

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.

2.1 Introduction

It has been widely accepted that reading in English is of paramount importance, particularly in the academic context. This stance is further emphasised by the fact that English is recognised as the international language of communication. This chapter will first of all focus on the early views of second language reading and will also briefly describe the current views of second language reading process. This will be followed by discussion of the major factors affecting reading comprehension, supported by reference to investigations about the role of the reader's schema in helping them to understand the reading text.

2.2 Views of second language reading

Researchers involved in various disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, artificial intelligence and education have contributed to a new understanding of the process of reading a text and how the reader makes sense of the text.

Views put forth by theories of second language reading appear to be influenced by research in the first language reading. Second language reading theories view reading as a rather passive "bottom-up" process. The "bottom-up" term emphasises the role of text based elements. Thus, reading in this view is assumed to be a process whereby meaning is derived from the text, the understanding starts from the smallest textual units at the "bottom" (words) to larger chunks of words, phrases, and clauses sentences at the "top". Therefore the meaning making process is believed to be solely in the text itself and the reader is seen as a passive recipient of information in the text.

The psycholinguistic model of reading (Goodman, 1971; Smith, 1974) which had initially imposed significant influence on first and native language reading began to spread its influence on second language reading theory. These views resulted in the shift of emphasis from text based elements to reader based elements.

In the psycholinguistic view of second language reading, the reader is an integral part in bringing meaning to the entire reading process. Therefore there has been significant emphasis that reader based elements such as the schema they possess and knowledge about the subject matter in the text and plays an important role in the understanding of the text. This line of understanding also further exerts the notion that the reader is an active participant in the reading process when reconstructs meaning from a written text by making and confirming prediction using cues from graphophonic, syntactic and semantic systems of the language. Adherent to this view of reading, the process is seen as an active process and is also referred to as a “psycholinguistic guessing game” The reader becomes the processor of information and predicts meaning while sampling parts of the text.

2.3 Schema theory and reading

Schema theory is a theory about how knowledge is represented in the human memory. It is accepted that all knowledge is packed in units or abstract structures (schemata). Rumelhart (1980:33) considers schemata as the “building blocks of cognition” and “the fundamental elements upon which all information processing depends”.

Schema theory implies that a reader interprets the symbols that form the text by relating it to some existing schema in his memory. This exercise of mapping might bring accurate or inaccurate interpretation of meaning to the reader.

Carrell and Eisterhold (1988:77) illustrate the role of schemata in reading comprehension by offering reflections on this mini text: “The policeman held up his hand and stopped the car”. For readers who activate the schema of traffic policeman signalling a driver to stop a car would understand that the policeman raised his hand and the driver applied the brakes to stop the vehicle. However if the reader has been told or is of the opinion that the policeman is in the likeness of superman, because he upholds the law then the reader would interpret the same sentence to mean that the policeman physically stopped the car which might have no driver. Hence, it is crucial for the reader to activate the appropriate schema against which they try to interpret the text. Therefore, the point made here is that “much of the meaning understood from the text is really in the schematic knowledge of the reader” (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988:79)

With the introduction of schema theory into the understanding of the interaction of reader and text, the reader actively constructs meaning from the text and is not only aided by the use of semantic and syntactic knowledge but also by engaging their schema related to the content of the text. Notable research indicates that the schema in the reader plays a powerful role in the reading task. Clarke and Silberstein (1997) claim that:

“More information is contributed by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories... the reader brings to the task a formidable amount of information and ideas, attitudes and beliefs. This knowledge, coupled with the ability to make linguistic predictions, determines the expectations the reader will develop as he reads. Skill in reading depends on the efficient interaction between linguistic knowledge of the world.”

(136-137)

2.4 Models of reading

Initially the psycholinguistic model, specifically the “top-down’ model was considered the norm of a fluent reader. This assumption was made doubtful by several researchers (Eskey, 1973; Coady, 1979; Clarke, 1979) who questioned its suitability to the SL reader. Grabe (1988) points out that the SL readers “invoke a unique set of constraints”, the most significant of which is that the reader cannot be assumed to have a large vocabulary or the basic syntactic structures that the L1 reader already has. (Carrell, 1988, Clarke, 1979) through their research have established that linguistic inadequacy is an inhabiting factor in understanding reading. Taking this point further Alderson and Urquhart, (1984) state that a rich resource of stored vocabulary in the students’ memory is necessary for effective SL reading.

Opposing the “top down” model of reading is the phonic-based or “bottom up” model of the reading process which portrays processing from letters to sounds, to words, to meaning, in progression, to understand the text. However, other theorists disagree. Goodman (1970) assumes that efficient reading does not result from the precise perception and identification of all the elements in a word, but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary.

There could be differences existing amongst readers and categories of readers. These differences would encompass the mix of skills and knowledge that will definitely vary from one reader to another and also from the same reader encountering different texts.

