The importance of scanning and skimming strategies in reading comprehension

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Abstract: *Reading is one of the important receptive skills in learning English language. There have been lot of questions about how to teach it. In our reading classes, in Afghan context, the teachers are not familiar to the strategies on how to teach it. They do not teach reading; instead, they are testing students' reading ability. This paper aims to review the definition of reading and the importance of implementation of the two important reading strategies, namely scanning and skimming. The findings from the review of different literature regarding the matter suggest that there is a positive impact of using scanning and skimming in reading classes on students' reading comprehension in all English learning classes. The papers suggest the use of scanning and skimming strategies for teaching reading effectively.*

Key Words: *reading comprehension, reading strategies, scanning, skimming, receptive skill.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

English language learning students should master all the four skills of the language. These skills are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking and writing are called productive skills, while listening and reading are receptive skills which are important for language comprehension. According to Murcia (1991), reading is the most important skill for academic success.

While the study of English becomes ordinary nowadays, reading in English is becoming increasingly important for the students. They need to be able to read texts in English, not only for learning the language, but also for other academic purposes and their careers. Reading has many beneficial effects in language acquisition. Many linguists believe that reading facilitates language development (Martin-Chang & Gould, 2008). The more a person reads, the more they will develop their knowledge of the language and vocabulary.

In educational context, most EFL learners face problems comprehending a text. According to EFL learners, understanding the meaning and the concept of a text can be a great challenge, as they are able to understand each sentence. The problem with them is that these learners do not achieve the meaning of a text. Beale (2013) suggested that the problem with these learners are that they do not know which reading strategy to use in specific situations.

To overcome reading comprehension problems, the students in English reading classes should apply various strategies. The students need to know more about reading strategies. From these strategies two are very common among the readers around the world which are called skimming and scanning. These two strategies can help the readers to understand texts easily and find the information they are looking for promptly. Different levels of students have different problems which will be discussed in the essay.

In accordance with the abovementioned importance of reading for students, reading comprehension problems, understanding uneasy texts and other reading related problems, one can say that reading strategies can help a reader to comprehend a text easily and efficiently.

The aim of this paper is to analyze, classify, and evaluate the use, meaning and uses of the above strategies-skimming and scanning. In addition to that, approaches, methods, and techniques will be contrasted in regards to all levels of study and learner problem areas.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

I have taught reading comprehension classes at different levels at the English Department of Kabul University. A big problem in my classes was seeing no tangible improvement in students' reading skill. Years later, after some experience, I came to know that the reason behind that was not the textbooks or the students. The most important and noticeable reason behind that was no or less use of reading strategies. The purpose of this paper is to further explore the two important reading strategies that will enhance students' reading comprehension.

3. METHOD OF RESEARCH

This paper aims to highlight the importance of two reading strategies: scanning and skimming. The method used to write this paper is the library method. The data is collected from selective academic books, journals, and authentic articles. In addition to that, I have provided examples from my own professional experience and observations to further support the importance of scanning and skimming in reading comprehension classes.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Reading is a strategic process in which readers construct meaning. Comprehending a text is an important part of reading. Comprehension is understanding the sense of a text (McNeil, 1992). Reading comprehension is a process of using reader's prior knowledge to interpret text in order to construct meaning. Reading comprehension is the ability of readers to get meaning from a written text. Readers may read a text, understand all the words and sentences, but do not get the meaning of the whole idea. Sometimes, it is not required to read the whole text to find an information in a long text that the reader is looking for.

Reading is of great importance in our life in modern world. Students always use reading in their modern life. Alderson (1984) stated that "In many parts of the world a reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important to academic studies, professional success, and personal development." Gibson and Levin (1975) claimed that reading is hard for second language learners as covers several language components, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, decoding and comprehension. Despite all these difficulties, learners can overcome these problems if they apply some strategies. (Carrel, 1983). Realizing the need of applying appropriate strategies, (Dreyer, 1998) has proposed skimming and scanning as the effective strategies that if applied by the students it would lead to efficient and meaningful reading.

