

Conceptual Clarifications on Whatness and Howness of Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of reading comprehension using different approaches otherwise known as interactive approach. In the paper attempt has been made to inform the reader that reading comprehension is a complex and diversified activity requiring that the reader pay attention to so many variables especially textual resources and how they are organized in the text for it to be textual material. The paper also draws attention to the fact that when words do not always retain their grammatical class whenever they are used in a text, their meanings change according to the context they appear. The paper also developed what is called assistive technology pointing out the uses to which words can be assigned.

Introduction

Reading is an essential component of learning. It is one of the language skills that if it is acquired, it guarantees academic success. Students who are lacking this skill could be vulnerable to academic failure. Of the skills, reading is one of the most complex activities which requires a lot of techniques. As a receptive skill, it requires one to derive meaning from a written document. Writers employ linguistic resources to package some ideas, information and thought. The task of the reader in the exercise is to reconstruct these ideas, information and thought as accurately as possibly packaged by the writer. For effective reading to take place, the reader must have functional eyes to pick the printed stimulus. Arguably, the ability of the eyes to perform reading task of picking the printed or written package is dependent on functional visual pathways- that is, the quality of sight of the reader, very good, good, and poor or near blindness. Besides, the cognitive process is equally important in reading task. The brain must be familiar with the printed material otherwise reading could not be possible. If the reader does not understand Chinese, for instance, no matter how functional his eyes are, reading cannot take place. This means that previous knowledge is very important in any reading task. Comprehension or effective reading is only possible if visual

information connects as well as identifies with background knowledge of the reader. More so, effective reading is further supported by the readers' exposure. A reader who is exposed to different texts from different fields is likely to be more knowledgeable and experienced. Reading, therefore, requires a wide range of activities, skills and techniques before it is comprehended.

What is Reading Comprehension?

The concept of reading comprehension is as complex as reading itself. This is true because the idea of every reading task is about comprehension. Audience who do not comprehend what they read are likely to become disenchanted with the whole exercise. This is why Grellet, (1988) defines reading comprehension as understanding of a written text. Understanding a written text implies extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible. It involves the readers' ability to decode what has been encoded by the writer. The reader should navigate through the text by discriminating digressions, examples and irrelevant points from the main and relevant information. A good reader also discriminates between propaganda and frustration from the central ideas the writer communicates in the text. He should also make effort to imply, make inferences from the text and if possible critique the text (separate facts from opinion). To achieve this high level of comprehension, the reader requires some skills or techniques that would be of help and these techniques would be briefly examined below.

How we Read and Comprehend a Text

We read and comprehend a text when we are familiar with the grammatical structure of the language in which the reading is taking place. The knowledge of the grammatical structure requires the reader's ability to comprehend the different usages to which words are assigned. Words, according to, Brooks and Warren (1949) are used in three ways:

Literary: prose, poetry and drama are the literary domains in which words are put to use. Prose writing could take the form of narratives, argument, description and exposition. Each of these forms of writing determines how words are used or what word should be used for. For instance, narrative essays require the use of words in the past tense since it is more like a report. Descriptive essays require too much use of adjectives. Expository deals with a process so the use to which words are put is basically to explain certain procedure or process. Poetry, on the other hand, is composed in stanzas and verses, and words are mostly saddled with great

semantic tasks. In this type of genre, readers should note, words could be used metaphorically and suggestively. The words mostly express both non-literal and literal meanings. So readers should show caution when interpreting them.

Example:

He is a lion, does not mean that the person addressed is an animal but possess some attributes of a lion.

Drama is another genre which the reader needs to understand to be able to know how words are used. It is a kind of writing that is characterized by dialogue. Dialogic discourses are mostly conversational in nature. Therefore, they are mostly impregnated with inferences and implicatures. In other words, words used could imply and infer as in the following:

X is rich **but** begs implies that X is greedy.

Casual usage concerns with how words are used creatively. In this regard, words are used informally. They are used not only to mean but to express mutual relations that exist between interlocutors.

Consider the following:

X: Your mother is here again.

Y: To hell with her, I don't want to see her again.

The Y's response implies that the word mother does not mean the biological mother of the respondent. The mother here means the Y's girlfriend.

in academic context, readers should bear in mind that words can be used with different semantic and functional variability. That means that the words' grammatical category is not fixed. A word under the class of noun could be used as verb or adjective as in the following examples:

- (a) He is **writing** the assignment.
- (b) He bought the **writing** materials.
- (c) **Writing** is a very demanding task.

In the first sentence, writing is used as a verb, while in the second the same writing is used as an adjective because it is qualifying the noun materials. On the other hand, the third sentence has writing as a noun.

Words under the class of noun could have different functions as in the following:

(a) Who will **police** the police?

(b) The police were deployed to **man** the area.

