending a text as well as readers language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary knowledge underlying language competence and linguistic knowledge seems to be the greatest difficulty in reading effectively and that reading understanding is closely linked to vocabulary improvement. But in addition to it, textual knowledge has a very relevant role in giving evidences to improve text comprehension. Finally, it is known that recent researches have shown that these kinds of knowledge are crucial factors that skilled readers use to become a competent reader.

Although, most exercises provided for students are not enough to develop the reading skills, they are over learnt and do not improve their understanding of word meaning. There are assumptions that reading activities must be a pretext to master isolated words and grammar-only, not regarding that reading need to be engaged in the meaningful vocabulary expansion and it is the system in which language acquisition takes place by constructing meaning through the contextual clues and by the ability of inferring word meaning. Thus vocabulary can be improved and reading comprehension can be satisfactorily achieved.

Nation & Coady (1988), suggest that most of the unknown words can be inferred in text. They figure that between 60 and 80 percent of the words from a text can be inferred from context; furthermore, when students use a dictionary to check a word up, teachers know that most of these words could be inferred without dictionary use.

Dunmore, (1989) claims that it would be a very important task to provide students with tools and strategies, which could help them to read more efficiently, especially by skilled reader using contextual clues to infer the meaning of unknown words. However, it is also states that it is not clear enough how contextual clues could be effectively applied.

Conversely it is known that by directing the readers' automatic and unconscious thoughts the local coherence as well as the interconnected relationships between the linguistic elements will construe the meaning through the readers' prior, textual and vocabulary knowledge.

Dunmore, (1989) also declares that vocabulary knowledge is as important as the skill of using context for finding out meaning. In addition to it, he says that the process of discovering meaning

and the teaching tools for vocabulary teaching lead students to further enhancing of such skills. However, it is necessary to teach these contextual clues skills by applying some specific activities aimed at discovering the meaning of unknown words. Nevertheless, it is not only lexical knowledge, but also a great variety of cognitive and metacognitive knowledge that underpin a monitoring process leading readers to reflect about their own knowledge, establishing their objectives, reading expectations, raising hypothesis, making inferences and predictions, discovering the real context and construing the meaning.

1.1 Reading in a foreign or second language.

Peregoy & Boyle, (2000) argue that due to the social and economic opportunities it offers, reading is one of the most important skills to be developed among all learners. Some debates have focused on whole language or phonetics and researchers continually try to improve learning and teaching to meet students' needs. Nevertheless, the needs of English learners are seldom fully met; there is still a large gap to be filled in terms of improving their literacy.

The combination of many factors involved in this situation makes English learners' reading a complex problem to be dealt with. In general, these factors are related to the lack of relevant reading research that can be generalized to English learners. Fitzgerald (1995) declares that there is a lack of consistency of research findings in the area of second language reading processes, in contrast with the fast growth and the huge diversity of the English language learning population.

It is known that it is time to combine reading research in a coherent whole as well as theory and practice in the field of foreign and second language reading. It is also assumed the crucial importance of teaching reading in English, because there is a huge diversity among L2 learners: their age, previous educational experience, cultural heritage, social and economical status, individual differences in terms of interests, desires, aptitudes, and potentials country of origin, first language and English language and literacy development.

In addition to these factors, there are different situations and policies in classrooms serving English learners. There will be a wide variation in their L2 proficiency, reading and writing ability and also their literacy in their L1. Despite that, Fitzgerald (1995) and Goodman & Goodman (1978) claim that the process of reading in English is essentially similar for all readers, whether they are native or non-native English speakers.

This process involves how readers decode written symbols and use their linguistic knowledge underpinning pronunciation, vocabulary, and rules of the grammar and language use as a fundamental role in sentence formation and in processing of a text. The use of this knowledge allows the interaction and the continuity of the reading process, helping readers to reach the meaning of the words and reading comprehension. Furthermore, the differences between native and non-native speakers are related to the cognitive-linguistic and experiential resources the native speakers have in terms of English language proficiency, textual background knowledge and literacy abilities and experiences in their first language.

Knight, Padron and Waxman (1985) carried out a study to determine whether there were differences in either the type or frequency of cognitive strategies reported by ESL and monolingual students. They used matched passages from the Ekwall Reading Inventory Manual (Ekwall, 1979) to identify the strategies the students were using during a reading task. The study was carried out with 23 Spanish-speaking ESL students and 15 monolingual native speakers from the third and fifth grades of an inner-city public school. Through this Reading Inventory they could identify the students' strategies and realized that native English speakers used more strategies than ESL students. The authors explained that one possible cause was that ESL students may not have had time enough to develop these strategies in their first language and were transferred to English texts too quickly.

The dilemma in this case can be explained because the native English speakers, of course, were much more exposed to the language and cognitively they have much more linguistic competence than the ESL. Cognitively comprehension is an unconscious attempt for construing the meaning from the text activating, for instance, readers' cultural knowledge as prior, linguistic, textual and world knowledge

whereas metacognitive actions govern the readers' reflection about his/her own knowledge on a specific theme, his/her conscious strategic control, as well as his/her parameters, competence and capacity to respond to the text, the capacity of establishing objectives, expectations, hypothesis, solving problems, construing the global coherence.

