

Reading Comprehension Problems Encountered by Foreign Language Students, Case Study: Albania, Croatia

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Abstract

Reading Comprehension is a crucial component of second language acquisition. As a core part of language learning it is, obviously, not an effortless process. Students often complain of not understanding a text, therefore they fail in answering to the comprehensive questions. Unfortunately, this is a reality evidenced and proven from unsatisfactory results of students in English Language Matura Exam in Albanian high schools (as these students have been the objective of this study). In this context it is very important to reveal why do students have difficulties in comprehending a text. At first, it is necessary to detect the problems that generally appear along this process. In this context, focus should be given to questionnaires as their results are good detectors of problems encountered by students. This would direct us to a proper strategy for problem solving and improving the situation. The survey in question was submitted to students from three different high schools in Albania, using questionnaires, sample texts, observations, focus groups etc. Second, theories related to these problems and strategies that could be of help should be provided. Basically, theories and approaches of Reading Comprehension are: 'bottom-up', 'top-down' and 'the meta cognitive view'. Third, but not less important, focus should be given to questionnaires as their results are good detectors of problems encountered by students. This would direct us to a proper strategy for problem solving and improving the situation. The survey in question was submitted to students from three different high schools in Albania, using questionnaires, sample texts, observations, focus groups etc.

Keywords: Reading comprehension problems, 'bottom-up', 'top-down' and the meta cognitive view, unsatisfactory Matura Exam results

1. Introduction

Learning English Language is very important nowadays, especially if we focus in Albania. This is due to the new policies and regulations of the Ministry of Education and Sports which has imposed new rules even to the students of the high school, who in order to get graduated have to successfully pass the English Language Test.

Actually there is not a satisfactory level of students' outcome as they have shown a lot of problems concerning second language acquisition, respectively English Language. The word "problems" includes a lot of aspects, but this study will be focused on Reading Comprehension.

Since reading is considered to be the core part of language acquisition, it is necessary to make a proper study about this process, the identification of the core problems faced during reading comprehension which create obstacles on language learning.

Another objective of the study is finding out some strategies that best work in solving reading comprehension problems.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study case key points

Location: three different Albanian High schools

Method: quantitative in the form of questionnaires (see appendix 1).

Focus :

- students' opinions about problems encountered on Reading Comprehension process through their experience of working with texts at school
- what they think the best text is
- the students' own ideas on how to best work with literature

2.2 Sample

When selecting the students for this study, there were chosen students from three different high school of Albania,, "Havzi Nela" high school, Kukes, "Kostandin Kristoforidhi", Elbasan, " Qemal Stafa", Tiranë This was partly to minimize the risk of different schools having different policies of teaching , English level etc.

In each school there were a few students that could not attend when the questionnaire was handed out for various reasons. In total the questionnaires were filled in by 150 students.

2.3 Questionnaires

This study was done with the help of questionnaires hand out to the students in order they give opinions about the difficulties they face during reading comprehension.

The entire survey, the introduction as well as the questions, was written in Albania, This was because the questionnaire was not intended to test their understanding, but to get as reliable answers as possible by avoiding misunderstandings as some of the terms are difficult enough in the students' first language. A further reason was that at the end of the questionnaire there were two open-ended questions, and by being allowed to write in their first language, students would feel more comfortable writing and giving suggestions.

The questionnaire consisted of an introduction informing each student of the general subject of the survey, namely to investigate their opinions of problems they encounter during reading comprehension process. It was also declared that participation was voluntary, and that they could opt out at any time without being questioned why. In the last part of this short introduction, students were kindly requested to be sincere while giving an answer.

In the questionnaire there were mainly two types of questions. The first type was multiple-choice questions, and here students were told to give the answer they thought agreed with their own opinions.. For the second type of question, the closed ones, there was rating using words, like *Every day, Often, Rarely, and Never*; or using numbers as in this example: *Choose a rating of difficulty from 1 (easy) to 5 (the most difficult)* for the reading comprehension problems below.

The students were here asked to circle only the one option they thought was closest to their opinion.]

Since these two types of questions were closed (and semi-closed), there was a need for the students to be able to say something in their own words at the end of the questionnaire. So in addition, as mentioned above, there were two open-ended questions at the end. In the first question, they were asked to give their opinion about any other reading comprehension problem they encounter and why.

