

A Study on the Factors That Affect Turkish Students' Reading Comprehension Skills

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1. Introduction

Reading is considered to be one of the most prominent skills as most students and teachers are required to do their academic reading in English. It is obvious that reading is one of the most important activities in any language class, both as a source of information and extending one's knowledge of the language. The main difference in the attitude to reading in recent years has been the emphasis on providing guidance for students in developing their reading skills and using some strategies rather than merely expecting it to develop with its own accord.

Above all, a person who wants to understand or to make comments on any passage must be "a good reader". Who is a good reader then? A good reader is a person who can only use his mind to figure out the main message of the passage as long as possible in the course of reading process. That is why; using time efficiently in exams is a very important factor for success. There is a good saying concerning reading: "*Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.*" So we can have the opinion that the more one reads, the quicker he will be able to understand the material he reads like a sportsman who makes regular exercises to stay fit all the time.

Reading comprehension tests are used in assessing the comprehension of readers in general and EFL students in particular. There are variety of tests that are used in measuring different reading skills such as pictures and sentence matching, true-false tests, close tests, multiple-choice tests and retelling. Among these tests multiple-choice tests are widely used as objective tests, particularly to measure reading comprehension, but whether or not these tests assess comprehension of the reader is also a question since there are so many factors that affect the understanding of the reader. These factors occur before, after or generally during reading process. Multiple-choice tests are an inadequate means of assessing the

comprehension of readers in general and of ESL/EFL students in particular. In fact, comprehension is a complex phenomenon and cannot be measured by objective tests alone. On the other hand, it is known that a multiple-choice test can offer a useful way of testing reading comprehension, and the extent to which a test is successful in measuring what it sets out to measure depends largely on the effectiveness of each of the items used.

In Turkey, multiple-choice tests are widely used in various examinations such as OSS Foreign Language Exam, TOEFL, Foreign Language Proficiency Examination for State Employees in order to measure student's reading comprehension in a limited time. However, it can be said that most of the students are incapable of being successful in these exams since they don't have much knowledge about essential reading and learning strategies. Probably they have enough language capacity, but unless they are aware of these strategies, they will not use their current capacity to be successful. Therefore, in this study, some basic reading and learning strategies are given so as to help those who want to improve their reading comprehension by practising them in the exams above mentioned.

Reading is thinking and it usually requires a good deal of effort and concentration. You should have a specific purpose and positive attitude each time you read something. Reading for information, enjoyment and knowledge is rather different from reading comprehension because reading in a test requires speed and quick scanning and understanding. You must be well-prepared for the test and it also requires a different way of studying.

There has been an emphasis on the development of the reading skills and justification for this is not difficult to find. In many countries foreign languages are learned by a large number of students who will have little or no opportunity to converse with native speakers, but who will have access to literature and periodicals or scientific and technical magazines or newspapers written in the language they are learning. Most of these people will need such publications to assist them with further studies or others will wish to enjoy reading in another language in their leisure time in order to keep themselves in touch with the wider world.

These are some of the questions asked about reading: Can we teach foreign-language by means of reading? Do students learn it without teaching, drawing on their literacy in their native language? Can students develop their reading skills?

When learning to read our mother tongue, we come to recognise the shapes of the writing of our native language and become skilled at reading these in the direction our language prescribes. We also learn to recognise certain patterns of arrangements such as paragraph division and become familiar with punctuation marks and their functions. When we come to read in another language, we normally understand what the process of reading signifies. We are alert to the fact

that reading involves recognition of certain patterns of symbols and they represent particular sounds which we use or hear.

2. Problem

Reading comprehension is of great importance not only in one's native language but also in his/her foreign language. Thus, a foreign language learner usually needs to read in both of them. There are several factors that affect the reading comprehension of people in foreign language. Since there are many differences between Turkish and English, one cannot easily figure out all of them in a very short time. It is suggested that the more a person reads in the target language, the better he can improve his reading skills by using and developing some reading strategies that help him read faster and understand better.

There are also some questions to be answered about reading in foreign language:

- Do students learn reading without being taught some strategies?
- Is reading a necessary preliminary to learn oral skills?
- If reading is something that can be developed after some time, what are the main strategies to improve reading comprehension of Turkish students?
- How can a language learner be a good reader in the target language?
- Which factors affect the reading comprehension of the readers before reading, during reading and after reading?

While students are learning to read their mother tongue, they become to recognise the shapes of the writing of the native language and become skilful at reading these in the direction that the language prescribes them. On the other hand, there is little disagreement among teachers and researchers that in order to learn to read, a child needs a number of abilities and various types of knowledge. Most importantly, a reader must be able to understand discourse, or speech. The ability to comprehend in one's mother tongue is much more complex an achievement than is commonly recognised.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to show the factors that affect the reading comprehension of Turkish students who are learning English as a second language.

Students who have acquired reading ability in their native language are assumed to transfer their reading and learning skills to second language reading; thus, in this study how these skills in native language are used for better reading comprehension in second language has been given with examples. Generally, multiple-choice tests are used in examinations such as OSS Foreign Language Exam, TOEFL, Foreign Language Proficiency Examination for State Employees to measure student's reading comprehension within a certain limited time. However, most of the Turkish students cannot be successful in these exams because they don't have enough knowledge about basic reading strategies. They usually say that although they know the essential grammatical patterns in English, they lack using them while solving the questions concerning reading comprehension passages. Therefore, in this study, some basic reading and learning strategies are given in order to help those who want to improve their reading comprehension by practising them in these exams.