To sum up, the current view of reading represents a conceptual shift in the way many researchers and teachers think about reading. The traditional view was one which regarded meaning as locked within a text, and reading as a list of discreet skills to be mastered in order to extract meaning from the text. The current view of reading

is that it is a dynamic process in which the reader, using his existing knowledge and strategies, interacts with a range of cues from the text to construct meaning from the text. Therefore it can be assumed that the reading process has to do with relating process to content and the teaching – reading- learning setting.

Therefore, for purposes of this study, the researcher prescribes to the “top-down” model of understanding in reading the two texts.

2.5 Some factors that may influence the understanding of reading comprehension text

There appears to be major factors that affect the reading process. Numerous studies have been carried out to better understand the process of understanding reading text. The two major areas are factors relating to the reader/ learner, and the second section concerns text related factors.

2.5.1 Learner factors

Studies which relate to factors affecting the understanding of reading text brings forth the notion that learner’s prior knowledge and background experience of a topic is a crucial factor in facilitating future comprehension. The reader must not only have sufficient background knowledge but that knowledge must be activated before it can be accessed. Apart from these aspects; the reader must be competent in understanding the meaning of words as well as knowledge of text structures. The learner’s linguistic competence as well as his cognitive and use of metacognitive strategies has also been found to significantly affect the understanding of reading.

2.5.2 Prior knowledge

One of the main assumptions of schema theory is that any text, spoken or written, does not by itself carry meaning. The listener or reader, in order to derive meaning of what is being read or heard has to relate his or her own previously acquired knowledge to construct meaning. (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988). This prior knowledge affects understanding. This understanding would be in the way the text is interpreted and it also affects the degree of understanding.

With reference to prior knowledge, Anderson et al. (1977:369) states “Every act of comprehension involves one’s knowledge of the world as well”. This uncertainty in interpreting what is read was clearly defined in a demonstration of an experiment in which two passages, each with two possible distinct interpretations, were given to subjects from two different departments: physical education and music. One passage could be interpreted either as a convict planning his escape or as a wrestler trying to break the hold of an opponent. The other passage could be interpreted either as friends coming together for a game of cards, or as a rehearsal session of a woodwind ensemble. It was found that the physical education students tended to interpret the first passage in a wrestling context, while the music students read the second passage as a rehearsal session. It was also found that 62% of the students had no idea of an alternative interpretation to the one they gave. The results indicated that their background influenced the interpretation the subjects gave to each passage.

Goodman (cited in Grabe 1991) puts forth the notion that reading is not primarily a process of picking up information from the pages. Hence he proposes that in the “psycholinguistic model of reading”, reading a text is a process whereby prior knowledge acquired by the reader is related to the text and then read by predicting

information and making inferences about meaning from their background knowledge. Smith (1982), concurs with Goodman (1971)) that the readers schematic knowledge contribute more to the meaning making process than the visual symbols on the page. Coady (1979) interprets Goodman's "psycholinguistic model" into a model more suited to second language learners. Coady argues that "conceptualisation of the reading process requires three components: "process strategies, background knowledge and conceptual abilities". He goes on to say that readers focus on process strategies (e.g. word identification whereas more proficient readers shift attention to more abstract conceptual abilities and make better use of background knowledge.)

To further strengthen the notion that background knowledge plays a relevant role in the interpretation of a text, Hudsons, (1988:85) asserts that "the principal determinant of the knowledge a person can acquire from reading is the knowledge he or she already possesses". Hence, it can be safely assumed that the greater the background knowledge a reader has of the text, the better the reader will comprehend the text. Several studies seem to prove the positive relationship between background knowledge and understanding of the reading text (Graves and Cooke, 1980: Graves and Palmer, 1981). Bringing this issue further, Stevens (1982) conducted a study involving tenth grade students by exposing them to relevant background information before they read history passage increased learning from the text. In another study, Hayes and Tierney (1982) found that the greatest single influence on student comprehension was specialised background information related to the topic, regardless of the manner of representation, or how specific or general it was. These findings may be applicable to SL reading as well.

In SL reading research, it has been found that the problem of inadequate understanding of the text could be caused by insufficient background

knowledge: the schema the reader possesses does not relate to the text being read thus difficulties in understanding the text occurs. Failure to possess relevant schema could be caused by differences in culture and what is not part of their culture would pose some difficulty for them to understand if the reader does not possess the relevant schema. Steffensen et al (1979), Johnson (1981) and Carrell (1981) have demonstrated that the texts based on the reader's culture are easier for the reader to understand than text based on a culture, which is unfamiliar to the reader. One possible reason for this occurrence could be that the reader already possesses adequate schema regarding the text based on their local culture. Similarly, academic text may pose some difficulty for students to understand because the text may require background knowledge specific to a particular discipline. To further strengthen the hypothesis that students perform better when reading texts, which correspond to their schematic knowledge. Alderson and Urquhart (1988) carried out an experiment by conducting tests on subjects by dividing them into two groups and giving one group a test containing questions related to their area of study and to the second group, questions unrelated to their area of study. It was hypothesised that problems would be caused not only by unfamiliarity with the content of the subject area, but also by unfamiliarity with such aspects as rhetorical organisation, forms of argumentation and linguistic and non linguistic relations typical of texts in that subject area. The results supported the hypothesis, and it was concluded that academic background could have an effect on reading comprehension.

