

Insights Into L₂ Reading: The Effects Of Content Knowledge On Reading Comprehension Of Egyptian University Students

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Abstract—Reading plays a crucial role in educational settings and outside these realms. There is, however, a growing number of English language learners who are experiencing difficulties in reading comprehension more than any other linguistic skill. This study investigates the effects of different EFL materials on (82) university students' reading comprehension skill. The first type is culturally familiar to the subjects (based on the nationality of the text's author, and the second is culturally non-familiar (based on the western culture). After reading each text, the subjects were asked to perform on four types of questions: true/false, vocabulary, interpretation and understanding. They were, also, interviewed individually to reflect on their performance through structured questionnaires. The study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) To what extent is EFL reading comprehension perfected in relation to learners' associated language education level? ; (2) What effect do culturally familiar and non - familiar materials have on university students reading comprehension?; (3) What are the strategies that 'successful readers' use to comprehend the two written texts?; and, relatedly, what are the strategies used by 'less successful readers' to comprehend the two written texts?; (4) To what extent do these strategies differ from one written text to another; and from one level to another? The data analysis had a quantitative and qualitative, interpretative part. Both types provide us with significant insights that may help us understand the reading behaviours of our students. Based on these insights, conclusions were made and pedagogical suggestions were provided.

Keywords—L₂ reading; strategies, content schemas and L₂ reading comprehension.

1. Introduction

As Silberstein (1987) points out, teachers trained in the audiolingual approach were taught that language was speech; reading was simply speech written down. Accordingly, reading instruction could proceed only after students had developed a working knowledge of the spoken language. The 'natural' order of language instruction, then, was taken to be listening, speaking, reading and writing. One result of the structuralist dogma that language is speech has been a relative lack of interest in the problems of the advanced student of English as a foreign language for whom the ability to read the written language with good comprehension at reasonable rates may be at least as important as the ability to converse.

Reading has always held an important place in foreign and second language programs. It is now seen in a different light, namely 'as communication', as a mental process, as the reader's active participation in the creation of meaning, as a manipulation of strategies, as a receptive rather than as a passive skill. There are some reasons for including reading skill development as a vital part of the second language curriculum: (1) reading is still essential in the teaching of literature, which remains an important goal in many programs; (2) it is a skill that can be maintained after students' complete formal language study; and (3) it fosters the development and refinement of literacy skills. By the mid- to late 1970s, many researchers began to argue for a theory of reading based on work by Goodman (1967, 1985) and Smith (1971, 1979, 1982). In this regard, Grabe (1991) points out that while the 1970 s was a time of transition from one dominant view of reading to another, the 1980 s was a decade in which much ESL reading theory and practice extended Goodman and Smith's, perspectives on reading. At the same time, second language research began to look more closely at other first language reading research for the insights that it could provide.

Most of our current views of second language reading are shaped by research on first language learners. This is true in part because L₁ research has a longer history, L₁ student populations are much more stable, and cognitive psychology has seen comprehension research as a major domain of their field. For these reasons, L₁ reading research

has made impressive progress in learning about the reading process. It makes good sense, then, for L₂ researchers to consider what L₁ research has to say about the nature of the fluent reading process and the development of reading abilities (Grabe, 1991). In this regard, Zvetina (1987), correctly, points out that many of the insights gained into the psycholinguistic components of the reading act have been gleaned from native language research, and they have often been helpful, and even essential to forming a concept of the L₂ reading process. It must be kept in mind, however, that native language research studies were, mainly conducted on children or native young learners. The question that forces itself here, then, is "Is it fair and pedagogically appropriate to apply the findings of such research to adult non-native speakers of English?" It is my contention that we need to conduct more research on L₂ learners to understand not only the nature of reading behavior but, more importantly, the internal mental machinery guiding the observable behavior.

1.1. Research Questions

This study investigates the effects of different EFL materials on university students' reading comprehension. Two types of materials: culturally familiar (based on the nationality of the text's author) and culturally non-familiar (based on western culture) were tried on two experimental groups sampled out from first and fourth years English department students enrolled at the faculty of Arts, Menoufia University, Egypt. This study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) To what extent is EFL reading comprehension perfected in relation to learners' associated language education level? ; (2) What effect do culturally familiar and non - familiar materials have on university students reading comprehension?; (3) What are the strategies that 'successful readers' use to comprehend the two written texts?; and, relatedly, what are the strategies used by 'less successful readers' to comprehend the two written texts?; (4) To what extent do these strategies differ from one written text to another; and from one level to another?

1.2. Methodology

1.2.1. Subjects of the Study

In the first phase of the study, 100 university students participated in the training session in which they were trained to read and answer questions similar to the ones used in this study. In the second phase, these students were divided equally into two groups according to their assigned academic levels in their faculty. Eighteen students, nine from each group, however, didn't complete the tests for various reasons. So, their scores were not counted. Accordingly, each group was made of 41 students. More specifically, group (1), representing the beginning readers, was made of 32 female students, and 9 male students. They were enrolled in the first year; department of English, faculty of Arts; Menoufia university. These students' total

score in the General Secondary Certificate ranged from 87% to 92%. Group (2), representing the advanced readers, was made of 26 female students and 15 male students. They were enrolled in the fourth year, department of English of the same faculty. These students' grades during their academic study in the department of English ranged from "Very Good" to "Good". All subjects were randomly selected. They, willingly, participated in the experiment, and considered their participation a real learning experience. It may be important, also, to mention that all subjects were of a homogeneous group in the sense that they all had their secondary school education in Egypt, and they all read Arabic as their first language, and English as a second language.

1.2.2. Instruments

The instruments of this study consisted of the following tasks:

1.2.2.1. Questionnaire (A)

A questionnaire was constructed to elicit information from each subject in both groups. All subjects were to report truthfully how important reading in English is for them; how difficult it is; how much they enjoy reading in English; what they read in English; how many hours of reading per week they do in English; how much they enjoy reading in Arabic; what they read in Arabic; how many hours of reading per week they do in Arabic; and what they do when they don't understand an English written texts and, also, an Arabic text.

1.2.2.2. Reading Task (1)

An Egyptian short story was chosen and used in this research. Its author is the Egyptian author 'Mahmoud Taymour'. The story was called 'The Enemy'. It was accompanied by four types of questions: 1) True / False questions (N = 8); 2) Vocabulary (N = 5); 3) interpretation (N = 4); and 4) Understanding (N = 8). The story was chosen by the author since it was believed that because of its components, it can be a good text for measuring the subjects' degree of understanding and pinpointing their strategies. All subjects were required to attempt all questions and provide responses on the answer sheets. Administration of this task for each of the two groups was completed in one session. Although no specific time for reading and answering the questions was determined, each subject was asked to report how much time he / she needs to read and understand the text. The entire test was scored on a 0-50 mark scale. Each correct answer in all types of questions was worth 2 marks. Each student, in both groups, was evaluated by two raters. Answers with scores that differed by two or more scale points were scored by a third rater and the extreme score was dropped.

