

## Investigating the Role of Comprehensive Reading in Understanding the Contextual Meaning of a Written Discourse

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### Abstract

This research aims at investigating to what extent Fourth Year B. A. students of English at different universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia do not understand the contextual meaning when they read a written discourse. In this research, the quantitative method as well as the questionnaire has been adopted as a tool for collecting data relevant to the study. Here, the importance of comprehensive reading in understanding the contextual meaning of a written discourse is also brought to the light. The sample of this study comprises one hundred participants working as English language teachers at different Saudi universities. The scores obtained from the questionnaire have been compared and the results reveal that the students encountered difficulties in using comprehensive reading. The results which are obtained from the questionnaire also indicate that there is a significantly high difference in score among the students. Therefore, this points out that the fourth year university students do not understand contextual meaning to some degree when they read a written discourse.

**Keywords:** Reading Fluency, Reader-Response Approach, Communicative Approach, Written Discourse

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'comprehensive reading' means reading with understanding. This helps a reader analyze as well as interpret the text easily and closely. There is a correlation between comprehensive reading and reading fluency. 'Reading fluency' refers to the ability to read words accurately, quickly and effortlessly. Additionally, fluency skills include the ability to read with an appropriate expression and intonation or prosody as well. Fluency, therefore, relies on three key skills: accuracy, rate, and prosody.

Reading fluency can and should vary, even for skilled readers, depending on the type of text (e.g. narrative, expository or poetry), familiarity with the vocabulary, background knowledge of the content, and the amount of practice the student has had with a particular text or type of text. Fluency comes from many successful opportunities to practice reading (Lambert, 2007). Fluency is a necessary but not sufficient component for comprehension. It is, however, the bridge that links accurate word decoding to comprehension (Rasinski, 2004). The ability to read fluently allows readers to free up processing 'space' so that they can comprehend, make connections to the text, and acquire new vocabulary. Typically, students who cannot read fluently show a significant lag in reading comprehension skills too.

### **Aims and Scopes of the Study**

This study aims to investigate to what extent fourth year university students at various Saudi universities do not understand contextual meaning when they read a written discourse. The scope of the study is limited to English language teachers. This study was conducted by 100 (one hundred) English language teachers of diverse universities of Saudi Arabia.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The earlier reading fluency intervention is provided, the more likely it is that students will respond. "Once serious fluency problems have developed, they can be resistant to remediation" (Spear-Swerling, 2006). Joe Torgesen and his colleagues (2010) have found that reading fluency is the hardest area to improve when intervention has not occurred early enough. This is not to say that fluency cannot be improved, rather that early identification and intervention are most likely to result in a complete remediation.

It is important to note that when intervening for reading fluency, an overemphasis on rate alone can have a detrimental effect on overall reading ability. Direct or explicit instruction is required for students to improve all three components of fluency: accuracy, rate, and prosody. Reading rate develops as a function of efficient decoding skills, opportunities for successful practice, and learning to read with expression (Rasinski, 2004). A good fluency intervention programme includes frequent opportunities to practice reading. According to the National Reading Panel (NRP), guided oral reading in small groups is sufficient for "typical" children; however, it should not be the sole technique for teaching fluency to students with an identified disability in this area (NRP, 2000). Teachers should be the model reading fluency, students should work in pairs, and chunking or phrasing should be explicitly taught. Other strategies include simultaneous oral reading, reader's theater, and having students chart fluency rates as they improve.

### **The Role of Reading in Writing**

On writing effectively in English, it has been argued that reading has an important role to play. In other words, possession of the basic skills of reading can enhance the skills to compose and write (Ross & Roe, 1990). Sovik (2003) believes that reading and writing,

support, complement and contribute to each other's development. Other authors such as Cox, C. (2002) and Tierney & Leys (1984) rationalize that both reading and writing should be taught together. In fact, Heller (1995) and Ross & Roe (1990) contend that the processes involved in learning both skills are the same. Reading or modeling (McCann & Smagorinsky, 1988; Irwin & Doyle, 1992) in writing has been looked at from different perspectives. Meriwether (1997) and Nunan (1999) look at it from a product oriented perspective when linked to extend writing. Adeyemi (2008) quotes Escholz (1980) who defends the use of models in composition writing as highlighted:

