

Difficulties second-language learners of English have in understanding English written texts

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ABSTRACT

Our study investigated the difficulties second language learners of English have in understanding English written texts. We adopted a qualitative research approach and used a criterion sampling procedure to select the sample. The population of the study comprised of 206 secondary school learners in Ohangwena region in Namibia. The sample consisted of 10 learners selected through purposive sampling. We collected the qualitative data by means of in-depth face-to-face unstructured focus group interviews. Data collected from the interviews were transcribed, presented, and then analyzed using thematic analysis. Our findings indicated that second language learners of English face difficulties in understanding English written texts because of a lack of prior knowledge of the texts being read, vocabulary and the nature of the text. The study recommended teachers to employ extensive reading and the use of context clues as strategies for improving learners' vocabulary understanding. Similarly, the study further recommended activating learners' background knowledge on texts being read as well as making learners aware of complex sentence analysis.

Keywords

Learners, Prior Knowledge, Vocabulary, Reading Comprehension, Texts, Schemata Theory

INTRODUCTION

We see reading comprehension as important because not only is it fun and informative, but also because learners need it to succeed in school which ultimately leads to success in life. If we are unable to read to comprehend, we would not be able to make sense of what we are reading and as such our attempt to access printed information will be affected. According to Kendeou, McMaster and Christ (2016), the persistent challenges children, adolescents, and even adults face with reading comprehension call for concerted efforts to design instructional approaches that minimize if not prevent reading comprehension difficulties.

Despite the extensive use of English nowadays, the language remains a challenge for most learners in our schools as has been confirmed by the constant poor performance of our learners (Ministry of Education Reports on Examinations, 2015). According to these reports, the standard of written answers in the November-December examinations in English as a Second Language was deteriorating. Similarly, our day-to-day teaching of English entailed us giving our learners various activities that required them to read texts and answer questions. Many a time these learners performed poorly and whenever feedback was given, in addition to spelling mistakes, those same answers were often irrelevant and out of the topic.

Having insight into what difficulties second language learners of English have in comprehending English written texts will inform specialists in second language acquisitions such as teachers and educators to understand the underlying causes of reading comprehension difficulties and help them in developing strategies to improve reading comprehension problems. In addition, understanding the reasons behind the learners' comprehension difficulties can help curriculum developers to develop teaching materials and instructional approaches that address reading comprehension challenges learners face. Lastly, the findings on reading comprehension difficulties the learners face can also inform policy makers to allocate resources especially to curriculum developers with the aim of addressing reading comprehension difficulties.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our study used the schemata theory, which has been defined as the process by which readers blend their own previous knowledge with the text's material to grasp the text (Stott, 2001). We decided to base our research on this theory because it informs us and our readership about the importance of prior knowledge and activation of prior knowledge as well the cognitive processes involved in reading comprehension. Similarly, the schemata theory informs us about how the readers engage with the texts such as making connections and filling gaps in order to understand the written text. Researchers (, e.g., Rumelhart, 1977) have clearly argued that if a learner's schemata are poor and do not give a comprehension of the incoming data from the text, that learner will have difficulty digesting and comprehending the text because the schema guides readers on how to retrieve or construct meaning from the written text based on their existing background knowledge about that text. Based on this theory, we believe that the written text does not necessarily carry meaning but, guides the reader on how to construct that meaning. During one of our usual lessons, the learners had to read and answer a text titled 'a market day'. About half of the class did not answer the questions about the text accurately, the question is, could it be because they had no previously acquired knowledge related to the term market day? This acquired knowledge is what is referred to as background knowledge or prior knowledge which is important in text comprehension (An, 2013). Our understanding is that the learners failed to make predictions and process this information because they lacked the existing knowledge about this term. In this case, the written text presumed that the reader had no prior knowledge of the issue at hand, because of underdeveloped schemata and hence no comprehension of the text has taken place on the part of the learners. Therefore, lack of schemata activation or background knowledge of the text being read leads to the reader

misinterpreting the intended message of the text; hence, it is important for the schema to be activated in order for incoming information to be understood as intended (Shen, 2008). In addition, if students do not have enough relevant knowledge and comprehensible culture-based input to the text, they will fail to read and understand even the simplified text of a major field (Murray, 2013; Shen, 2008).