1.2.2.3. Questionnaire (B)

In this questionnaire, subjects were asked to report truthfully how much they have understood the Arabic short story. If they didn't understand the whole text completely, they had to give the reasons and judge whether vocabulary, sentence structure, topic, length or the style of writing, was the obstacle to comprehending the text. They were, also,

asked what reading strategies they used when their understanding of the text failed. They were also asked to recommend some techniques that will make them understand the text better.

1.2.2.4. Reading Task (2)

An English short story was chosen and used in this research. The story, entitled 'Halloween' by Isaac Asimov, represents an aspect of the American culture since it is based on a well-known event in the American social life. After reading the story, the subjects in both groups were asked to answer four types of questions: (1) True/False (N = 8); (2) Vocabulary (N = 5); (3) Interpretation (N = 4), and (4) Understanding (N = 8). All subjects were required to attempt all questions and provide responses on the answer sheets. Administration of this task for each of the two groups was completed in one session. Each subject was asked to report how much time he / she needs to read and understand the text. The entire test was scored on a 0-50-mark scale. Each correct answer in all types of questions was worth 2 marks.

1.2.2.5. Questionnaire (C)

The same procedures as in instrument (B) were applied again, but at the American short story.

1.2.2.6. Data Analysis

The data analysis had a quantitative and a qualitative, interpretative part. The quantitative part consisted of some statistical procedures, i.e. means and standard deviation of students' scores on the total reading comprehension skill. The T - test was also applied to determine the significance of differences between means. In addition, the F - test was applied. Other appropriate statistical procedures were used. The qualitative part was an analysis of each student's conceptions about reading and his / her strategies in understanding the two texts. This analysis was inductive based entirely on the individual's explanations, and aimed at accounting for the differences between the tasks.

2. Literature Review

Within second language reading theory, particular prominence has been given to the role that the reader's background information or previous knowledge plays in text comprehension (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). The way in which what we already know (our background or world knowledge) is organized in the brain is characterized by research in Schema Theory as being organized into units called 'schemata' (Rumelhart, 1980, Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977). The role of background knowledge in language comprehension has been formalized as schema theory which has as its fundamental tenets that text, any text, either spoken or written does not by itself carry meaning. Rather, according to schema theory, a text only provides directions for listeners or readers as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge, and the previously acquired knowledge structures are called "schemata" (Rumelhart, 1980). Efficient comprehension, according to schemata theory, requires the ability to relate the textual material to one's own knowledge. Comprehending words, sentences and entire texts involves more than just relying on one's linguistic knowledge. In this connection, Anderson et al.

(1977: 369) point out that "every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well".

Individuals differ in reading comprehension because of their differences in what they know, who they are, what values guide them and what purposes or interests they have. Their different personalities, experiences, and memory associations ensure that they will give prominence to different parts of the message, or even ignore some elements as insignificant. Rumelhart (1980) discussing schemata, stated that 'schemata' represents knowledge at all levels of abstraction. Whereas all readers share some knowledge, it is culturally specific knowledge which differentiates cultural groups. In the process of reading, the textual information interacts with reader's personal knowledge of the 'world; which in turn is conditioned by age, sex, race, religion, nationality, occupation; in short, his culture (Reynolds, 1982). The possible effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension has been highlighted by many researchers in the field. Differences in values can be a significant factor in the comprehension of a text if the values expressed by the text differ from the values held by the reader. Commenting on the role of background knowledge, Coady (1979: 7) observes that students with a Western background of some kind learn English faster, on the average, than those without such a background'. Grabe (1991) argues that prior knowledge of text-based information and cultural knowledge strongly affect reading comprehension (Meara & Aleoy, 2010; Alptekin & Eretin, 2009; Cheung et al., 2007; Lervag & AuKrust, 2010; Lesaux et al., 2010; Gottardo & Mueller, 2009).

Johnson (1981) examined the effect of the cultural origin of a prose passage on the reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate / advanced ESL students at the university level. In the study, the subjects read both an Iranian and an American folk tale in unadapted and simplified versions. She found that the cultural origin of the story had more effect on the reading comprehension of the ESL students than did the level of syntactic or semantic difficulty. Cultural background knowledge, Johnson concluded, appeared to have a significant effect on ESL students' reading comprehension. Another study by Johnson (1982), examined the effects on reading comprehension of building background knowledge. Results showed that a text on a familiar topic was better recalled by ESL readers than a similar text on an unfamiliar topic. Nelson and Schmitt (1989: 539) studied the effects of text familiarity on standardized test scores among adult ESL learners. Their study sought to answer the following question: "will the improved reading comprehension skills acquired by using reading passage on native culture transfer to improved performance on reading passages on standardized reading tests?" Results provided evidence of the importance of background knowledge since the experimental classes (using reading passages on native culture) demonstrated a significant increase in reading comprehension from pre to post test. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) explain that there are two basic kinds of schemata used in understanding messages: (1) content schemata (relating to one's background knowledge and expectations about objects, events and situations) and (2) formal schemata (relating to one's knowledge of the rhetorical or discourse structures of

different types of texts) (Lee, 2009; Lesser, 2007; Ren, 2011; Liu, 2004; Gilkijani & Ahmadi, 2011; Iwai, 2010).

Schema theory suggests that schemata serve at least two important functions during comprehension. First, they provide a framework for classifying concepts presented in a text. Hence the stronger the framework, the more likely concepts are to be classified and available for subsequent retrieval from long-term memory. Bransford and Johnson (1973) found that subjects given a passage theme in the form of a title or a picture before reading an obscure passage recalled significantly more textually presented concepts than those not given a theme or given a theme after reading. Second, schemata allow readers to fill in gaps not completely specified in the text. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), in their discussion of schema theory and ESL reading, argue that comprehending a text is an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge (which is mainly derived from his / her own culture) and the text. Efficient comprehension requires the ability to relate the textual material to one's own knowledge. Hassan (1992) argues that the role of background / schemata is crucial for comprehending a written discourse. Schemata enables a reader to differentiate the most important information in a text, and when appropriate schemata are available, readers may differentially allocate cognitive resources to what they perceive as most important ideas'. Reading comprehension, Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) explain, occurs when the total meaning of a passage is fitted into this network of information organized in ways meaningful to a society (Pang, 2008; Ozek, 2006; Jongejan et al., 2007; Shang, 2010; Landry, 2002; Yang, 2010; Lee, 2020).

Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984) argue that cross-cultural experimentation demonstrates that reading comprehension is a function of cultural background knowledge. That is, if readers possess the schemata assumed by the writer, they understand what is stated and effortlessly make the inferences intended. If they don't, they distort meaning as they attempt to accommodate even explicitly stated propositions to their own pre-existing knowledge structures. One position that has been adopted is that there will be cultural interference at the affective level, in the connotative values of words and in the attitudes expressed in, and underlying, the passage. A second is that there will be interference at the denotative level as well, and students must have a rather complete understanding of the background information if there is to be complete comprehension of a text. A third recognizes that complete mastery of a language is dependent upon knowledge of the culture but recommends the use of literature to achieve this goal. As Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984) point out, while foreign language teachers and theorists have been aware of the fact that students from different cultures will bring different systems of background knowledge to the comprehension process, pedagogical methods and materials have not always reflected this insight. This may be attributed to a number of factors: First, the power and scope of this effect has probably been underestimated. Second, foreign language pedagogy, until recently, has factored out skills as productive or receptive, and oral or written. Third, it is easier to identify and teach specific features of the phonological and grammatical systems of language in a

methodical and concise way than it is to teach features of culture. The experiment conducted by Jafarpur et al. (1980) on Iranian university students showed that students who were given reading materials that were related to the target culture had greater comprehension than those who were provided with reading materials based on their own culture (Melby-Lervag & Lervag, A., 2011; Melby-Lervag et al., 2012). To sum up, although the effect of materials' cultural familiarity / non familiarity on reading comprehension has been studied on subjects coming from different cultural backgrounds, little research has been conducted on Egyptian college students learning English as a second language.

3. Results of the Present Study

3.1. The qualitative analysis

The qualitative results show that both Beginning and Advanced students viewed reading as an essential skill. As for the Beginning students, 35 of them considered it a 'very important' skill; while 6 of them considered it 'quite important'. Advanced students, on the other hand, were equally divided into two semi-similar views: 21 of them considered reading skill a 'very important', and 20 considered it 'quite important'. No one in both groups chose 'Not very important' or 'Not important at all'. This finding, simple as it may sound, indicates that our subjects had a very positive attitude toward reading in English. Regarding how easy/difficult reading in English is for the subjects, the qualitative results showed that half of the Beginning students considered it 'quite difficult'; 17 of them considered it 'quite easy'; three considered it 'Very easy'. Only one subject considered it 'very difficult'. No one in the Advanced group considered it 'very difficult'. Fourteen of the Advanced group viewed reading in English as 'quite difficult'; eighteen viewed it as 'quite easy' and nine considered it as a 'very easy' skill. This means that almost 50% of the Beginning students viewed reading in English as 'quite difficult' skill; and the other 50% viewed it as either 'quite easy 42%' or 'Very easy 7.5%'. On the other hand, 45% of the Advanced group viewed reading as 'quite easy'; 35% viewed it as a 'difficult' skill, and 20% considered it a 'very easy' skill.

The qualitative results also show that the 'subjects in both groups seemed to enjoy reading in English: thirty-three (82.5%) of the Beginning students chose 'Very much', seven of them (17.5%) chose 'quite a lot'. Only one subject indicated that he didn't enjoy reading in English. On the other hand, five subjects in the Advanced group seemed not to enjoy reading in English 'very much'. Nineteen (47.5%) indicated that they enjoyed reading in English 'Very much' and seventeen (42.5%) enjoyed reading in English 'Quite a lot'. In addition, analysing subjects' responses shows that the subjects in both groups seem to be alike in terms of the degree of their enjoyment while reading in their native language. More specifically, the choice 'Very much' was chosen by 28 (70%) in the Beginning group, and 26 (65%) in the Advanced group. The choice 'quite a lot' was chosen by 11 (27.5%) in the Beginning group, and 8 (20%) in the Advanced group. However, two Beginning subjects seemed not to enjoy reading in their native language; while seven from the Advanced group reported that they didn't enjoy reading in Arabic. Regarding what the subjects read in their spare time, the qualitative analysis indicates that both

Beginning and Advanced subjects seem to enjoy reading vowels, newspapers, comics and news magazine, whether these reading materials are written in English or Arabic. Finally, the qualitative analysis of the subjects' responses on questionnaire (A) shows that when the subjects, in both groups, didn't comprehend what they were reading in both L₁ and L₂, they would normally make guesses. This is perhaps the least demanding strategy in terms of time and cognition (Ho, 1995). Generally Speaking, all subjects reported that they used more than one strategy. No preferable strategy was reported, whether they read in English or Arabic. This finding indicates that both Beginning and Advanced subjects, in this study, suffered from a lack of understanding of the appropriate strategies they could use; an issue which, will be clarified more later (See Rosenberg, 2009).

3.2. Quantitative analysis

The following illustrates the subjects' performance in the Egyptian short story (The enemy).

Table (1). Group (1) = Beginning Readers: Egyptian short story

	T./F.	Vocab.	Interp.	Underst.	Total
X	147	240	166.5	364.5	918
X ²	612	1672	868.75	3497.75	22229.5
\bar{X}	3.59	5.85	4.06	8.89	22.39
SD	1.44	2.55	2.17	2.15	6.39

Table (2). Group (1) = Beginning Readers: American short story

	T./F.	Vocab.	Interp.	Underst.	Total
X	210	216	128.5	249.5	804
X ²	1222.5	1368	520.52	1963.25	17085.5
\bar{X}	5.12	5.27	3.13	6.09	19.61
SD	1.89	2.37	1.69	3.29	5.67

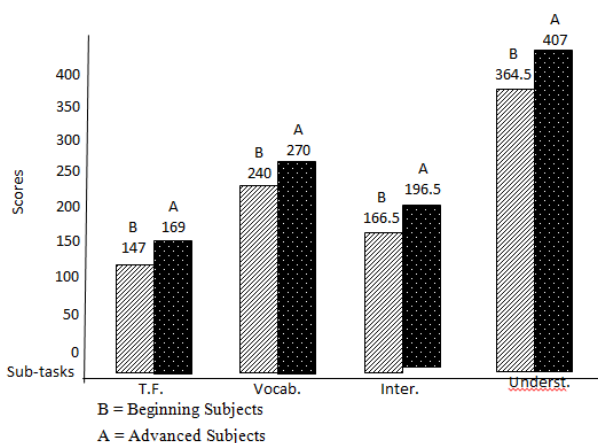


Figure (1). Plot of subjects' Performance in the Egyptian short story (The Enemy)

The next figure illustrates the subjects' performance in the American short story (Halloween)

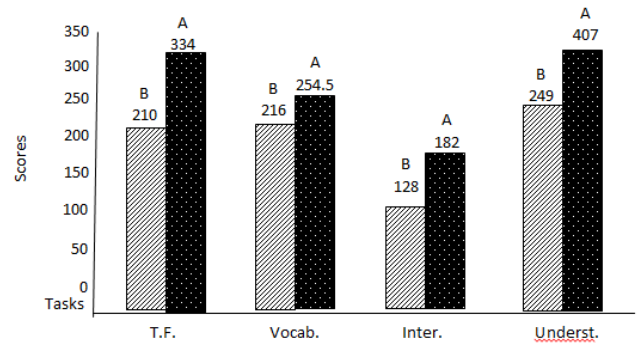


Figure (2). Plot subjects' Performance in the American short story (Halloween)

Next, the results of the statistical analysis of students' performance in the four types of questions in both the Egyptian and American short stories will be provided.