5. Skimming and Scanning Strategies Analysis:

According to Brown (2001), Skimming and scanning are two famous reading strategies. They are each used for different purposes, and they are not meant to be used all the time. Readers who know how to skim and scan are flexible readers. They read according to their purpose and get the information they need quickly without wasting time. Their skill lies in knowing what specific information to read and which method to use.

Form

Skimming is one of the strategies a student can use to read more in less time. "Skimming" refers to looking only for the general or main ideas, and works best with technical or factual text rather than fictional materials (Harmer, 2007). With skimming, a reader's overall understanding is decreased because he or she does not read everything. He or she only reads what is important to his or her purpose. Skimming takes place while reading and allows you to look for details in addition to the main ideas.

Meaning

To skim effectively, there has to be a structure but the reader does not read everything. Let's say you are doing research on a long chapter or a web site. By reading the first few paragraphs in detail, you will get a good idea of what information will be discussed. According to (Harmer, 2007), Once you know where the reading is headed, you can begin to read only the first sentence of each paragraph. Also called topic sentences, they give you the main idea of the paragraph. If you do not get the main idea in the topic sentence or if the paragraph greatly interests you, then you may want to skim more.

At the end of each topic sentence, your eyes will go through the rest of the paragraph, looking for important pieces of information, such as names, dates, or events. Continue to read only topic sentences, dropping down through the rest of the paragraphs, until you are near the end. Since the last few paragraphs may contain a conclusion or summary, you should stop skimming there and read in detail. Remember that your overall comprehension will be lower than if you read in detail. If while skimming, you feel you are grasping the main ideas, then you are skimming correctly.

Skimming is done at a fast speed, the student or reader shouldn't skim all the time. There are many times, however, when skimming is very useful.

Suppose a student is taking a presentation skills class and have to deliver an oral report in a few days about the first computers ever made. He finds six books and four newspaper articles about this topic. Because he must be ready soon, he does not have time to read each word, but need a large quantity of solid information.

Skimming will help this student locate the information quickly while making sure he uses your time wisely. It will also increase the amount of usable material he obtains for his research.

Suppose you have an exam in a few days. You need to review the material you learned, but you don't want to reread everything. By skimming, you can quickly locate the information you haven't mastered yet and study only those materials.

While reading, ask yourself the following questions to help you decide whether or not to skim. If you answer yes to any of these, then skimming is a useful tool.
- Is this material non-fiction?
- Do I have a lot to read and only a small amount of time?
- Do I already know something about this?
- Can any of the material be skipped?

If you have sufficient background knowledge or believe you do not need the information, then skip it! Skipping material may sometimes be the best use of your time. Just because someone wrote something doesn't mean you have to read it. If you pick and choose carefully what you skim and skip, you will be pleasantly surprised at the large amount of information you can get through in a short period of time.

Scanning is another reading strategy that a student can use it for speeding up his or her reading. Unlike skimming, when scanning, you look only for a specific fact or piece of information without reading everything (Harmer, 2007). You scan when you look for your friend's phone number in a telephone book, and for the sports scores in the newspaper. For scanning to be successful, you need to understand how your material is structured as well as comprehend what you read so you can locate the specific information you need. Scanning also allows you to find details and other information in a hurry.

The material you scan is typically arranged in the following ways: alphabetically, chronologically, non-alphabetically, by category, or textually (Hancock, 1998). Alphabetical information is arranged in order from A to Z, while chronological information is arranged in time or numerical order.

Information can be also be arranged in non- alphabetical order, such as a television listing, or by category, listings of like items such as an auto parts catalog. Sometimes information is located within the written paragraphs of text, also known as a textual sense, as in an encyclopedia entry.

Learning to use your hands while scanning is very helpful in locating specific information. Do you do anything with your hands to locate a word in a dictionary? To find a meeting time on your calendar? Using your hand or finger is extremely helpful in focusing your attention and keeping your place while scanning a column of material.

Keep the concept of key words in mind while scanning. Your purpose will determine the key words. Suppose you are looking in a newspaper for the time a bus leaves from Kabul to Ghazni. The key words to keep in mind are "from Kabul" and "to Ghazni".

Scanning is used when someone want to find specific pieces of information. If you were doing the research for an oral presentation, you could scan the index of books, web sites, and reference materials. You would discover whether they contain any information you want and the pages where the information can be found.