As we have alluded to earlier, in addition to the findings of our study informing teachers, educators, and curriculum developers about reading comprehension difficulties, schemata theory also informs us about the importance of activating prior knowledge. If understood well by our readership and the entire education fraternity, we believe policy makers will make informed decisions about strategies aimed at improving reading comprehension difficulties that our learners face.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been abundant research on reading comprehension, which has made us aware of the problems associated with reading comprehension. However, there are still areas that are not covered enough by the existing research on reading comprehension. Research dating as far back as 20 years (Cornoldi & Oakhill, 1996) postulate that great efforts have been made to investigate the normal processes of text comprehension. However, little interest has been taken in subjects who have reading disabilities, or these studies have relatively looked at reading problems of speakers of other languages other than English in Southern Africa (Murray, 2013). Our argument is that there is a need for more extensive research that focuses more on reading comprehension difficulties experienced by second language learners of English. We need to understand the challenges second language learners face, such as language barriers or cultural differences to develop strategies that would ease the problems associated with reading comprehension.

According to Carrell and Eisterhold (1988), traditionally, the focus of reading comprehension was on the target language itself rather than on the reader, with each word, sentence or passage of text being accepted as 'having' a meaning in itself, independent of speaker, writer, listener, or reader. We believe this is contrary to what the schemata theory advocates because according to the theory, comprehending a text should be an interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text (Shen, 2008). In the same vein, the more a reader lacks background knowledge about the topic, the more difficult it will be for the reader to understand a text (Chang, 2004; Dickinson and Neuman, 2006; Levine, 1994; Irvin, Lunstrum, Lynch-Brown & Shepherd, 1996). Background knowledge, which can also be referred to as schemata or prior knowledge, is important because it promotes reading comprehension that organizes facts about how the world works and without adequate background knowledge, reading comprehension suffers (Chang, 2004).

In addition to activation of prior knowledge as a contributing remedy for reading comprehension difficulties for second language learners of English, Vacca (2002), argues that

vocabulary knowledge was also regarded as an important factor in reading comprehension. However, Dechant and Smith (1997), warn that growth in vocabulary does not occur instantly because of many issues involved. For instance, a learner must develop precision in meaning or become acquainted with multiple meanings. A study done by Carlisle, Beeman, Davis and Spharim (1999) in Chang (2004, p.154) demonstrated that primary school native Spanish speakers' vocabulary knowledge was a good predictor of their English reading comprehension. Again, a similar study done by Schoonen, vanGelderen, de Glopper, Hulstijn, Simis and Snellings (2003) in Chang (2004, p.154) on Dutch children learning to write in English revealed that eighth graders' writing skills in the two languages (English and Dutch) were highly correlated with one another. The relevance of these two studies in our study is the fact that the studies highlight the importance of the knowledge of the first language's influence on the development of the second language. This means when a child can read and write in his/her first language (Chang, 2004 and Dickinson and Neuman, 2006) then this child can easily transfer those literacy skills (reading and writing) even vocabulary to the second language to be learned.

The question is, can this conclusion of the first language being the predictor of literacy skills of a second language be generalised to all first languages? Our study took place in Africa, Namibia where a lot of languages are spoken many of which are Bantu languages. The languages mentioned above Spanish and Dutch and even Portuguese and French share cognate words with the English language. A word is a cognate with another if both derive from the same word in an ancestral language. In other words, cognates are words in two languages that share a similar meaning. In our view, it is obvious that learners who speak these languages i.e., Spanish and Dutch once presented with English written texts may not at all struggle to figure out a few words in the English written texts because their spelling and meaning might be like the words in their own languages. In Namibia, this might not be entirely the case. The first language of the learners who took part in this study is Oshikwanyama, a Bantu language spoken by 99% of the learner population at the school and by 99.9% of all the learners who took part in this study. The problem at hand is Oshikwanyama does not share the same origin as English unlike Spanish and Dutch. This is a clear indication of how our second language learners of English have difficulties understanding English texts and how difficult it is for them to have background knowledge of the English language because our learners come to school with zero knowledge of the English language especially those that did not even go to kindergarten. This is the exact point that the schemata theory keeps pressing, the importance of background knowledge on content to be learned. In this regard, Thompson and Vaughn (2007) warns that although teaching the use of cognates is useful skill for learning word meanings, it is imperative for educators to keep in mind that cognates are only helpful if the words to be learned are already part of the student's vocabulary and the students have at least knowledge about the words in their home language. This scenario unfortunately does not help our students in any way. Therefore, this is an indication that problems of reading comprehension experienced by non-native speakers of English or those who do not speak languages that share cognates with the English language will continue to exist.