The above figures and tables show that the Beginning subjects scored a total of 918 marks in the Egyptian short story, with a mean of 22.39 and standard deviation of 6.39. In the American short story, the Beginning readers scored a total of 804 marks, with a mean of 19.61, and standard deviation of 5.67. Generally speaking, this means that the Beginning subjects performed better in the Egyptian short story the American short story: To get a more accurate picture of the Beginning readers' performance, we need to check their scores in the four types of questions, across the two reading tasks.

3.2.1. The True/False Type

In the Egyptian short story, the Beginning readers scored a total of 147 marks, with a mean of 3.59 and standard deviation of 1.44. In the American short story, they scored a total of 210 marks; with a mean of 5.12 and standard deviation of 1.89. This means that the Beginning subjects performed in the American short story better than what they did on this particular type of question in the Egyptian short story.

3.2.2. The 'Vocabulary' Questions

In the Egyptian short story, the Beginning readers scored a total of 240 marks, with a mean of 5.85, and standard deviation of 2.55. In the American short story, they scored a total of 216 marks, with a mean of 5.27, and standard deviation of 2.37. This means that the Beginning reader's performance on this particular type of question was better in the Egyptian short story.

3.2.3. The 'Interpretation' Questions

In the Egyptian short story, the Beginning readers scored a total of 166.5 marks, with a mean of 4.06, and standard deviation of 2.17. In the American short story, they scored a total of 128.5 marks, with a mean of 3.13 and standard deviation of 1.69. This means that the Beginning readers' performance on this particular type of question was better in the Egyptian short story.

3.2.4. The 'Understanding' Questions

In the Egyptian short story, the Beginning readers scored a total of 364.5 marks, with a mean of 8.89 and standard deviation of 2.51. In the American short story, they scored a total of 249.5 with a mean of 6.09 and standard deviation of 3.29. This means that the Beginning readers' performance on this particular type of question was

better in the Egyptian short story. To sum up, the beginning readers' total score in the Egyptian short story was higher than their score in the American short story. Moreover, their performance in all types of questions was better in the Egyptian short story than their performance in all types of questions in the American story, except the true/false type.

Table (3). Group (1) = Advanced Readers: Egyptian short stories.

	T/F.	Vocab.	Interp.	Underst.	Total
X	169	270	196.5	407	1042.5
X ²	775	1940	155.25	4334.5	27686.75
\bar{X}	4.12	6.59	4.79	9.93	25.43
SD	1.38	1.99	1.66	2.68	5.36

Table (4). Group (2) = Advanced Readers: Egyptian short story.

	T/F.	Vocab.	Interp.	Underst.	Total
X	334	254.5	182	325.5	1096
X ²	2909	1781.25	954	3073.75	31204.5
\bar{X}	8.15	6.21	4.44	7.94	26.73
SD	2.41	2.22	1.89	3.46	6.82

The above figures and tables show that the Advanced subjects scored a total of 1042.5 in the Egyptian short story, with a mean of 25.43 and standard deviation of 5.36. In the American short story, the Advanced readers scored a total of 1096, with a mean of 26.73 and standard deviation of 6.82. Generally speaking, this means that the Advanced subjects performed better in the American short story. This is quiet opposite to the case with the Beginning readers, whose performance in the Egyptian story was better than their performance in the American story. To get a more accurate picture of the Advanced readers' performance, we will check and compare their scores in the four types of questions, across the two reading tasks.

3.2.5. The True /False Type

In the Egyptian short story, the Advanced readers scored a total of 169 marks, with a mean of 4.12 and standard deviation of 1.38. In the American short story, they scored 334 marks, with a mean of 8.15 and standard deviation of 2.14. This means that the Advanced subjects' performance in the American short story was better than their performance in the Egyptian story, as to the True/False type of questions. In this sense, both the Beginning and Advanced subjects performed better in the American short story.

3.2.6. The 'Vocabulary' Questions

In the Egyptian short story, the Advanced readers scored a total of 270 marks, with a mean of 6.59 and standard deviation of 1.99. In the American short story, they scored a total of 254.5, with a mean of 6.21 and standard deviation of 2.22. This means that the Advanced reader's performance on this particular type of question was better in the Egyptian short story. Once again, both the Beginning and Advanced readers performed on the Vocabulary questions in the Egyptian short story better than their performance in the American short story.

3.2.7. The Interpretation Questions

In the Egyptian short story, the Advanced readers scored a total of 196.5 marks, with a mean of 4.79 and standard deviation of 1.66. In the American short story, they scored a total of 182, with a mean of 4.44, and standard deviation of 1.89. This means that the Advanced readers' performance on this particular type of question was better in the Egyptian short story. In this sense, both the Advanced and Beginning readers are alike.

3.2.8. The 'Understanding' Questions

In the Egyptian short story, the Advanced readers scored a total of 407 marks, with a mean of 9.93 and standard deviation of 2.68. In the American short story, they scored a total of 325.5 marks, with a means of 7.94 and standard deviation of 3.46. This means that the Advanced readers' performance on this particular type of question was better in the Egyptian short story. In this sense, both the Beginning and Advanced subjects are alike. To sum up, the Advanced readers' total score in the American short story was higher than their score in the Egyptian short story. This is due to the fact that in the True / False questions, they scored a total of 169 in the Egyptian story, and 334 in the American story. Other than that, the advanced subjects performance on all other types of questions was better in the Egyptian story than their performance in the American story. Next, the t-test will be applied to determine the significance of differences between means.

Table (5). Means and standard deviations of the beginning readers' scores in both the Egyptian (E) and American (A) short stories.

Variable	Means		SD		T	Sign.
	E	A	E	A		
T/F	3.59	5.12	1.44	1.89	4.07	0.01
Vocab.	5.85	5.27	2.55	2.37	1.05	Insign.
Interpr.	4.06	3.13	2.17	1.69	2.14	0.05
Underst.	8.89	6.09	2.51	3.92	4.28	0.01
Total	22.39	19.61	6.39	5.67	2.06	0.05

Table (6). Means and standard deviations of the advanced readers' scores in both the Egyptian (E) and American (A) short stories.

Variable	Means		SD		T	Sign.
	E	A	E	A		
T/F	4.12	8.15	1.38	2.41	9.18	0.01
Vocab.	6.59	6.21	1.99	2.22	0.81	Insign.
Interpr.	4.79	4.44	1.66	1.89	0.88	Insign.
Underst.	9.93	7.94	2.68	3.47	2.88	0.01
Total	25.43	26.73	5.36	6.82	0.95	Insign.

Table (7). Means and standard deviations of both groups' scores in the Egyptian story.

Variable	Means		SD		T	Sign.
	Beginners	Advanced	Beginners	Advanced		
T/F	3.59	4.12	1.44	1.38	1.69	Insign.
Vocab.	5.85	6.59	2.55	1.99	1.45	Insign.
Interpr.	4.06	4.79	2.17	1.66	1.70	Insign.
Underst.	8.89	9.93	2.51	2.68	1.79	Insign.
Total	22.39	25.43	6.39	5.36	2.31	0.05

0.01 = 2.64

0.05 = 1.99

Table (8). Means and standard deviations of both groups' scores in the American story.