Reading comprehension also plays a great role in word meaning acquisition during reading process. Therefore, the effects of prior topic and enabling concept knowledge are very important. Reading comprehension level and prior main concept knowledge facilitates vocabulary learning from context. So, there is the need for a reconceptualization of context to take into account the mental representation that readers construct in addition to the printed text that surrounds an unfamiliar word.

4. Method and Scope of the Study

Reading can be considered as a general skill in any language, but in this study it is handled as advanced reading. Generally, in this sense, Turkish students are not capable of the basic reading skills and most of them cannot develop a strategy while reading advanced passages which seem to be too complex to understand.

An experimental method is used to get the results according the students' answer to the tests and the questionnaire. The results given in the tables are not certain, but they can give some clues about developing reading skills.

The students who are attending in English Language Teaching Department at Selçuk University are given two different tests including Turkish reading comprehension questions and English reading comprehension questions. At first, they are wanted to answer English reading comprehension questions and then Turkish reading comprehension questions. Approximately 300 students from first, second, third and fourth classes have had these tests. There were 25 multiple-choice questions related to the reading passages in each test. After evaluating their test scores, the same students have been given a questionnaire including 20 different questions. Most of the questions are related with the difficulties they had

while answering the questions in both tests. Some questions have also aim to determine their attitudes to both English and Turkish reading skills lessons from their primary school years till university education.

In this study, the factors which affect these students' understanding and answering the advanced reading passage questions taken from certain exams are determined and some strategies which can help them understand faster and better will be suggested.

5. Conclusion

With the flood of written information available, fast and effective reading has become a so important. Thus, most of us read in order to learn something. However, people don't have much time for reading. Sometimes we seem to read a piece of text, but we often ignore using some strategies during the reading process. This means that even though we waste our time for reading, we can only have little understanding about what is read. That is why, we lack of the essential reading and learning skills. Therefore, this study gives a great deal of information about effective reading and reader's strategies to comprehend a passage or any other reading material as fast as possible.

In this study, we have tried to show the importance of reading comprehension and the factors that affect the reading comprehension of Turkish students who want to improve their proficiency in English especially in reading. After evaluating the results of the sample tests, we discovered that the students at the third classes are the most successful of all the students. Most of these students, who have had good test results in both tests, are the ones who read much in Turkish as much as in English. They are also much more interested in reading than the others. In general, they have enough knowledge about the basic reading styles and comprehension strategies. That is why; they not only read faster but also understand better than the others. This I shows that if a person likes reading and uses the basic reading and comprehension strategies during the reading activities, he/she can understand better and faster both in his/her native language and in English.

In particular, a reader for whom English is a second or third language may have problems at first. Learning to read is a complex challenge, but it is far more difficult for a learner who lacks knowledge in any or all of the following areas:

1. the vocabulary and grammar of the language to be read (i.e. knowing how to use the language effectively);
2. discourse structure (e.g. narrative structure);
3. cultural conventions (e.g. knowing that it is bad manners to steal porridge);

4. general knowledge (e.g. knowing that a straw house will be weaker than a wooden house).

If we provide students with appropriate scaffolding when they are reading challenging texts, it won't hurt; and reading English will become the pleasurable and rewarding experience it should be.

The exact nature of the universal processes and the linguistic levels on which reading is different or the same in different languages is not clear at this point. Goodman (1973) asserts that the reading process will be much the same for all languages with minor variations to accommodate the specific characteristics of the language.

The present study has a number of limitations. First, because of the in-depth nature of the analysis, it was impossible to study the reading performances of a large number of subjects. The results are, therefore, suggestive rather than definitive, and cannot be generalised to other populations without qualification. Second, it is possible that the elicitation instruments have produced behaviours which are peculiar to those tools, and not in fact representative of the subject's reading behaviours.

The study also involves reading in English as a second language. Theorists have assumed that reading is basically the same in all languages, and teachers have developed methods and materials to reflect research insights into L1 reading. The results of this study suggest that, while the assumption of universals may be justified, the role of language proficiency may be greater than it has previously been assumed. Clarke (1978) notes that the presence of a "language competence ceiling" tampers the good L1 reader in his/her attempts to use effective reading behaviours in the target language.

The results obtained in this study show that if the students are highly interested in reading lessons, they can be more successful than the ones who have lack of interest to reading lessons. Furthermore, if the students possess high English reading comprehension level, their Turkish reading comprehension level will also be higher and the opposite of this is also true.

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Summary

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Most of us often seem to read a piece of text, but we usually ignore using essential reading strategies during reading process. Thus, in this study a great deal of information was given about effective reading strategies to comprehend a passage or any other reading material in both native and foreign language. This study aims to show the significance of reading comprehension and the factors that affect the reading comprehension of Turkish students who want to improve their proficiency while reading an English material. It has been discovered that especially third class students, whose test results were better than the others in both tests, are the ones who read much in Turkish as much as in English. According to their answers to the questions in the questionnaire, it was understood that these students are much more interested in reading than the others who failed. In general, the successful

students have enough knowledge about the basic reading comprehension strategies. That is why; they not only read faster but also understand better. Consequently, it can be concluded from the results given in the tables that if a foreign language learner likes reading and makes use of these strategies during reading activities, he/she can understand better and faster both in his native language and in English. The findings in this study are suggestive rather than definitive.