Reading comprehension research plays a crucial role in improving reading comprehension problems, further studies done indicate that the reading text also affects the learners reading comprehension (Şahin, 2013). According to Karatay (2007), a text is a meaningful, logical, and related structure composed of all structures based on language and it aims to express an opinion or experience in writing (Hartman & Hartman, 1996). There exist three types of texts in Kavcar and Oğuzkan' views (1999), the poetry text, the narrative text and informative text and for the purposes of our study, our focus is on the information text. Informative text is written to give readers new information and teaching and understanding informative texts are more difficult than narrative texts because of their structure (Presley, 2000; Saenz & Funchs, 2002). For instance, the more complex and abstract the informative text is, the more difficulty the readers have in comprehending it and equally so, the easier and clearer the informative text, the less difficulty the readers will have in comprehending it.

METHODOLOGY

Our study is a case study which was qualitative in nature. Case studies offer detailed descriptions of the actual nature of a phenomenon, which is why this type of study was chosen. The population of the study comprised of 206 secondary school learners in Ohangwena region, Namibia. The sample consisted of 10 learners selected through purposive sampling drawn from the population. The qualitative data was collected by means of in-depth face-to-face unstructured focus group interviews. Data collected from the interviews were transcribed, presented, and then analyzed using thematic analysis. Before the data collection commenced, we sought permission from the director of education in Ohangwena region. After the permission was granted, we informed the learner participants about the nature of the study, the informed consent forms which the learners signed as well as informed them about their rights to withdraw from the study at any time and assured the learner participants that their identities would not be disclosed. We employed a reading comprehension test which was an information text and focus group interviews as the research instruments. First, we administered a comprehension test to the learner participants with the purpose of gauging their reading comprehension skills. Second, after this test, we interviewed the learner participants to find out their views regarding their performance in the reading comprehension test. The responses from the interviews are transcribed and thematically analysed.

RESULTS

After the data collection process, the responses from the learner participants from the interviews were arranged and categorized based on the most occurring themes. The interview served as the communication tool the learner participants used to communicate the results of their reading comprehension test performances. Therefore, the themes that emerged from the learners' responses in the interview were based on their performance in the reading comprehension test.

The main issue of this study was to find out what made reading comprehension of English texts difficult for second language learners. The learner participants who took part in this study said

a lot however the main theme that surfaced from their responses regarding what made English texts difficult to understand were unfamiliar vocabulary, the reading text and lack of background knowledge. The table below depicts the main theme and subthemes that emerged from the data collected.

Table 1 displays the major theme and subthemes that developed from the collected data.

THEME	SUB-THEMES
Theme 1: Why it is difficult to understand English texts.	1.1 vocabulary
	1.2 the reading text
	1.2 lack of background knowledge

Table 1 displays the major theme and subthemes that developed from the collected data.

Theme 1: Why is it difficult to understand English texts?

In our effort to find out the difficulties second language learners have in understanding English written texts, the following sub-themes emerged: vocabulary, the reading text and lack of background knowledge.

Sub-theme 1.1: Vocabulary

Most of the participants in this study who were learning English expressed a lack of comprehension of English texts. They claimed that the English language was challenging to grasp and that most writings employed "bombastic phrases." For example "*The texts have bombastic words*". The majority of the learner participants used this phrase to describe challenging or unfamiliar vocabulary. In addition, these learners said that the materials they were required to work on frequently had several new terms "*We do not understand the words in the text*". This is exactly what the schema theory emphasises, that, if a reader lacks the schema or knowledge about the world then the reader will have difficulty comprehending what is written (Shen, 2008). In most cases, these readers waste a lot of time attempting to decipher the meanings of the text's foreign terms, which makes the reading process worse because they have nothing to stimulate their thinking because the word is new to them. In an event where the learner has some prior knowledge about the word, the learner activates the schema and supplements the information related to the material during the reading process, and when the schema is activated, it selects the most appropriate part to explain the reading material (An, 2013). However, if the schema is underdeveloped, the consequence is a breakdown in text comprehension. Eskey and Grabe (1988) provide credence to the idea that readers, particularly struggling readers, are word bound. They repeatedly read the passages in which the new words appear when they encounter a foreign language. According to the top-down model of reading, being word bound is an indication that these learners are unable to employ context to enhance understanding (Rumelhart, 1977), a strategy that can be used to comprehend texts. These learners only comprehended texts when they lacked difficult terms, employed ordinary

language that was easily understood, or employed simple English with simple words that they already knew well.

In this regard, Aebersold and Field (1997) argue that if the number of information words in a text is small and their content is not important to the main message, then these words may not hinder comprehension. However, if many of the keys words are unfamiliar, readers may not be able to comprehend the text.

Sub-theme 1.2 The reading text

The English reading comprehension test that the learner participants wrote was an informative text that asked about a specific topic and was aimed at assessing learners' abilities to comprehend and analyze factual information. The learner participants who took part in this study indicated that it was difficult to understand the messages that texts are trying to convey for example one participant said, "*the text has complicated deep English*". Some participants indicated that "*sometimes the title is also difficult*".