Variable	Means		SD		T	Sign.
	Beginners	Advanced	Beginners	Advanced		
T/F	5.12	8.15	1.89	2.41	6.26	0.01
Vocab.	5.27	6.21	2.37	2.22	1.83	Insign.
Interpr.	3.13	4.44	1.69	1.89	3.27	0.01
Underst.	6.09	7.94	3.29	3.46	2.45	0.05
Total	19.61	26.73	5.67	6.82	8.08	0.01

Table (9). Analysis of variance (2X2) in students' scores I True/False questions: Language education level X text type.

A.

Total	Language Educ. Level		N	Egyptian	Text Type
	Advanced	Beginners			
82	41	41	N	Egyptian	Text Type
316	169	147	X		
1387	775	612	X ²	American	Text Type
82	41	41	N		
334	210	210	X	American	Text Type
4181.5	2959	1222.5	X ²		
164	82	82	N	Total	Text Type
860	503	357	X		
5568.5	3734	1834.5	X ²	Total	Text Type

B.

Sign	F	Variance	Degree of Freedom	Squares	Variance Source
			163	1058.74	Total
			3	510.39	Between groups
		3.43	160	548.35	Within groups
0.01	37.90	129.98	1	129.98	Lang. level
0.01	92.41	316.98	1	316.98	Text type
0.01	18.49	63.43	1	63.43	Interaction

F (1, 160)

3.91 significant at 0.05

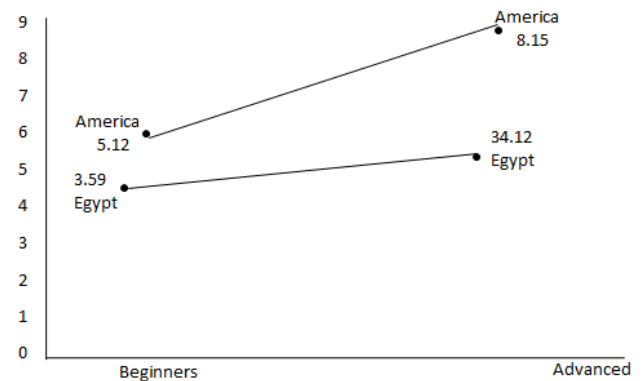
6.81 significant at 0.01

The above tables (9 A) and (9 B) show that there are significant statistical differences between subjects' scores in the True / False type of questions at 0.01 in favor of the advanced students. The F value that signifies these differences is 37.90, which is statistically significant at the level 0.01. The total score of the beginning readers in the True /False type of questions in both the Egyptian and American short stories was 357. The advanced readers scored 503. The above tables also show that there are significant statistical differences between the subjects' scores in the True /False type of questions as to the type of text (Egyptian VS. American short story), and in favor of the American short story. The F value that signifies these differences is 92.41; which is statistically significant at the level 0.01. The subjects in both groups scored 316 in the Egyptian short story, and 544 in the American short story.

The above tables also show that there is a significant statistical interaction between the language education level (First year students vs. fourth year students)

and the text type (Egyptian vs. American). The F value that signifies this interaction is 18.49. The following figure illustrates this interaction.

Figure (3)



The above figure clearly shows that for the beginning readers the difference between \bar{X} in the Egyptian and American short stories is less than its equivalent for the Advanced readers. In other words, although both groups scored better in the American short story, the advanced group performed a lot better than the beginning readers in the True/False type of questions.

Table (10). Analysis of variance (2X2) in students' scores in vocabulary: Language education level X text type

A.

Total	Language Educ. Level		N	Egyptian	Text Type
	Advanced	Beginners			
82	41	41	N	Egyptian	Text Type
510	270	240	N		
3612	1940	1672	X ²	American	Text Type
82	41	41	N		
470.5	254.5	216	X	American	Text Type
3149.25	1781.25	1368	X ²		
164	82	82	N	Total	Text Type
980.5	524.50	456	X		
6761.25	3721.25	3040	X ²	Total	Text Type

B.

Sign	F	Variance	Degree of Freedom	Squares	Variance Source
			163	899.18	Total
			3	38.57	Between groups
		3.43	160	860.61	Within groups
0.01	37.90	129.98	1	28.61	Lang. level
0.01	92.41	316.98	1	9.51	Text type
0.01	18.49	63.43	1	63.43	Interaction

The above tables (10 A) and (10 B) show that there were not significant differences between subjects' scores in the Vocabulary type of questions as to the type of text. The F value is 1.77 which is not statistically significant. The subjects in both groups scored 510 in the Egyptian short story, and 470.5 in the American short story. The above tables also show that there were significant statistical differences between the scores of both the beginning and Advanced readers, in favor of the advanced

readers. The F value is 5.32, which is statistically significant at 0.05. The total score of the beginning readers in the Vocabulary type of questions in both the Egyptian and American short stories was 456. The advanced readers scored 524.50. The tables also show that there was not a significant statistical interaction between the language education level and the text type. The F value is 0.08 which is not statistically significant. The following figure illustrates this case.

Table (11). Analysis of variance (2X2) in students' performance in 'interaction': Language education level X text type.

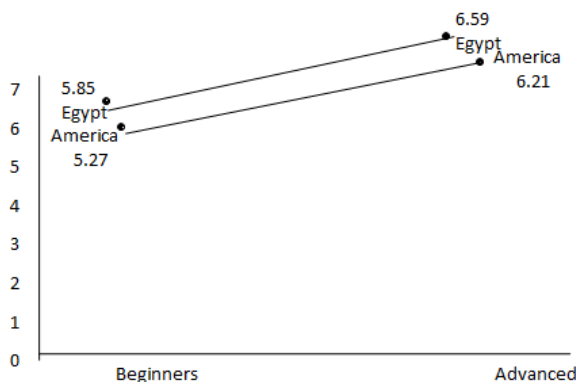
A.

Total	Language Educ. Level				
	Advanced	Beginners			
82	41	41	N	Egyptian	Text Type
363	196.5	166.5	X		
1924	1055.25	868.75	X		
82	41	41	N		
310.50	182	128.50	X	American	Text Type
1474.25	954	520.25	X		
164	82	82	N	Total	
673.50	378.50	295	X		
3398.25	2009.25	1389	X		

B.