3. Theories on Reading Comprehension Problems and Strategies

There a lot of theories concerning reading comprehension, different authors have given their contribution to this important aspect of language learning. Since the focus of this paper is reading comprehension problems we are going to be focused on these two important approaches: **'bottom-up'** and **'top-down'**

'Bottom up' theory is the traditional standpoint that has been used to understand the reading comprehension process. According to Nunan (1991),reading in this view is basically a matter of decoding a series of written symbols into their aural equivalents in the quest for making sense of the text. It is based on the smallest linguistic units of a text from which particular knowledge schemas are activated. In this view, the comprehension process starts with words (their pronunciation, semantic value, morphology, etc.), which later give access to more extensive units (syntagmas, sentences, paragraphs) and finally to interpreting the whole text. Based on this approach the whole message of the text is considered the sum of the information in each paragraph. The interpretation of each paragraph is determined by the previous interpretation of each sentence which is the result of interpreting each word, and so on.

'Top-down' approach is in direct opposition to the **'bottom-up'** model. According to Nunan (1991) and Dubin and Bycina (1991), the psycholinguistic model of reading and the top-down model are in exact concordance. **Thus the 'bottom-up'** standpoint is that comprehension begins with more general aspects such as: the title, the basic idea of each paragraph, etc; and subsequently, goes into smaller linguistic units. In this way, this type of processing is principally based on the prior knowledge the speaker has and in the communicative situation. Thus in order to understand a message, first we have to understand a paragraph then later turn to the sentences and words that make up the message. Top-down may allow the understanding of an ambiguous text because it activates high level schemas that guide the reading process. Thus it is very important to use the prior knowledge and reader expectations in the comprehension

process.

Both top-down and bottom-up perspectives now form the basis of every study related to reading comprehension. However, several authors have developed different theories in order to explain reading comprehension in relation to memory, thus giving a contribution to the identification of the problems related to reading comprehension. We will make a quick review of the theoretical accounts that try to explain how information is activated (or reactivated) from background knowledge during reading.

3.1 The metacognitive view

According to Block (1992), metacognition is the control readers execute on their ability to understand a text. In this way, Metacognition involves thinking about what one is doing while reading. Klein et al. (1991) stated that strategic readers attempt the following while reading:

- Identifying the purpose of the reading before reading
- Identifying the form or type of the text before reading
- Thinking about the general character and features of the form or type of the text. For instance, they try to locate a topic sentence and follow supporting details toward a conclusion
- Projecting the author's purpose for writing the text (while reading it),
- Choosing, scanning, or reading in detail
- Making continuous predictions about what will occur next, based on information obtained earlier, prior knowledge, and conclusions obtained within the previous stages.

4. General Problems Faced by Students on Reading Comprehension

When we refer to problems related to Reading Comprehension certainly there are a lot and they vary from the simplest to the biggest ones, and to our surprise they may be different from what we think. The first question of our inquiry is: Which are the main problems faced by high school students in Reading Comprehension? To answer this question we did a study with the help of the questionnaires and surveys in two important high schools in two different cities in Albania.

The result showed that Reading Comprehension difficulty occurs frequently even in students who are good in decoding and spelling. This difficulty in reading comprehension occurs for many reasons, the three most important ones are listed below:

Vocabulary. New words are seen by students as a great obstacle to comprehend a text. It is necessary for students to properly comprehend the words or the vocabulary of a written passage in order to be able to decode the message, thus comprehend a written text.

Working memory. The students often complain of the fact that they cannot recall the information they just read. They need to hold the information in working memory long enough for the information to be more extensively processed, and often some of them lack it.

Absence of extensive reading. Students read a little or nothing. This is considered to be a great obstacle for students to comprehend a written text. These were the aims of the study, and the results will be presented in the following. If a breakdown occurs in one of the aspects mentioned above then the students usually fail to decode a text, and analyze its meaning, which often results in reading comprehension problems and failure.

Type of text. The type of text is another factor that influences a lot reading comprehension. It is considered to be one major barrier. Some texts are easy to be perceived some others are very difficult. Which are these so called easy and difficult text according to students? Why are they called so? These are two other questions which will be answered on this paper.

5. Results and Analysis

Based on the questionnaires we did in some of the high schools of Albania, as described in the Methodology section, we are going to show the results on the chart below. Students were asked to answer several questions about problems they face while trying to comprehend e text.

Based on their answers we ranked seven important so called problems. Most of them correspond to Bottom –up model. Thus, they first start with New Words and finish with Pronouns.