“Certainly few people will take exception to the general rule that one good way to learn to write is to follow the example of those who can write well ... professional writers have long acknowledged the value of reading; they know that what they read is important to how they eventually write.”(p. 63)

Furthermore, White and Arndt (1991) see modeling as beneficial since it explores the link between reading and writing to improve students' writing skills. In other words, reading can be used to prepare learners for more realistic forms of writing. Also, writing activities in this context can provide a basis for integrated learning through reading and writing (Adeyemi, 2008). It is equally important that this connection does not ignore the use of interactive activities provided by process writing. The reading dimension of this discussion can be equated with response based reading as well as the subsequent writing assignment borne out of what students have read about and their perceptions of the piece. The students' writing can then be read and appreciated the same way they have appreciated or responded to other people's writing as suggestions are made, and the writing and ideas expressed, revised for further improvement to the learners' developing texts.

### **Reader-Response Approach to Reading**

The Reader-Response Approach to reading emphasizes the reader's role in creating meaning and stresses the importance of the reader's own interpretation of texts. It rejects the idea that there is a single fixed meaning inherent in every literary work and holds that the individual creates his or her own meaning through a 'transaction' with the text based on personal associations. It is believed that readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences and knowledge to their reading to make each interpretation subjective and unique (Rosenblatt, 1985, 1994).

The underlying theory of this approach recognizes that readers are active agents in the reading process and that their experiences, the individual emotions, feelings, understanding and the stances they bring into the reading process counts. It also acknowledges the reader's engagement with the text, the psychological, and the concern with the cognitive, subconscious forces, the social and cultural features that affect meaning (Probst, 2015). Iser, W. (1978) argues that even though the text in part controls the reader's responses, at the same time it contains 'gaps' that the reader creatively fills. This gap that the reader fills creatively in spoken or written response can

be channeled or harnessed by the teacher and facilitator to aid students to compose and write their views and ideas.

In making a case for the reader-response aspect in teaching composition writing, reference would be made according to Collie and Slater (1987) who maintain that literary texts have the potential to provide a rich context in which individual lexical and syntactic items are made more memorable for students. They argue that by reading a substantial and contextualized body of texts, students gain familiarity with many features of written language such as the variety of possible structures and the different ways of connecting ideas which broadens and enriches students writing skills. In all these ways, it is believed that literary works and experiences can improve students' spoken language and reading and writing abilities as a result of the non-judgmental and non-threatening classroom environment encouraged in the reader-response process.

### **Integrating Reader-Response in Writing**

Although reader-response process is often used for literature, it can be integrated into assignments in other subject areas such as in composition writing where the particular type of creative writing is required. For example, composition writing by nature is expected to be creative and closely allied to the aesthetic dimensions which the reader-response strategy can provide (Probst, 2015). In this way, students can be able to find new ways to channel their thought and creativity.

Rather than to rely on a teacher to give them a single standard interpretation of a text or situation, students learn to construct their own meaning by connecting events and situations in print to issues in their lives and describing what they experience as they read (Mora & James, 2010). This oral or written description of events, reactions, responses or expectations can be exploited extensively to help students put their thoughts and ideas together in logical forms to develop their writing skills. Also, the exposure to different literature genres or texts has the potential benefit of helping students sharpen their reading skills as well as develop vocabulary they need so badly to put their ideas down in written form. Moreover, the diverse responses of individual readers and the freedom it allows in a response-based classroom, enable students to value their own views, discover the variety of possible meanings, language usage, vocabulary and grammar necessary to express thoughts in speech and to extend them into their writing (Probst, 2015). As learners' personal responses are valued, they begin to see themselves as having the authority and responsibility to judge their own writing and see their potential ability as writers, too.

Finally, the social or interactive opportunities of a response based classroom makes it best suited for cooperative and group activities encouraged in communicative language teaching and the process approach to writing. This benefit is articulated (Karolides, 2000) in the following:

“In the weighing and balancing of class exchanges, the students gain insight into the views of others. In this atmosphere of acceptance and honesty, students will sense an appropriate, expressive reading or a limited or misdirected reading; they will measure and receive the ideas of others, incorporating them in their own revising and building their interpretations of the text”(p. 21).