Sign	F	Variance	Degree of Freedom	Squares	Variance Source
			163	632.38	Total
			3	62.79	Between groups
		3.65	160	569.69	Within groups
0.01	11.94	42.51	1	42.51	Lang. level
0.01	4.72	16.81	1	16.81	Text type
Insign.	0.95	3.37	1	3.37	Interaction

Figure (4)



The above tables (11 A) and (11 B) show that there were significant statistical differences between subjects scores in the "Interpretation" type of questions at 0.01, and in favor of the Advanced students. The F value that signifies these differences is 11.94, which is statistically significant. The total score of the beginning students in the 'Interpretation' type of questions in both the Egyptian and American short stories was 295. The advanced students scored 378.50. The above tables also show that there were significant statistical differences between the subjects' scores in the

"Interpretation" type of questions as to the type of text (Egyptian VS. American short story), and in favor of the Egyptian short story. The F value that signifies these differences was 4.72, which is statistically significant at 0.05. The subjects in both groups scored 363 in the Egyptian short story, and 310.50 in the American short story. The same tables also show that there was not a significant statistical interaction between the language education level and the type of the text. The F value for such an interaction was 0.95 which is not statistically significant. The following figure illustrates this case.

Figure (5)

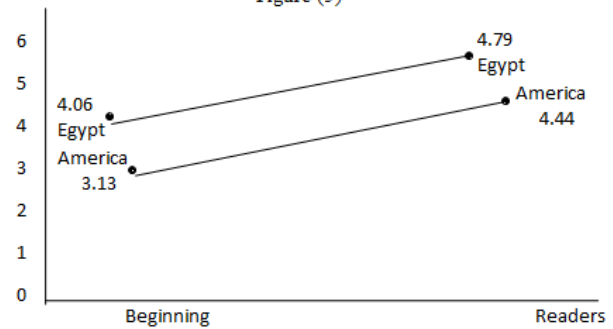


Table (12). Analysis of variance (2X2) in students' performance in 'understanding': Language education level X text type.

A.

Total	Language Educ. Level				
	Advanced	Beginners			
82	41	41	N	Egyptian	Text Type
771.50	407	364.50	X		
7832.25	4334.50	3497.75	X		
82	41	41	N	American	
575	325.50	249.50	X		
5037	3073.75	1963.25	X		
164	82	82	N	Total	
1346.5	732.5	416	X		
12869.25	7408.25	5461	X		

B.

Sign	F	Variance	Degree of Freedom	Squares	Variance Source
			163	1813.99	Total
			3	327.91	Between groups
		9.29	160	1486.08	Within groups
0.01	9.22	85.62	1	85.62	Lang. level
0.01	25.34	235.44	1	235.44	Text type
Insign.	0.74	6.85	1	6.85	Interaction

The above tables (12 A) and (12 B) show that there were significant statistical differences between subjects' score in the "Understanding" type of questions, and in favor of the Advanced students. The F value that signifies these differences is 9.22, which is statistically significant at 0.01. The total score of the beginning students in the 'Understanding' type of questions in both the Egyptian and American short stories was 614. The advanced students scored 732.5. The same tables also show that there were significant statistical differences between the subjects' scores in the 'Understanding' type of questions

as to the type of text, and in favor of the Egyptian short story. The F value that signifies these differences was 25.34, which is statistically significant at 0.01. The subjects in both groups scored 771.50 in the Egyptian short story, and 575 in the American short story. In addition, the same tables show that there was not a significant statistical interaction between the language education level and the type of the text. The F value for such an interaction was 0.74, which is not statistically significant. The follow figure illustrates this case.

Figure (6)

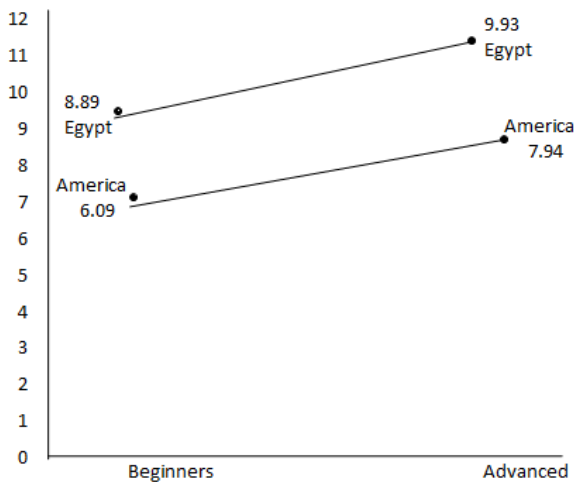


Table (13). Analysis of variance (2X2) in students' total score: Language education level X text type.

A.

Total	Language Educ. Level		N	Text Type
	Advanced	Beginners		
82	41	41	N	Egyptian
1960.5	1042.50	918	X	
49916.25	27686.75	22229.50	X	American
82	41	41	N	
1900	1096	805	X	Total
48290	31204.5	17085.5	X	
146	82	82	N	Total
3860.5	2138.5	1722	X	
98206.25	58891.25	39315	X	

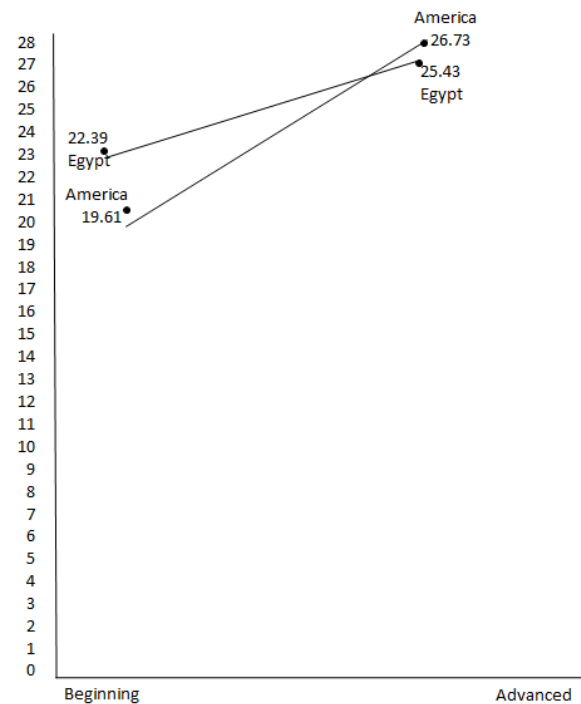
B.

Sign	F	Variance	Degree of Freedom	Squares	Variance Source
			163	7331.49	Total
			3	1251.15	Between groups
		38	160	6080.34	Within groups
0.01	27.84	1057.76	1	1057.76	Lang. level
Insign.	0.09	22.32	1	22.32	Text type
0.05	4.50	171.07	1	171.07	Interaction

The above tables (13 A) and (13 B) show that there were significant statistical differences between the total score of the Beginning students and that of the Advanced students, and in favor of the Advanced students. The F value that signifies these differences is 27.84 which is statistically significant at 0.01. The total score of the

Beginning students in both reading tasks was 1722. The Advanced students scored 2138.5. The same tables also show that there were not significant statistical differences between the total scores of both group as to the type of the reading text. The F value is 0.09, which is not statistically significant. The subjects in both groups scored a total of 1960.5 in the Egyptian short story, and 1900 in the American short story. In addition, the same tables show that there was a significant statistical interaction between the language education level and the type of the text. The F value for such an interaction was 4.050, which is statistically significant at 0.05. The following figure illustrates this case.