In the past, you probably scanned without knowing you were doing it. Now with the information provided, you can use scanning more intentionally and frequently. The more you practice, the more effective scanning will become. Finally, the most important benefit of scanning is its ability to help you become a more flexible reader.

Learner Problems in Different Levels

Students around the world have many problems in reading and comprehending a text. The problem of Pakistani students may be different from the Iranian students and they may have different problems than a European student. Not to mention that in Europe the students in particular and the people in general read a lot, so it is obvious that they will have many strengths and their problems will be lesser than those living in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the students do not have the habit of studying their own school books, so they have the basic need for the strategies to enhance their understanding from a text.

A problem in Afghan learners is that they do not understand when to use skimming and when to use scanning. If they are asked about something specific in a text, they will read the whole text to find the answer. Another problem for most of the learners is that they are reading the whole text to find the main idea of a text or they look in the text for the words that are mentioned in the question to find the answer easily. The problems of students of at different levels of their study are addressed in the following:

Low-Level Learner Problems

Low-level learners, at beginner or elementary levels, do not usually come in contact with these two strategies - skimming and scanning, which gives little evidence in the way of problem areas for learners at these levels. However, learners at the pre-intermediate level are going to come in contact with both these strategies. It is at this level, which we will examine awareness raising activities and ways to practice and apply these strategies.

According to Gairns (1995) "Soft Reading" a pre-intermediate textbook for adults some awareness rising contexts at the pre-intermediate level will include: scanning and reading for understanding easy texts. According to Ur (1998), low level learners do not have more language knowledge and vocabulary understanding to be enough for skimming. Ur (1998) has mentioned that these students can practice scanning through very easy paragraphs, such as texts about introduction of a city, going to a zoo, school days or introduction to a country which contains pictures and charts. The reason for why can practice scanning but not skimming is that they do not have more language of the target language to skim but scanning can be done because that does not need that much language knowledge. The students will look for captions, pictures and headings to find answers for the questions that they are looking. To look for these answers is called scanning.

Intermediate Level Learner Problems

Skimming and scanning at this level has been viewed as either a reading skill or dismissed as a skill too basic to be taught. Students are expected to read extensively and to read a vast amount of texts ranging from textbooks, journal articles, web pages, novels, textbooks, manuals, magazines, newspapers and mail.

Cheng (1996) has mentioned that in intermediate level the students need to practice both skimming and scanning in texts that are incomprehensible for beginner level students. Ur (1998) has proposed that scanning at this stage can be practice through texts about famous athletes, resumes, news articles and people's lives. He also has added that the students should not only find the answers but the teacher should focus on reasoning. He means that the teacher should not only accept the correct answer for the questions provided by the students but ask them the reason by asking how that is true or untrue or how is that true or false. This will improve the students' critical reading skill and they will pay more attention to correctly applying these strategies.

Advance Learner Problems

Higher level learners in contrast need passages, which are structurally more challenging as Ur (1998) points out. The opportunity for practice of these two strategies is greater. At this stage the students will be presented with a lot of practice in hard texts (Celce-Murcia, 2001). According to Hancock (1998), a lot of practice should be given to students contextualized around subjects such as, critical thinking topics, where the students can compare and contrast what they have gone through as a leaner with what they are going through now as a learner (p.56). The teachers can also add activities which needs the use of both these strategies for finding answers. An example of a possible activity that would be suitable for higher learners is a free group or class discussion about the answers after they are scanned or skimmed. In short, both these strategies should be practiced through hard texts and the reasoning for the answers should be provided by the students.

6. CONCLUSION:

Skimming and scanning strategies are effective to improve students' comprehension in the reading tasks.

In conclusion, I would like to say although teaching is an excellent profession, it is a hard one, too. When teachers enter classroom there are many variables at play for the teacher, first and foremost is that how they will teach these two strategies. It is these variables, which can cause many issues for the teacher and the students alike. Before everything the teacher should have enough information about these two strategies. The teacher also needs to have other activities planned to back up the lesson for different learner levels. These activities should focus in language awareness, practice and student-centered.

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