1. New words 20 %
2. Background knowledge 18 %
3. Type of the text 15%
4. Organization 13%
5. Lack of illustration 15%
6. Tenses 10%
7. Linking words 10%
8. Pronouns 5%

Chart nr.1

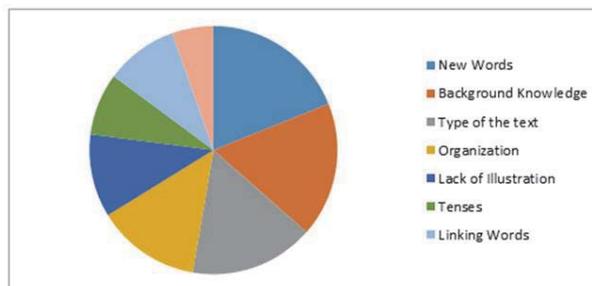
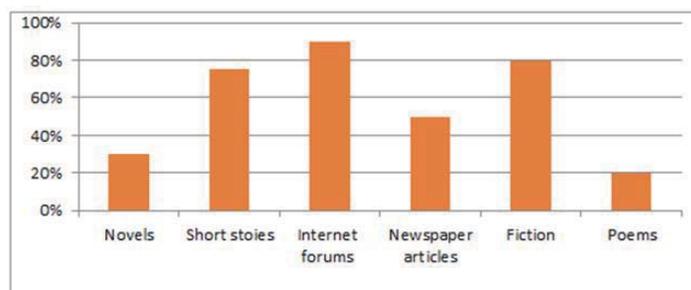


Chart.2 The type of texts students want to work with in school



As we see in the chart, students prefer some types of text to work with it in schools, while others they consider to be not interesting, thus difficult for them. In these context students should be encouraged to do extensive reading and use some sort of techniques to encourage them. As for instance when reading novels it's highly recommended to use these techniques in the classroom:

- Talk about what happened in the text
- Write about what happened in the text
- Dramatize what happened in the text.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

As discussed above Reading Comprehension in the second language is not an easy process. It is affected by many factors which are analyzed from the perspective of students. They vary from new words to the type of text students work with in the classroom.

Students face difficulties in both two approaches, bottom up and top down approach.

Thus, it is important to encourage students, especially foreign language students to read as much as possible because in this way they will find a great help in their process of language learning.

Not only the students, but also the schools and other groups of interests should be encouraged to discuss about rules and policies that encourage extensive reading at schools.

While facing new words, the most common problem reported from students it is highly recommended to follow these advice:

- Do not spend minutes reading and re-reading a sentence just because you don't understand one word.

- Each question is only worth 1 point. Make a guess and move on.
- There are questions that are difficult for native speakers too. Don't get stuck.

Another recommendation is the use of Reading Comprehension strategies as listed below:

Provide students with a variety of opportunities to review what they have read. Try story maps, or story re-telling.

Encourage students to make connections between the reading passage and their worlds. Connection charts can be set up where students are encouraged to link what they learned to their experiences and world knowledge.

Use cooperative learning activities. Assign each student a part of the reading they are responsible for teaching to other group members. This provides the opportunity for students to paraphrase what they have read, which may help commit the information to memory.

Encourage students to re-read passages. They will be able to read with increased speed and fluency, which will allow them to extract more knowledge from what they read.

Allow students to demonstrate their understanding of readings in a variety of ways. Students may like to draw pictures, make charts, write a poem, write a play, etc.

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Appendix

QUESTIONARE (PYETESOR)

Pyetesor nr.2

Qarko nga 1 tek 5 shkallen e veshitresise se ketyre faktoreve gjate leximit te nje teksti:

1. Fjalet e reja

1 2 3 4 5

2. Stuktura e tekstit

1 2 3 4 5

3. Lloji i tekstit
1 2 3 4 5
4. Kohet e foljes
1 2 3 4 5
5. Koha ne dispozicion
1 2 3 4 5
6. Fjalet lidhese
1 2 3 4 5
7. Stili i te shkruarit
1 2 3 4 5
8. Peremrat
1 2 3 4 5
9. Mungesa e i ilustrimeve
1 2 3 4 5
10. Mungesa e nje strategjie te caktuar
1 2 3 4 5

Pyetje te hapura

1. Sa shpesh lexoni dhe analizoni nje tekst ne klase
2. Sa arrini te kuptoni nje tekst ne klase?
3. Cilet lloje tekstesh keni veshitresi te kuptoni?
4. Cfare ju pengon per te kuptuar nje tekst?
5. A ju duket e veshtire analiza e nje teksti ne klase. Nese po, pse?