Another line of argument brings to light the notion that there are instances when understanding is hindered not because of the unavailability of the appropriate schema but because the appropriate schema has not been activated. This was proved by Bransford and Johnson (1972) who conducted an experiment in which

a passage which proved incomprehensible to one group of people was rated very comprehensible by another group which had the advantage of being shown the relevant pictures that served as the context for the passage.

2.5.3 The influence of motivation on reading behaviour

Motivation indeed has a role to play in the development of positive attitudes and achievement of reading behaviour. According to Saracho and Dayton (1991:34) 'Intrinsic motivation and desire encourage learning condition. Children are motivated to read when they see reading as an enjoyable experience related to their needs. Studies also show that children with higher literacy achievement were seen to have better quality of parents/ child interaction in reading. Therefore parents who encourage their children to read and parents who take their children to the library facilitate and support children's reading behaviour. Behaviourist psychologists believe on the effectiveness of extrinsic motivation in promoting reading habit. They believe children would make an attempt to read when incentives were given to them. They further claim that if extrinsic reinforcements were used long enough, the reading activity will become embedded in their value system. Hence it can be assumed that the reader will accumulate a wealth of prior knowledge.

2.6 Attitudes and interest towards reading

In a study conducted by Greaney and Hegarty (1987) regarding the correlates of leisure reading, it was found that factors such as achievement, gender, library membership, socio-economic status and family size played a significant part in the subjects reading habits. They further state that the relationship between reading attitudes and its association with the higher level of reading achievements in turn

correlates with the amount of leisure reading carried out. These studies also appear to establish that attitudes to reading significantly influence leisure time reading habits and further establishes that attitudes to reading correlate significantly with reading for enjoyment. Based on this, it is clear that the development of positive reading habits is related to the level of satisfaction derived from earlier reading experience. Therefore it could be assumed that children who read for pleasure during their free time can and could attain higher levels of ability and reading achievement. A study conducted in Malaysia by Long et al (1984) indicate reading as the first choice leisure time activity compared to others activity such as watching television. Hence we can assure that individual's interest in reading encourages reading and hence adds on to the schemata of the students.

2.7 Exposure to the written word and word knowledge (vocabulary)

Whatever the stages of development or environmental background of the reader, their immediate surrounding in school is of prime importance in creating the atmosphere in which they learn. The learning surrounding should be visually stimulating. According to Saracho and Dayton (1991), early exposure to written word will benefit them eventually. Hess et al also affirms this view in the findings: (1982 cited in Greaney and Hegarty 1987) and say that learner's early exposure to writing has positive influence on reading ability. Therefore exposing pupils to written word is assumed to indirectly play a significant role in cultivating the learner's abilities in reading.

Apart from possessing the necessary schematic knowledge regarding the content of a reading text, the reader should also possess adequate word knowledge. Words serve as labels for concepts. Ulijn and Kempen (1976) and Ulijn (1978), both cited in

Alderson and Urquhart (1984), affirms that poor FL reading comprehension is not due to insufficient knowledge of grammar, but to lack of conceptual knowledge. Conceptual knowledge is associated with word knowledge as well as subject knowledge. They argue that since native speakers may lack subject knowledge, the only difference between first and foreign language readers is their knowledge of vocabulary.

Davis (1968) cited in Devine (1986:30) conducted factorial studies to discover the relationships to one another of several hypothesised reading comprehension skills. He identified five unique skills, of which “recalling word meanings” were the first. In a later study Davis (1972), applied factor analysis to the same data and again found “recalling word meaning” led the list of the four key factors that were identified. Spearfit (1972) re analysed Davis’s original data using “a maximum likelihood” factor analysis and arrived at the conclusion that recalling word meaning was “the best differentiated of all factors”

In Cooper’s study (1984) involving undergraduates at the University of Malaya about practised and unpractised readers of English as a SL, it was found that unpractised readers were severely disadvantaged by their poor knowledge of vocabulary. They had problems particularly with sub-technical vocabulary common across subject areas and sentence connectors that signal inter sentence relationship.