Figure (7)



4. Conclusion

The qualitative aspect of this study provides us with some insights that may help us understand the reading habits of our students. It draws our attention towards working on the students' attitudes, values and beliefs as to the skill we are about to teach. It was interesting to see both the Beginning and Advanced subjects consider the skill of reading an essential and important skill. It is known that second language learners approach the second language either through the instrumental or integrated motivation, or both. An essential component of our students' integrated motivation is their attitude towards what they are going to learn. The more positive the attitude is, the better their performance will be. Accordingly, second language teachers should, first of all, foster their students, attitudes towards the skill of reading by showing them "Why do they have to be proficient readers?" Once they become clear about the purpose and benefits of what they are studying, it will be easy for teachers to carry out their plans. Having answered the above question, teachers should be realistic with their students regarding the demands of the skill they are going to study. It will not help students much to be told

that the skill is easy and don't worry about it, and everything will be fine. Quite the contrary, they will be disappointed and frustrated when they came face to face with the task. More dangerous than this is that students may lose their faith and confidence in themselves, and in their teacher who lied and was not truth worthy. If this happens, nothing will be accomplished no matter what we try: In this study, almost 50% of the Beginning subjects viewed reading in English as 'quite difficult' skill, and the other 50% viewed it as either 'quite easy 12% 'or 'very easy 7.5%'. After working on the Egyptian short story, and in questionnaire B, they were asked the following question, "how difficult is the text compared to most of your other reading materials?". Their responses were as follows: 15 subjects reported "more difficult"; 15 subjects reported "more or less the same"; 10 subjects reported "easier", and 1 reported "a lot easier". However, after working on the American short story, their responses were quite different: 7 subjects reported "much more difficult; 21 reported "more difficult"; 12 reported "more or less the same, and only 1 reported "easier". Similar responses were also reported by the Advanced subjects. This means that tie subjects, in both groups, found the American short story more difficult than the Egyptian short story. This suggests that students must understand that each written passage is a reading unit in itself, and their performance in this unit requires certain strategies, that may change if they come across another written passage. They and their teachers should expect some degree of variation in performance according to the nature and complexity of the passage itself. This leads us to say that choosing reading materials for our students is of vital importance if we want our students to move from one level to another without feeling frustrated or disappointed. Reading Materials should hold the attention of the readers. This means that reading passages should have two qualities, if at all possible. They should be both current and of appropriate interest to the students in order to form a positive attitude towards reading.

In addition, the qualitative results seem to suggest that teachers should know whether their students enjoy reading either in their native or target languages. Knowing this about our students may facilitate the whole process, instead of feeling rejected or doing something by force. Relatedly, teachers should also be aware of the types of materials their students enjoy most. Accordingly, instead of forcing our students to read something they probably don't enjoy, we can select certain materials that attract them, at least as a starting point. The subjects in both groups seem to enjoy reading in their native and target languages. And, they mostly enjoy reading novels, newspapers, comics and news magazines. This leads us to talk about extensive reading. Foreign language learners need to read extensively. Extensive reading refers to "the less rigorously supervised reading that students will do both in and outside the classroom. The texts read will normally be those of their own choosing, even though the teacher's guidance will be crucial at the beginning". Extensive reading should be encouraged for the following reasons: (1) extensive reading exposes students to different registers of the target language that they will meet in varied contexts; (2) wide reading broadens and increases their vocabulary, which is important for effective communication; (3) reading a text in

its entirety builds confidence, and consistent Wide reading aids concentration for reading by expanding their attention span; (4) skills learned through reading are transferred to other areas of language, such as writing and speaking, and (5) reading opens up a whole new world, enabling the reader to learn about other people, their cultures, their outlooks, and the reasons that they behave in certain ways. It also sharpens judgement, as one's own outlook on life is broadened.

The qualitative results seem also to suggest that regardless of the difference in the language education background, the subjects in this study suffered from the same linguistic areas that constituted areas of difficulty. These are vocabulary, style of writing, and sentence structure. Specifically speaking, vocabulary turned out to be a major area of difficulty for both the Beginning and Advanced subjects, and in both reading texts... This may suggest that reading in English as a foreign language is partially a language problem. Regarding the strategies that the subjects used when they failed to understand the reading texts, the qualitative analysis shows the following:

- (1) Many Beginning subjects resorted to two strategies to understand the Egyptian short story: (a) making guesses; (b) re-reading the problematic parts. These two strategies were used by 25 Beginning subjects;
- (2) The above two- mentioned strategies were also used by 27 subjects in the Advanced group;
- (3) Six subjects in both groups tended to use three strategies in their attempt to better understand the text: (a) making guesses; (b) reading the problematic parts again, and (c) concentrating on the understood parts, and ignoring the parts that are difficult to understand.
- (4) There were a set of combined strategies that were used by Beginning subjects only. That is, they were never used by the Advanced subjects: (a) making guesses + asking somebody; (b) making guesses + reading the problematic parts again + asking somebody. Similarly, there were sets of combined strategies that were only used by the Advanced subjects: (a) making guesses + looking up the dictionary; (b) reading the problematic parts + looking up the dictionary.

Moreover, to understand the American short story, the subjects in both groups tended mostly to use the following strategies: (1) making guesses + reading the problematic parts again (19 subjects from each group reported using them; (2) six Beginning subjects and nine Advance subject tended to use the following set of strategies ; making guesses + reading the problematic parts again + concentrating on the understood parts and ignoring the other difficult parts ; (3) making guesses was used by eight Beginning subjects and three Advanced subjects; and (4) six advanced subjects used 'making guesses + concentrating... and ignoring...', whereas it was used by only one Beginning subjects. Other than this, the subjects in both groups attempted all other strategies to get the meaning out of the text. The above results imply that there

is no difference between the Beginning and Advanced readers as to use of strategies. Both groups tended to use the same set of strategies in their attempt to understand the text.

A misconception that should be eradicated is that language learning entails learning and understanding the meaning of every word in the text to the extent of translating every word into Arabic in the hope of understanding a passage. This idea will slow down the reading rate for these students and will make learning the language for communication next impossible. In respect, Hanna (1992: 67) maintains that language students must learn to cope with uncertainty. That is, they should avoid heavy reliance on a dictionary. They should be trained in techniques and strategies of guessing the meaning of words from context and getting the general meaning of texts instead of concentrating on word for word meaning. It seems that by reading word by word one cannot maintain the minimum rate of input required for linguistic synthesis. Mattingly (1979: 145) illustrates this by comparing- it' to speech. When speech is slowed down by inclusion of a pause after each word, it is hard for the listener to put the whole sentence together, even when individual words are completely intelligible. If a reader can maintain the required minimum rate of input, many of his perceptual errors can be smoothed over in synthesis.