The bold words in i) and ii) above are traditionally known as noun but in these sentences they are used as verbs,

Similarly, adjectives could have different grammatical functions as exemplified below:

i) He is rich.

ii) The rich are happy.

In the first sentence, the word **rich** is used as an adjective while in the second sentence it is used as a noun.

How Readers get out of this Riddle

Readers should know that when words are used in sentences they mostly lose their original home, that is, their grammatical class. It is, therefore, the slot they found themselves that determine their class. In a simple declarative sentence, there are 3 major slots. The first one is technically called the **subject** and its **filler** is a noun phrase i.e. NP. The second slot is called the **verb** and its **filler** is verb phrase i.e. VP. The third slot is the one that appears after the VP and it is called the **object** and its **filler** is a noun phrase NP. Consider the following:

a) The man read the book.

b) She swept the room.

c) What I learnt from him enriched me.

d) Reading is a difficult task.

All the underlined words represent noun since they occupy the NP slots. The structure of NP, we should note, is:

NP ----- N (noun alone as in ‘Men’)

NP ----- D +N (determiner + noun as in ‘The man’)

NP ----- D+ADJ+N (determiner +adjective + noun as in ‘The old man’)

NP ----- D+ ADV+ADJ+N (determiner + adverb + adjective+ noun as in “The very old man”).

Another strategy to recognize words used as a noun especially singular and uncountable is when they are preceded by definite and indefinite articles – a, an

and the. These words signal that the succeeding words that come after them are either nouns or adjectives followed by nouns. That means that wherever they appear a noun must appear after them. Finally, the reader should note that any of the above could be used as subject of the sentence, direct and indirect objects of the sentence, complement of both the subject and object as well as complement of the indirect object.

On the other hand, simple declarative sentences would have their verb occupying the middle position of the sentences they appear in, which means, they appear after the subject and before the object. They are sometimes preceded with **to** infinitive, sometimes with modal or primary auxiliaries.

Semantic Knowledge of words

Here the reader is expected to note that words do not always retain their ‘original’ meanings. In most instances, words are used by the writers to mean something other than what we know about them. That is why we have different types of meaning associated with words. The most common are denotative meaning and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning is the dictionary meaning of a word. It is the real meaning that a word denotes, that is what everybody agrees the word stands for in the literal sense of the word. For example, the word dog refers to a four legged domestic animal used in hunting and security purposes. However, the same word would be used to refer to a particular behavior of an individual as in **He is a dog-** which means the person possesses some habits or qualities resembling that of a dog. This interpretation of the word as behavior is the connotative meaning of the word. Therefore, connotation refers to all the associated meanings that a word derives from its referents. Contextual meaning is another type of meaning. Consider the following sentence uttered in a university senate meeting by the Vice Chancellor:

1.0 We need more **chairs** in this university.

In the above sentence, the word chair means professors and this meaning is derived from the context in which the word is used. Words such as ‘university senate meeting’ and ‘Vice Chancellor’ provide contextual clues to such meaning.

Clause and Sentence: How they matter in Reading Comprehension

Both clause and sentence are group of words that communicate meanings. However, the two communicate different kinds of information. Writers employ them depending on the information they want to pass across to the reader.

Another difference between the clause and the sentence is that clause is divided into main and subordinate clauses. Main clause enables the writer to package single information that makes complete sense to the reader. However, subordinate clause contains information that does not communicate complete sense to the reader. This enables the writer to use the subordinate clause to form larger structure which we call a sentence. Subordinate clause, unlike the main clause, could be used as subject of a sentence as in: **What I heard from him pains me.** In this sentence, the underlined is a subordinate used as subject of the sentence. Subordinate clause could also function as object of sentence, complement of the verb as well as complement of the direct object as in the following examples:

- a) John put the book **where I could see it.**
- b) I believe **that he will come.**
- c) His father gave him **what he requested.**

The bold items in the above examples report the different grammatical functions which subordinate clause performs. The ability of subordinate clause to perform these functions creates room for the formation of larger structures called sentence. Besides, it is important for the reader to note that writers could use subordinate clause to qualify a noun in a sentence as in: The man **who came here yesterday** taught me a lesson. The bold is a subordinate clause which functions as an adjective.

Although we mentioned that clause and sentence are different, this difference, the reader should note, does not prevent them from working together. Sentences are produced via the combination of clauses. A sentence, therefore, that is made up of two main clauses is described as compound sentence while the one that consists of main and subordinate clauses is tagged complex sentence. The former gives the writer the liberty to package two independent ideas in a string of words. On the contrary, information (contained in the latter) that requires background knowledge to make complete sense is packaged in a complex sentence. This means that complex sentence contains two set of unequal information- one is complete and the other incomplete. Consider the following:

- (d) Aisha read the book.
- (e) Binta read the book.
- (f) Aisha and Binta read the book.