2.8 Knowledge of text structure

While background knowledge of culture, referred to as content schemata, is vital in facilitating understanding of reading text, knowledge of text structures is no less important. This is known as formal, rhetorical, organised structures of different types of text. Rhetorical traditions in institutionalised writing are relatively firm and well

known and writers tend to structure discourse in certain ways. Herber (1978) studied content area textbooks and found the same patterns predominating. Robinson (1978) found certain organisational patterns common to certain school subjects. It is expected then that familiarity with these accepted patterns of organisation would facilitate reading comprehension. As demonstrated by Carrell (1985), explicit instruction of top-level organisation patterns to readers of ESL does facilitate understanding. Formal aspects of language and genre structure contribute to readers' developing comprehension and inferencing abilities. Awareness of text structures is a critical aspect of reading comprehension and learners who are aware of text structure have better comprehension abilities. In this study the subjects will read two expository texts outlining the process of playing two cultures specific games.

2.9 Cultural influence

Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984) conducted a study using two descriptions of weddings both written in English. One was a description of an American wedding, while the other was of an Indian (subcontinent) wedding. Both the Indian students, for whom English was an L2, and the American students, for whom English was the L1, read the descriptions and were asked to recall the descriptions. It was found that readers comprehended texts about their own cultures more accurately than the other. While the readers indicated that the words were easy to understand, the unfamiliar cultural protocol of an Indian wedding made the passage more difficult to remember.

Johnson's (1981) study investigated the effects of the cultural origin of prose on the reading comprehension of 46 Iranian intermediate advanced ESL students at the university level. Half of the subjects read the unadapted English texts of two stories, one from Iranian folklore and one from American folklore, while the other half read

the same stories in adapted English. The subjects' reading comprehension was tested through the use of multiple-choice questions. The recall questions and the texts were also given to 19 American subjects for comparison purposes. Results revealed that the cultural origin of the story had a greater effect on comprehension than syntactic or semantic complexity of the text. In another study, Johnson (1982) compared ESL students' recall on a reading passage on Halloween. Seventy-two ESL students at the university level read a passage on the topic of Halloween. The passage contained both unfamiliar and familiar information based on the subjects' recent experience of the custom. Some subjects studied the meanings for unfamiliar words in the text. Results of recall protocols suggested that prior cultural experience prepared readers for comprehension of the familiar information about Halloween on the passage. However, exposure to the unfamiliar words did not seem to have a significant effect on their reading comprehension. Kang (1992) carried out an interesting study. Kang's study examined how second language readers filter information from second language texts through culture specific background knowledge. Korean graduate students with advanced English read stories and answered questions. A think-aloud protocol assessing their understanding and inferences indicated an effect of culture specific schemata and inferences upon text comprehension. Although all the variables and factors surrounding the issues of how culture shapes background knowledge and influences reading are not fully understood, there is agreement that background knowledge is important, and that content schema plays an integral role in reading comprehension.

In view of the findings mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, this study will evaluate students understanding, using recall protocols to study the influence of culture upon their understanding of the texts. This study will also gather evidence

from the data derived from the questionnaire which will be administered to bring to light the possible influence, reading habits have upon the students' storage of schematic knowledge which enabled understanding of the two reading texts.

2.10 Socio- cultural influence

There seem to be evidence to suggest that the home environment have an influence in developing students' reading interest. Findings by Tizard et al; (1982 cited in Beard 1991), reveals that collaboration between school and home in promoting literacy development has had some positive effect. This positive effect of children reading aloud in the foreign language to their parents on a regular basis even though their parents may have been illiterate was shown by a marked improvement in the reading ability of the pupils. However, contrary to Tizard's assumption that parents' literacy has little significance in developing pupils' reading habits. The argument put forward by McGee et al; (1988 cited in Rowe 1991) seems to suggest that parental literacy level is likely to have a significant impact on the development of students' reading habits which in turn will influence their reading skills. That is to say, pupils from literate background tend to become proficient readers as compared to pupils from background where the reading culture is less dominant. An interesting revelation in this study relates to the effects of reading activity at home and the development of students' attentiveness. The findings seem to indicate that the opportunity to develop and practice attentiveness demanding skills at home results in positive transference of similar skills to the classroom. This was attributed directly to the experience of shared reading activities with family members or friends. Roller and Matambo (1992) suggest another view that encouragement to read in the foreign language is further enhanced if the reading text relates to the readers' background

knowledge. A similar view is posited by Carrell and Eisterhold (1993), who say that the role of background knowledge appears to play a vital role in comprehension of a reading text. Hence the reader can engage in the top down and bottom up information processing, processing the information perceived from the text and relating it to schematic knowledge predominantly acquired through the use of their mother tongue.

Therefore, in this study, the analysis of the questionnaire would give an indication to see whether the students reading habits had an influence on their performances in the recall assessment. The scores obtained in the recall assessment of contents will shed some light as to the relationship of students' reading habits and the schema they possess to enable understanding of the reading texts.