The quantitative results show that the Beginning subjects' performance in the Egyptian short story was better than their performance in the American short story. Specifically speaking, they scored a total of 918 points in the Egyptian short story, with a mean of 22.39 and standard deviation of 6.39. In the American short story, they scored a total of 804 points, with a mean of 19.61 and standard deviation of 5.67. On the other hand, the Advanced subjects' performance in the American short story was better than their performance in the Egyptian short story. In the Egyptian short story, they scored a total of 1042.5, with a Mean of 25.43 and standard deviation of 5.36. In the American short story, they scored a total of 1096, with a mean of 26.73 and standard deviation of 6.82. Comparing the overall performance of the Beginning subjects to that of the Advanced subjects shows that Advanced subjects, as expected, were better than the Beginning subjects in both reading texts. It may be important to mention that the subjects in both groups performed better in the Egyptian short story on all types of questions, except the True / False questions. This may provide evidence that cultural background knowledge and - subjects' familiarity with the Egyptian themes had a positive influence on the subjects' performance in the "vocabulary", "understanding" and "interpretation" questions. This implies that teachers should orient their students and provide them with the cultural aspects included in the reading materials.

5. Pedagogical Considerations

In any detailed approach to the ways of achieving improvement of comprehension, due regard must be given to illumination of several fundamental misconceptions about the nature of reading comprehension and they are indeed difficult to eradicate First, that comprehending well means getting exactly what was said or written; second, that

a given passage has a series of ideas which the reader's mind absorbs like blotting paper, and third, that the same passage should mean exactly the same to all readers. Our previous discussion shows that reading is an active and a complex information process. From this it follows that successful reading depends up on the coordination of number of special skills and strategies. Students, then, should be able to determine an appropriate approach to a reading task. That is, they should know whether they are reading to obtain a general sense of the passage (Skimming); to discover a specific fact or piece of information (Scanning); to obtain a comprehensive understanding or to draw inferences and evaluate an author's view (Critical Reading). It has also been shown that reading involves, as Goodman states, an interaction between thought and language. That is, the reader brings to the task many ideas, attitudes and beliefs. This knowledge, in addition to the ability to make linguistic predictions, determines the expectations the reader will develop while reading. Based on this conception, students must have conceptual readiness (to use Silberstein's term (1987); that is, reading activities must either hook into students' knowledge of the world, or the teacher must fill in the gaps before the task is begun. When Carrell (1984: 465) investigated the relationship between the ability of ESL readers to recognize rhetorical style and their recall of text, she found that instruction about several common discourse patterns did positively affect L₂ readers' ability to remember what they had read. Based upon these findings, her appropriate pedagogical suggestion was that devoting reading instruction to the identification of different discourse structures may be effective in facilitating reading comprehension.

Another way to improve L₂ learners reading comprehension is called contextual guessing. As Van Patten and Schouten (1981: 24) point out, "guessing the meaning of words from context can enhance retention of these words. Another view was expressed by Jarvis (1969) who maintained that such method can be effectively used by advanced readers, and is not necessarily appropriate at the beginning stages of reading instruction. Bernhardt (1983) compared oral and, silent reading modes of university students of German, and found that comprehension of passages read silently was higher than that of passages read aloud. It was also discovered that the texts read, orally were perceived by the readers to be more difficult. As Zvetina (1987: 253) explains, "When cognitive attention must be focused upon lower - level processing of pronunciation, higher - level processing is road - blocked and students become frustrated, seeing the task as unpleasant and uninteresting ". In addition, Nehr (1984) hypothesized that L₂ readers need not even learn to produce oral language in order to be able to read. In the light of the above-mentioned studies, a case can be made against the traditional form of preparing L₂ students for reading texts; that of vocabulary lists to be memorized. Johnson (1982) found that pre-exposure to the definitions of difficult vocabulary items didn't generally affect L₂ readers comprehension. More important, such pre-teaching, when combined with glossing of the same low-frequency words in a text seemed to interfere with global comprehension of a text. Under these conditions, readers were less able to grasp

the overall gist of the passage. In Hudson's (1982) study, beginning and intermediate readers were greatly helped by picture / discussion preparations for the reading task, and didn't benefit as much from the vocabulary preparation method. As Zvetina (1987) points out, these studies at least call into serious question the efficacy of traditional pre-reading methods. The impact of building background knowledge on reading comprehension was demonstrated in Johnson's (1982) study of ESL students' understanding of a reading passage about Halloween, a cultural celebration in which the subjects had actively participated prior to calling out the reading task. Results indicated that prior experience with the subject matter of a text increases its comprehensibility.

Several pieces of research strongly suggest that pre-teaching vocabulary may have a negative effect on reading comprehension. Hudson (1982), for example, found that, except for beginning - level students, pre-teaching of vocabulary was less effective at promoting reading comprehension than no pre-reading activity at all. Taglieber, Johnson, and Yarborough (1988) report similar findings. As P. Johnson (1982: 221) maintains "Providing glosses and pre-teaching vocabulary may encourage word-by-word reading and consequently prevent the ESL reader from the development of the skill processing syntax and context in sampling and confirming meaning. Rather than pre-teach vocabulary, research seems to suggest that a more effective approach is to provide pre-reading activities that build the student's general background knowledge of the topic of the text. Following these activities, the students should be allowed to read the text and confront the difficult vocabulary in context, searching for clues, using guessing strategies, and thereby working out meaning for themselves. In this regard, Madden (1980) argues that such a process aids retention since any meanings the students work out for themselves.

The kinds of training useful in promoting vocabulary improvement fall into two categories: the analytical and contextual approaches. Each has its place in a well - rounded and thorough going attack upon the problem of insufficient word control. The analytical approach includes the familiar drills in word roots, prefixes and suffixes; word lists in particular areas of knowledge such as social studies, mathematics, or science; word lists of special interest such as those from proper nouns and those of especially interesting origin, development or derivation, with the abundance of such material to be found in texts and workbooks, professional journals and publications of dictionary makers. The other means to vocabulary development is the contextual approach. Most simply stated, this presents new words to readers not as isolated phenomena, but rather in their natural environment, that is, in sentences and paragraphs in a text, where the verbal circumstances will tend to assist the reader in identifying, limiting or amplifying meaning. By contrast, with analytical procedures already cited, the contextual approach has had very little consideration or use or research.

The final aspect of L₂ reading research to be presented here is perhaps the most basic one faced by L₂ teachers: the selection of appropriate and valuable reading

material for L₂ readers. Krashen (1981) and Carrell and Fisterhold (1983) advocated "narrow reading" as a means of selecting text. This strategy is based upon the premise that the more familiar the reader is with the text, either due to the subject matter or to having read other works by the same author, the more comprehension is facilitated. In conclusion, although much has already been learned about L₁ and L₂ reading processes, so much more lies undiscovered. Therefore, more research studies are needed. Future research should examine the interaction between reading strategies and learning styles. It also needs to investigate the role of teaching successful strategy use to readers. Needless to say, a variety of studies are still needed to systematically explore and combat the current problem of reading comprehension progress or growth, with particular reference to different groups of learners in comparable English language instruction and acquisition environments.

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