Anderson (1991) explored the differences in strategy use. He investigated the individual differences in strategy use by adult second language learners. Students were given two forms of the Descriptive Test of Language Skills (DTSL) and The Textbook Reading Profile (TRP). After that, the students were asked how they carried out the tasks of reading. The results showed that both high and low scoring readers appeared to be using the same kinds of strategies while answering the comprehension questions; nevertheless, high scoring students seemed to be applying strategies more effectively and appropriately. For that reason, this experience indicates that strategic reading is not only a matter of knowing which strategies to use, but also that the reader must know how to apply such strategies successfully. This factor seems to contribute to the relationship between proficiency level and reading strategies used by readers.

On the other hand, Olshavsky (1977) investigated three factors that help readers achieve more successful reading: interest, proficiency and writing style. The subjects included fifteen boys and nine girls from the tenth grade English class. It was discovered that readers do use strategies and these lent support to the theoretical position that reading is a problem-solving process. This study seemed to indicate that a reader identifies problems and applies strategies to solve those problems. Readers used these strategies mainly when they were interested in the material.

Furthermore, reading reassessed as an interactive process was considered from a serial model or bottom-up process to an interactive process where reading is now viewed as an interchange between the reader and the text. This conclusion came after Widdowson, (1979) who declares that reading is a process of combining textual information with the prior knowledge or information a reader brings to a text.

Moreover, readers' strategies have lately been given more importance in second language reading and that communicative

strategies of language teaching have been the current focus of research. Reading strategies have to do with how readers look for meaning managing their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension. Thus, reading comprehension is primarily a matter of developing appropriate, efficient comprehension strategies, some of which are related to bottom-up and top-down processes.

I am presenting here just a brief description of some strategies, which can be helpful tools for classroom techniques:

a) Identify the purpose in reading: teachers need to make sure students know their purpose in reading a text;

b) Use graphemic rules and patterns to aid in bottom-up decoding (for beginning level learners): one of the difficulties students face in learning to read is realizing the relationship between spoken and written English;

c) Use efficient silent reading techniques for relatively rapid comprehension by intermediate to advanced levels: students need not be speed readers, but teachers can help them to increase efficiency by teaching a few silent reading rules;

d) Skimming: it is a very important strategy consisting of quickly reading across the text in order to get the gist. Skimming gives readers the advantage of being able to predict the purpose of the passage, the main topic or message, as well as the base for supporting ideas;

e) Scanning: a very helpful strategy, which works as a quick search for some particular information in a text;

f) Semantic mapping or clustering: this strategy groups ideas into meaningful clusters in order to help the reader to organize main topics;

g) Guessing: readers need to be encouraged to use their skills and knowledge in order to raise hypotheses and try to guess, through the context, the meaning of words, to make analogies realizing the references, a discourse relationship, to infer between the lines, to guess about a cultural reference and content messages;

h) Vocabulary analysis: this strategy helps readers to analyze words as they look for the prefixes, suffixes, familiar roots, grammatical contexts, semantic context as a topic for clues and also for cognate words;

i) Distinguish between literal and implied meanings (meanings between lines): this involves the application of sophisticated top-down processing skills. It is stated that implied meaning generally needs to be obtained from processing practical information coming from the reader's awareness and prior knowledge;

j) Take advantage of discourse markers to process relationship: this strategy has to do with the discourse markers in English which work in the relationships among ideas as expressed through phrases, clauses and sentences.

2 FINAL REMARKS

It is possible to recognise that, whilst reading is done, an analytic and synthetic process of word-level and text-level is activated, both unconscious and consciously. This process underlies cognition and metacognition, significantly assisting comprehension. These strategies are part of the reader's prior knowledge. Readers can monitor this knowledge in order to have expectations, establish objectives, raise hypotheses, predict, and make inferences in an unconscious and conscious way, through the merging of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies.

Furthermore, it is possible to understand that the explanation of the process of reconstruction of the meaning of a text is crucial to improve reading comprehension. Thus it is promising, in this work, to advocate the relevance of being aware of all aspects concerning the role of readers' cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies.

It is assumed that cognitive and metacognitive processes can improve students' comprehension through many factors, including coherence, context, information, textual factors and appropriate texts, as well as other strategies, such as the use of selective reading and pre-reading activities. Besides these factors, reading is supposed to be in conformity with the student's level and age group.

Students can become more fluent and critical readers, understanding not only the surface of a text but also having a deeper comprehension. By inferring from the context, students can learn to interpret the implicit meaning and the gaps of texts. The

understanding of cognitive and metacognitive reading processes is a promising new approach to improving comprehension: there are strategies and factors which can be learned and applied, thus successfully helping the reconstruction of the global meaning of the text and promoting the interaction between text and reader.

It is very relevant to be aware of the importance of the cognitive and metacognitive processes and what they involve. Being able to make use of appropriate methodologies, creating new ways of dealing with texts and promoting effective comprehension. Another important aspect in terms of foreign language learning is ensuring that the student has enough background information about the text to be read. This plays a vital role in enabling the students not only in reading, but also in speaking and writing. Lack of background information makes it much more difficult for students to take part in classroom discussions, as well as to produce writing compositions. As the student's prior knowledge is expanded, more opportunities can be created in aid of successful comprehension and foreign language acquisition.

In sum, students can be taught to be active as they read in the sense of using a variety of comprehension strategies like the ones that skilled readers report as they read. Thus comprehension can, in fact, be improved through reading strategies.

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