In these examples A and B combined to form a compound sentence. However, the following sentence has a different structure:

i. I read the book that he gave me yesterday

The above sentence contains clauses i.e. the main clause: 'I read the book' and subordinate clause: 'that he gave me yesterday.' Thus the meaning of 'that he gave me yesterday' is dependent on the main clause.

Sentences have semantic functions beside the structural roles they play. Sometimes they are used to ascertain the truthfulness or falseness of a proposition; that is how a particular expression matches with reality in the real world. They are called declarative sentences. These sentences are in form of a statement, and they are marked off with a period. Examples:

4.0 I am writing a letter.

5.0 The students and the lecturers are waiting for the bus.

Interrogative sentences are types of sentences used to request for information. These sentences enable the writer to seek for different types of information. In a situation where the writer needs elaborate information, WH questions are used to satisfy this need. For instance, the writer may ask questions such as:

- a. What are you doing here?
- b. Why do you come to school late?
- c. How did you arrive at this answer?

In these sentences, the writer needs elaborate answers. However, if the writer's concern is to seek for a brief answer, polar questions are used. Polar questions are questions that require 'yes or no' answers as exemplified below:

- i. Are you leaving now?
- ii. Is the teacher around?
- iii. Were the children at home?

All these questions could be responded to by yes or no answers; hence the questions do not require any details. Another type of question which the reader should note is the rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions are questions that do not ask for any information. They are used mostly by the writers to express surprise or emotional display on a particular point the writer is discussing. For examples expressions such as: 'What have you got to do with that boy?' does not ask the addressee to give any answer as regards to what he is going to do with the boy. Generally speaking, writers use this type of sentence to problematize a discussion and this is curiously done in order to provoke the curiosity of the

reader. Question sentences are sometimes used in a text to make the reader to ponder over a particular issue.

On the contrary, imperative sentences have a different semantic import. The use of these sentences foreground dialogic encounter. In other words, they are the type of sentences supported by contextual information. Their basic feature is that both the subject and the object of the expression are external to the sentence. If for instance, X says to Y, 'Stand up', the X and the Y will not appear in the body of the expressions. Hence, to understand who the X and Y are, we need background information. Nonetheless, the use of imperative sentences does only give order but also express interpersonal relations that exist between interlocutors.

Reading Comprehension and Paragraph

Paragraph is a group of words with unity of purpose. It is the level at which sentences come together to form what Halliday describes as text. A text is anything beyond sentence. Therefore based on this view a paragraph is a text. Every meaningful paragraph must have what is called topic sentence. A topic sentence is the sentence that introduces the main idea in the paragraph. Fish (2005) describes the topic sentence as first sentence. First sentence knows all about the sentences that will follow it and is in a sense the last sentence. It has, according to Fish, an 'angle of lean', it leans forward, and inclining in the direction of the elaboration it anticipates. Brooks and Warren (1988) describe paragraphs as beads joined together with a thread to form necklace, for which the reader needs a signpost. This means that topic sentence is the main sentence in a paragraph, and all other sentences are subordinate sentences. They are sentences that clarify, justify, exemplify, expatiate and redefine the topic sentence, among other things. In reading comprehension task, the reader should know that all sentences in a paragraph hinge on the argument or proposition of the topic sentence irrespective of what they do. Thus, to be able to identify and understand the topic sentence in a paragraph makes the reading task very simple. If the reader locates and comprehends the topic sentence, he would be able to know what the whole paragraph is talking about. He would also be able to know the point the writer seeks to discuss.

Sentences in a paragraph may have different propositional intents. These intents are easily recognized through the use of cohesive devices or transitional words or phrases. Writers use them to link a paragraph with another or a sentence with another on the basis of these intents. Markers such as moreover, similarly, in

addition, however, nonetheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, therefore, thus, accordingly, consequently, in conclusion, in the end etc. are used by the writers within and between paragraphs to control and maintain their trend of thought. Writers, for instance, use ‘*moreover*’ and ‘*similarly*’ to show express similarity or continuation of the same ideas. However, contrast is observed through the use of words such but, so, however, nonetheless, nevertheless, on the other hand and so on. These words according to Van Dijk (1977) are used at the beginning of a paragraph to signal topic change. They are used by writers to tell the reader that the preceding and succeeding sentences or paragraphs contrast in ideas or propositions as in; ‘**The teacher did make it to class but he gave an assignment.**’ In this sentence, the idea of making to the class contrasts with that of giving assignment. Words such as ‘consequently’ are used to show result or consequence (result or effect), as in: ‘**The student didn’t read, consequently, he failed the exams.**’ In conclusion and finally are expressions that signal to the reader that the writer is concluding his write up. Cohesion is achieved through the use of pronouns and synonyms. This means that pronouns always have antecedent to which they refer in the sentence. In the sentences, ‘Aisha comes to school late every day. She has always been like that these days.’ the pronoun **she** refers Aisha. Lexical choices within the paradigmatic axis enhance cohesion in a paragraph. Consider the following:

Nigeria’s dogged series of experimentation with democracy have consistently ended in a tragic **fiasco**. Ironically, this **failure** to democratize emanates from more structural dysfunctions...