The complexity of English texts prevented them from understanding what was written. Some learners reported having little trouble understanding written English, while others stated they had difficulty even with simple passages. Learners reported a deeper comprehension of the material when they read texts that they liked, the ones whose titles interested them, the ones whose contents corresponded to what they already knew just as postulated by the schema theory, or the ones whose terms were familiar.

Bernhardt, Kamil, Muaka and Pang (2003) argue that when choosing books for learners to read, learners' interests should be considered. This is especially important for English second language learners. We believe that when learners read topics of interest to them, they develop the desire to want to read and the will to read more. In addition, the more learners engage in reading tasks, the more they encounter different words, become familiar with them and get a chance to observe and see how, for instance, a single word can be used in many different contexts to mean many different things.

The National Reading Panel (2000) posits that text comprehension is improved when teachers use a combination of reading comprehension techniques such as question answering, question generation and summarization. When students are able to use such techniques successfully, they perform better in recall, answering questions, generating questions and summarizing texts. The National Reading Panel (2000) also found that intensive professional development is necessary so that teachers can learn to use reading comprehension strategies effectively. Based on the Panel's findings, teachers should receive formal instruction on strategies to teach reading comprehension as early as pre-service.

Sub-Theme 1.3 Lack of background knowledge

In this study, all learner participants indicated that the overall English comprehension test they wrote was not generally difficult despite the fact that it contained some difficult or unfamiliar words for example some participants said "*The text talks about what we hear every day*". Of

great interest in this study is that the learner participants reported that the text was familiar and was about what they already knew “*We have studied this topic in History*”. The title of the reading text was “Refugees”. According to the learner participants, English texts can be difficult to grasp when the title is difficult, unfamiliar, the context had difficult vocabulary, and when there is no prior information to relate to. It is also worth noting here that language and the type of texts to be read could be the major causes of text difficulty. When new unknown terms arise in texts, they clearly impede learners' understanding (Shen, 2008). Similarly, if the material is unfamiliar to the learners, or if it is not intriguing or liked by the learners (as some learners have put it), all of these factors might influence how the learners will perceive the text.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons why second language learners of English found it difficult to understand English texts. The learner participants highlighted that English texts are typically challenging due to unfamiliar language, unusual subject content, or a lack of prior knowledge of the content being read. Research regarding the issue of reading and comprehension stresses the one thing that we believe should be emphasised by teachers in their language classrooms. The issue of prior knowledge of content to be taught is essential in reading comprehension (Murray, 2013). In Smith's (1978) view, prior knowledge of word usage in English facilitates word processing by reducing the number of alternatives and consequently the amount of information required for the identification of words. As teachers, we need to know how to tap into what our learners already know in order to build on that foundation. Sharing the same sentiments is Murray (2013) who argues that students learn a second language best when they are able to draw on their prior knowledge of their first language (Murray, 2013). The learner participants also mentioned the issue of text interest which has a strong influence on learning. Individuals display more persistence, engagement, and positive effect toward tasks that they are interested in. Then comes the issue of unfamiliar vocabulary or the use of ‘bombastic words’ as the learner participants in this study highlight. Second language learners are bound to meet many unfamiliar words in the course of their studies and they are also expected to cope with the reading materials in content areas subjects, such as history and still pass in the reading comprehension examination. The problem of vocabulary is further confounded by the fact that vocabulary learning is not the top priority in language classes, and is not even considered in content areas subjects (Zhang & Anual, 2008). The role of vocabulary in reading comprehension is intriguing and complex and given the complexity of processing involved in comprehending text, a high level of word knowledge may be needed (Beck, Mckeown and Omanson, 1987). Researchers argue that inability to recognize words in text and the presence of high density of unknown words in a text may impair comprehension (Nation, 2001).

With regard to the issue of the nature of the text to be read, English texts usually contain texts on cultural events or specific topics that expect learners to identify main ideas, understand cause and effect, identify fact or opinion as well as making inferences in addition to interpreting complex sentences. All these factors may affect the learners' reading comprehension of the text depending on how the learner perceives the text. Addressing this problem may require teachers to make learners aware of complex sentences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings revealed that understanding of English texts poses challenges for second language learners because of the following factors: unfamiliar vocabulary, types of texts to be read, lack of background knowledge. Therefore teachers and policy makers need to develop effective instructional methods such as explicit vocabulary instruction, complex sentence analysis skills and reading skills in order to improve learners' comprehension abilities.

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