The above argument has implications for students’ reading skills development and articulation of ideas in spoken forms that can be explored and extended into their writings. This is made possible as students read model texts, respond and examine those responses by speaking, reading and writing composition drafts, revising and fine-tuning their drafts. The Communicative Approach to language teaching favoured by the Botswana government requires that the process approach to composition writing be emphasized so that students learn the language in meaningful interactions and more spontaneous and natural discourse (Republic of Botswana, 1996). There is no doubt that the process has been proved to be of use in very many ESL contexts. At the same time, some of the criticism against the approach needs re-examination. Some of the writing difficulties identified (Adeyemi, 2008) included difficulties with meaning, cohesion in writing as well as inability to express ideas in speech and writing through lack of vocabulary on the part of the learners that were studied.

Last but not the least, oral discussions, small group discussions, pair works, journal writing activities, writing logs, free responses which are some of the strategies used with response based teaching are similar to process writing activities that can be incorporated, modified or strengthened to teach writing skills needed in the junior secondary level composition writing. All these, coupled with the democratic environment and attitude encouraged in a response-based classroom are advantages to be explored to solve the problems of the teaching and learning of ESL writing.

### **Techniques of using the Reader–Response Approach in Writing Pedagogy Reading or Modeling**

The teacher introduces a reading topic in the form of articles from books, newspapers, novels, videos, and dramatization as long as it is something that excites the students’ interest and is at the level of their understanding. At this stage, a brief introductory activity for the reading can be done such as a discussion or opinion poll of the topic or theme of the reading can be done. This would be followed by a class discussion (shared responses) of questions on the reading that are reader-response based that would enable students to do the subsequent composition writing assignment later on in the lesson.

Nuttall, C. (1982) says: these and more, along the lines of the above activities and questions can be modified to improve not only students’ reading skills but their spoken and written language also. More importantly, a novel, the topic in a narrative, a play or poem puts a human face to the issues, themes or concepts being discussed and through the reader response activities; multiple interpretations that tap into students’ creative ability are encouraged. This can then translate into creative writing and enrich the use

of language. Through shared responses, students discern a range of reactions to the topic being read or discussed. This helps to build or clarify the students' own responses. In this process, students get the opportunity to identify and reflect on their own reactions by exploring their responses to questions posed on the subject or their feelings/attitudes to the events in the reading. The teacher should be careful at this point so that s/he does not become judgmental or prescriptive. Cross fertilization of ideas should be encouraged. It is equally important throughout the process that students are allowed to disagree or agree and to write down important information as they deem fit.

### **Reading and Learning in the Discipline**

In management and HRM (human resource management) disciplines, it is a common practice to expect students to read scholarly academic journal articles as part of either stand-alone activities or in preparation for a written assessment task. The scholarly literature provides a foundation for students who may wish to pursue research in HR and provides important knowledge they will need as future HR professionals. The activity of reading internalizes and applies academic literature as part of a student's apprenticeship into the academic discourse of the discipline (Dunn, 2007).

Both reading and writing can be difficult for students (Rachal et. al., 2007), especially those who are studying courses in their second languages. As a result, native and non-native speakers alike may require some intervention from discipline teachers to ensure that they learn how to read journal articles and synthesize the new knowledge they provide into their own writing.

### **METHOD AND INSTRUMENTS OF THE STUDY**

In this research, the descriptive, analytical and quantitative methods as well as a questionnaire have been used as a tool in the collection of relevant data and information in pursuing this paper. The population of this study is drawn exclusively from English language teachers at different Saudi universities. A sample of one hundred English language teachers from different universities was randomly selected for the questionnaire to conduct the research.

The questionnaire has been designed and used to answer the question "to what extent fourth year university students do not understand contextual meaning when they read a written discourse". Among the students who study English as a second language provided answers to the problems encountered but the teachers who conducted the study do not know why these took place. The tables below are going to illustrate what has been stated earlier.

