

A Study on Students' Ability in Literal and Inferential Comprehension of English Texts

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ABSTRACT

Comprehension is of at least two different types, literal and inferential comprehension. Literal comprehension is roughly defined as the understanding of messages and are explicitly stated in the text being read. Inferential comprehension is roughly defined as the understanding of messages implicitly started in the text being read, or messages which are not stated but implied. Inference is a process by which readers use hints to gather information. In making inferences, we go beyond surface details and read between the lines to reach information logically. Factual details in what we read provide the basis of our knowledge. But not every bit of information is easily apparent or clearly stated. Hints or suggestions may appear that you have to build upon with your own knowledge and experience in order to understand something fully. because information is not always stated in exact terms, we must supply our own information from details or ideas that are only suggested by the writer. we can't always be certain that what we supply is absolutely right. but if we follow hunches that are based on evidence, we can be fairly sure about some things, even if they are only hinted at. Literal comprehension is considered easier than that of inferential comprehension. It is easier do to the fact that since the message is explicitly stated, is does not require longer time and much effort to decode it (Weber, 1980).

Keywords: Literal, Inferential, Reading Comprehension

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Reading

Reading plays an important role in human life. It cannot be separated from human activity because by reading people can get knowledge. About reading, Tarigan (1983:7) also says that: "membaca adalah suatu proses yang dilakukan serta dipergunakan oleh pembaca untuk memperoleh pesan yang hendak disampaikan oleh penulis melalui media kata-kata atau bahasa tulis". It means that reading is a process done and used by reader to get message which is presented and given by the writer in written form. The reader should understand the message. It can be concluded that reading will be useful communication if we understand the message in the text that has been expressed by the writer through words or written language.

According to Zinth (1979:8) reading is like conversation between the writer and the reader, like someone who is talking; the writer is trying to convey the message to another person. So, a person must read well if she or he wants to broaden their experience, develop the ideas, solve the problem and acquire understanding and ways of thinking, all of which are innate in their personal growth. In our society reading is one of the most important skill. It affects virtually every aspect of our life. Reading is a skill that must be developed and must be acquired.

In relation to the definition of reading, Twining (1991:120) says: "reading is an active process in which the reader has some purpose and is consciously engaged in construction some meaning, some understanding of material being read". It is clear that reading is not only examining the information of the text but also the activity. For example, people read to solve problem like how to fix a carburettor how to remove a stain or how to refinish a piece of furniture, or sometimes people read a book just for pleasure. So, they select their reading material according to their particular interest. Marksheffel (1966:12) gives another definition to support this statement. He says that "reading is highly complex purposeful thinking process engaged by the entire organism while acquiring knowledge involving new ideas, solving problem or relaxing thorough the interpretation of printed symbols.

From the above definitions, the writer may conclude that reading is not a simple activity. It is more than pronouncing words orally or changing the written code to the spoken one. To read means to comprehend to whatever printed material will serve their purpose. So, in reading we are trying to grasp meaning, understand or comprehend meaning from printed materials.

Kinds of Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the goal of instruction in reading. Although word recognition is a means to an end, reading comprehension represents the major goal or end product of reading.

Comprehension is divided into four sub-skill categories: (1) literal, (2) interpretive, (3) critical, and (4) words in context. Being able to understand what one reads is not, in fact, a singular cognitive process. But rather an integrated thought process.

Being able to understand what one reads is not, in fact, a singular cognitive process, but rather and integrated thought process. This relatively unexplained cognitive area, called reading comprehension, is easier to manage for instructional purposes if approached through a more didactic treatment of invented or hypothesized sub-skill areas. Topics such as schema, metacognition, and specific learning strategies are beginning to appear in instructional materials on a limited basis. However, it is difficult to delineate clearly the related assessment and instructional procedures with any assured degree of empirical accuracy.

The rather conservative grouping of comprehension skill presented on the following pages is based upon the reading materials and curricula currently used in many schools. Incorporated within the recommended instructional practices are the implications of a substantive body of research focusing on reading comprehension.

In recent years, many researches have been focused upon the comprehension as a composite of skills which, as a result, requires reading comprehension to be preceived as an evolution of reader applied skills. In addition to the reader's decoding fluency, his or her affective characteristics, prior knowledge, and cultural background impinge upon comprehension (Irwin, 1991). Tierney (1990) refers to reading comprehension as a constructive process involving engagement and situation-based decisions.

The comprehension process requires the interaction of multiple-skill mastery and, at times, a simultaneous application of skill competencies. The holistic, or interactive, skill model is an important consideration in interpreting data and planning instruction.

According to Choate and Rakes (1989:148), "Reading" infers comprehension. In fact, without comprehension, reading is little more than pronouncing words. Reading means interpreting print, either orally or silently, with understanding. Letter and word recognition in the absence of meaning is not reading. There is, in general, more similarity than difference between existing list of major skill components of reading comprehension or comprehension taxonomies. The grouping may vary, but the overall composition of skill recommended is comparable with many global representations of comprehension curricula. The use of four major subskill categories helps make assessment and programming manageable within an educational setting.

Literal Comprehension

Generally considered the most basic or entry-level comprehension skill, literal comprehension include reading and understanding the lines of text to recognise detail and sequence of events. Burns, Roe and Ross (1988) explain the literal level in terms of textually explicit meaning, which involves recognizing the sequence and facts that are explicitly stated in the text as well as answering factual questions.