In the above excerpt ‘fiasco’ and failures are synonyms used to bind the first and the second sentences through lexical choices.

Worthy of note is how writers deploy articles (both the definite and indefinite) to maintain cohesion in their piece of writing. The use of indefinite article such as ‘a’ and ‘an’ introduces a new participant in the discourse. However, the use of definite article signifies or refers to a referent that has been foregrounded earlier. Consider the following excerpt:

Consider always the ways in which we refer to **a persons** or things: using proper names, pronouns, articles and so on. **A person** named ‘John’ is referred to as ‘John’ only in his own, known context; **a person named** ‘the policeman’ is an officer we know (or are supposed to know). Saying ‘John is the policeman’ makes

sense only in contexts where there is **a person** John whom I know by name and who happens to be the policeman (or is assigned that role in a play), Mey, (p40).

From the above excerpt, the bold phrases, a person, contain an indefinite ‘a’. The use of this article with the noun indicates that different referents are referred to. In the above, we can talk of four persons. However if, for instance, any of these nouns is preceded with a definite article ‘the’, it means we will have three persons as in: ‘A man sent the boy. The man looks nice.’ In these sentences we can only talk of two participants, that is, the man and the boy. The ‘man’ in the second sentence refers to the first ‘man’ that appears in the first sentence. So, the use of articles and other cohesive devices have great semantic relevance in understanding a text. In conclusion, reading comprehension is multifarious activities that require knowledge of grammar. This can be achieved if the reader is familiar with how writers use this knowledge to produce a comprehensible text.

Assistive Technology in Understanding Verb

Verb is the most complex concept in grammar. It is the basic element in the clause structure. In System Functional Grammar, it forms the transitivity system. This is why it is often described as the chief word in a sentence. It is the chief because it is the center in which the basic argument of a clause realized. For this reason and many others, there is the need for a practical demonstration of how the verb transmogrifies into different forms, for example, using a tabular form. The table is what this paper christened as assistive technology that is a kind of table that assists the reader to understand the forms of the verb. Verb changes into five forms as follows.

SN	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	Remark
1	Dance	Dances	Dancing	Danced	Danced	Regular verb
2	Utilize	Utilizes	Utilizing	Utilized	Utilized	Regular verb
3	Use	Uses	Using	Used	Used	Regular verb
4	Sleep	Sleeps	Sleeping	Slept	Slept	Irregular verb
5	Write	writes	Writing	Wrote	Written	Irregular verb
6	Cast	Casts	Casting	Cast	Cast	Irregular verb
7	Hide	Hides	Hiding	Hid	Hid	Irregular verb
8	Be	-	Is, are, am and being	Was and were	Been	Irregular verb

9	Read	Reads	Reading	Read	Read	Irregular verb
10	Fly	Flies	Flying	Flew	Flown	Irregular verb

From the above table, we should note the following:

All the words under F1 are the infinitive form of the verb. F2 stands for simple present tense of the verb used with 3rd person singular as in ‘She dances very well’. However, F3 expresses an action in progress. They are used with auxiliary verbs to express progressive action as in, ‘He is writing the assignment’. F4 expresses past simple while F5 expresses actions and events in the present and past perfects. F3, we should note, is described as ‘ing’ participle and F4 is called ‘ed’ participle. Items under F3 could be used as adjective as in ‘writing material’. Verbs whose F4 and F5 are formed by simple addition of ‘ed’ to their base form to derive their F4 and F5 are referred to as regular verbs. While those whose F4 and F5 are formed in different ways other than the addition of ‘ed’ are called irregular verbs. Of all the irregular, ‘be’ is the most notorious because its F3 are the 3rd person singular irregular **is** (s/he is), 2nd person singular/plural irregular **are** (you are, they are etc.) and 1st person irregular **am** (I am). It has as its past simple 1st person singular and 3rd person singular **was** (I was, he was etc.) and 3rd person plural **were** (they were).

In conclusion this paper, using an interactive approach, guides the reader on how the writers combine words to form larger utterances. It discusses the semantic import of words, phrases, sentences and the different functions they perform when they are combined. In addition, the paper examines how paragraphs are structured. It discusses the use of topic sentence in a paragraph and the various cohesive markers that determine the trend of thought of the writer. Finally, it uses assistive technology that is a tabular form that expresses how verbs transform into different forms. This enables the reader to know the different behaviors verbs exhibit in different forms.

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