### **Teachers' Questionnaire**

This item (a set of questionnaire) tries to elicit information from the teachers concerning their views about the fourth year Saudi university students who do not understand contextual meaning when they read a written discourse.

**Statement- 1** Students do not know how to paraphrase reading a discourse when they read the written discourse.

**Table 1.** Students do not know how to paraphrase reading a written discourse when they read it.

	Alternative Choices	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	79	79.0	79.0	79.0
	Neutral (No opinion)	21	21.0	21.0	100.0
	Disagree	00	00.0	00.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (1) above shows that a vast majority of the respondents (79%), English language teachers at different Saudi universities 'strongly agree and agree' that students do not know how to paraphrase reading a written discourse when they read a discourse. Only 00% do not agree to that. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed in how to paraphrase a written discourse.

**Statement- 2** Students require the knowledge of the world when they read a written discourse.

**Table 2.** Students require the knowledge of the world when they read a written discourse.

	Alternative Choices	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	67	67.0	67.0	67.0
	Neutral (No opinion)	15	15.0	15.0	82.0
	Disagree	18	18.0	18.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (2) above explains that a vast majority of the respondents (67%) 'strongly agree and agree' that students require the knowledge of the world when they read a written discourse. Only 18% do not agree to that. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed in using the knowledge of the world.

**Statement- 3** Students do not know how to address a discourse when they read a written discourse.

**Table3.** Students do not know how to address reading a written discourse when they read it.

	Alternative Choices	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	83	83.0	83.0	83.0
	Neutral (No opinion)	8	8.0	8.0	91.0
	Disagree	9	9.0	9.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (3) above shows that a vast majority of the respondents (83%) 'strongly agree and agree' that students do not know how to address reading a written discourse when they read it. Only 9% do not agree to that. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed in how they can address reading a written discourse.

**Statement-4** Students require reviewing words meanings when they read a written discourse.

Table 4. Students require reviewing words meanings when they read a written discourse.

	Alternative Choices	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	84	84.0	84.0	84.0
	Neutral (No opinion)	6	6.0	6.0	90.0
	Disagree	10	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (4) above explains that a vast majority of the respondents (84%) 'strongly agree and agree' that students require the knowledge of grammar when they read a written discourse. Only 10% do not agree to. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed in using the knowledge of grammar.

**Statement- 5** Students require the knowledge of others' culture when they read a written discourse.

**Table 5.** Students require the knowledge of others' culture when they read a written discourse.

	Alternative choices	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree & Agree	89	89.0	89.0	89.0
	Neutral (No opinion)	3	3.0	3.0	92.0
	Disagree	8	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

The table (5) above expresses that a vast majority of the respondents (89%) 'strongly agree and agree' that students require the knowledge of others' culture when they read a written discourse. Only 8% do not agree to that. This indicates that students need to be trained and developed in knowing others' culture when they read a written discourse.

## REPORT DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

After comparing and calculating the five sub-hypotheses, we have found that the average of the total number of the sub-hypotheses in percentage (79%+67%+83%+84%+89%) is equal to 84% which represents negative responses justifying that teachers do not know why fourth year university students of Saudi Arabia do not understand the contextual meaning when they read a written discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The data collected from the questionnaire which had been given to the teachers in our research were analyzed in relation to the study hypothesis. Again, the data were exclusively drawn from English language teachers at different universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia but they do not know why these took place. The population is English language teachers of various Saudi universities. A sample of 100 (one hundred) teachers was randomly selected for the questionnaire. The questionnaire was used by the researchers as a tool in the collection of data relevant to this study. The researcher questionnaire has been designed to identify the problems encountered by teachers who do not know why fourth year university students of Saudi Arabia do not understand contextual meaning when they read a written discourse.



The scores obtained from the questionnaire for all participants were analyzed and compared statistically by using frequencies and percentages. The analysis showed that the highest percentage which is represented as 'strongly agree and agree' is estimated (84%) in contrast to the percentage of 'strongly disagree and disagree' which is estimated by lesser than this one. Accordingly, this justifies that there is a statistical difference in terms of teachers' point of views that fourth year students at different Saudi universities do not understand contextual meaning when they read a written discourse.

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