Understanding sequential order of events is a somewhat more difficult task than factual recall for some readers. It requires students to remember detail but do so in an organized or sequential manner. This skill is particularly necessary when reading science, social studies, and other content subjects. Educators are occasionally criticized for focusing exclusively on the recall of facts (Guszk, 1967).

Another concern is that too much time is spent testing for mastery of details and not in teaching students to read for details. Although the literal level is the easiest of the four areas of comprehension to teach, it should not be overemphasized.

As stated above there are four areas of comprehension: literal, interpretive, critical, and words-in-contexts. The following are a short account of the two areas (critical and words-in-contexts comprehension), while the other two areas will be explained in the next sections.

Critical comprehension results from reading *behind* and *beyond* the lines to evaluate the readers and their reading acts. In this respect, critical comprehension is reading for trans licit meaning. That is, critical comprehension transcends and encompasses literal and interpretative comprehension, prior experiences, and the reading process itself. Critical reading skill involve the evaluation of written material and are considered by some to represent a still higher level of thinking (Burns, Roe and Ross, 1988). Those skills are intended to develop questioning and thinking readers.

The final category, words-in-contexts, is included with comprehension skill because of its direct contribution to a meaningful comprehension curriculum. The use of context is essential to all three types of comprehension-literal, interpretive and critical. Understanding words in context represents a continuation of the word meaning and other word recognition skill. It is the surrounding words that define and expand the meaning of individual words. Problem readers may be able to decode in isolation or call words orally. It is only when they can understand words in the context of each page that the full usefulness of reading is realized. Without the ability to use context successfully, a reader has severely limited comprehension.

Interpretive Comprehension

Interpretive comprehension is acknowledged as reading between the line. That is, interpretive reading is comprehending the information implied in the text, or understanding implicit meaning. Some authors refer to this second area of comprehension as inferential reading comprehension (Cunningham & Moore, 1989; Lapp & Flood, 1986).

Collins and Cheek (1989) state that interpretive skill require a higher level of thinking than that of literal skill. Interpretive comprehension includes the tasks of finding main ideas and cause and effect relationships, drawing conclusions, and summarizing from printed materials.

The major difference between literal and interpretive comprehension is that the second requires the reader to rely more heavily upon factors that are not always directly stated in text. The student must synthesize information from prior knowledge, content and subtle language differences, such as syntactic and semantic variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Ability in Identifying Literal Comprehension

Based on the data collected, the total scores obtained by the III^A students are 2585. If this score is divided by the total number of students and be counted in percentage formula, we can get the following result: $2585 : 32 = 80.78\%$. The total scores obtained by the III^B students are 2465. If it is divided by the total number of students, then be counted in percentage we can get the following result: $2465 : 30 = 82.17\%$.

By using the computation of percentage technique above, the mean scores for the two classes (III^A and III^B) can be computed as follows: $80.78\% + 82.17\% : 2 = 162.95\% : 2 = 81.42\%$. We can conclude, then that the students' ability in identifying the literal comprehension of English reading texts is 81.47%. In other words, their ability in mastering the English simple tenses can be categorized as "good" (81.47%).

Students' Ability in Identifying Inferential Comprehension

Based on the data, the total scores obtained by the III^A students are 2000. If this score is divided by the total number of students, we can get the following result: $2000 : 32 = 62.50\%$. The total scores obtained by the III^B students are 1940. If this score is divided by the total number of students, we can get the following result: $1940 : 30 = 64.67\%$.

By using the computation of percentage technique above, the mean scores for the two classes (III^A and III^B) can be computed so follows: $62.50\% + 64.67\% : 2 = 127.17\% : 2 = 63.58\%$. We can conclude then that the students' ability in identifying interferential comprehension of English reading texts is only 63.58%. In other words, their ability in mastering the English simple tense can be categorized as "enough" (63.58%).

Identification of the Most Difficult Comprehension

In analysing the student's difficulty in identifying the literal and inferential comprehension, the analysis is done as follows. The total number of students in class III^A and III^B are 62 students. The total numbers of test items are 30 in all. Classes III^A and III^B are given both literal and inferential comprehension tests. The mean score of the obtained mean score for both classes determined which kind of

comprehension is more or the most difficult (literal comprehension or inferential comprehension).

The table below shows the score of students that has been counted in percentage formula.

Class	Literal Comprehension	Inferential Comprehension
III ^A	80.78%	62.50%
III ^B	82.17%	64.67%
Mean Score	81.47%	63.58%
Criterion	Good	Enough/Medium

Based on the above table, it is found that out of the two kinds of comprehension (literal and inferential comprehension), the most difficult comprehension that the students feel difficult to identify is inferential comprehension, which get lowest score (63.58%). The literal comprehension is easier than the inferential comprehension. The score for their identification of the literal comprehension is 81.47%, which can be categorized as good identification.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the preceding discussions on the students' ability in identifying the literal and inferential comprehension of English reading texts, it can be concluded that the third-year students of SMA Negeri 2 Tondano can comprehend well the literal aspects of English reading texts. It has been found out that their ability is 81.47%. This is a good indicator that they can read well the texts given. The same case holds for the inferential comprehension of reading texts. They can also comprehend the English texts inferentially with the level of enough or medium (63.58%) It is clear that the inferential comprehension is more difficult to identify than the literal one.

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