

Introduction

To start with, the students in the third year of the intermediate level in Iraq are supposed to develop certain skills in learning English which enable them to use English effectively in understanding and speaking the language at normal speed (Al-Hamash ,1984:357). Additionally, they are supposed to develop their reading skills to be able to read and comprehend English texts and passages within their level (ibid, 36). To the best knowledge of the researcher and as far as the reading comprehension skills are concerned, most of the students show no sign of developing these skills when they finish their intermediate study. This forms a serious problem which hinders the process of teaching and learning English in the stages which follow the intermediate level. Therefore, it is necessary to tackle this problem and take effective procedures to overcome it. This paper suggests a step to taken to help the students to develop their reading comprehension skills.

1. The Meaning Of Reading Comprehension And Background Knowledge

1.1. What is reading comprehension?

Explaining the meaning of reading comprehension, Bormuth (1969) suggests that '...comprehension ability is thought to be a set of generalized knowledge-acquisition skills which permit people to acquire and exhibit information gained as a sequence of reading printed language' (1969[quoted in Harris and Sipay 1980:479]) .

The main components of reading comprehension are: decoding, lexical access and text access, and text organization. However, the last component, which can be defined as obtaining meaning from units larger than the single word, is what most writer mean by reading comprehension (ibid.). Similarly, Grellet (1981:3) says that 'understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible'. To acquire such efficiency requires to apply different reading strategies and involves various skills among which are the following: understanding explicit and not explicit information stated in the text, understanding the communicative value (function) of sentences and utterances, understanding relation within the sentence, understanding relations between the parts of a text through cohesion devices, recognizing indicators in discourse and identifying the main point or important information in a piece of discourse (ibid.,4-5).

Accordingly, if we want to develop a reading comprehension competence in our students, we have to help them to acquire the afore-mentioned skills. In my point of view this can be achieved by means of text, methodology and teacher.

1.2. Present reading materials in Book 5

Reading materials in Book 5, which is the prescribed textbook for the third year of the intermediate level in Iraq, are introduced in a form of reading passages aiming at reinforcing the language structure presented in the units of the book. Each reading passage has an average of five paragraphs or paragraph like sections. This follows that an average of one paragraph should be taught every two lesson periods.

The topics are selected from a variety of origins. Three passages are about history (ancient Iraq, Arab and Islamic): 'Ur', 'Saladdin' and 'Khawla Bint-ul-Azwar'. Three Passages are about the target culture (i.e. English): 'Let the boy Speak', 'A Brave Girl' and 'Penny Postage'. Three passages are about contemporary issues: 'A blind boy', 'The Voyage of the Tigris' and 'Palestine'. Three other passages are of general interest: 'Football', 'Looking at Science' and 'The Oasis'. Each passage is followed by a glossary containing the meaning of the new words in Arabic. Each passage is also followed by a single multiple-choice exercise.' Since there are 12 reading passages in Book 5 so here are 12 multiple-choice reading comprehension exercises' (Al-Hamash 1984:139). Additionally, the Teacher's Guide contains comprehension questions for each reading passage.

However, the aforementioned passages and exercises do not contribute much to developing the student' reading comprehension skills as we'll see later in this paper.

1.3. Evaluating the reading materials in Book 5

To start with , the audio-lingual method , which is adopted as the basic teaching method in Iraq , gives primacy to the oral skills (listening and speaking) at the expense of the other two skills (reading and writing) under the justification that improving the oral skills will automatically facilitate the graphic skills.

Thus, according to this method, reading in Book 5 is, as expressed by Al-Hamash's words, 'just one of the activities that the book includes. Often it is not a major activity' (1977:2).Going hand in hand with this , the reading text have been exploited as context to reintroduce the grammatical item taught in the oral practice activities of the unit of the book. Therefore, they have been modified and simplified to function as a vehicle for carry the language structure. What is harmful in this simplification is that the information presented in the texts has been made explicit to an extent that very little has been left to challenge the students' intelligence and activate the skills required for comprehension which are mentioned in 1.1. Additionally, the use of cohesive devices such as discourse markers and reference items, beyond the level of the sentence has become limited.

As far as reading comprehension exercises and question are concerned, they can be considered inadequate because they are designed in a way that they require a straightforward answer.

1.4. Analysed text

The following text is extracted from one of the reading passages presented in Book 5, namely 'Ur'. This passage is presented in four sections. The first section gives a definition of 'Ur' and shows its location. The second section describes the streets and the houses of the city. In the third section, the writer introduces some information about the invention of picture-writing in Ur and how the people of Ur used to write. Finally, the passage ends up in section 4 by giving a description of some of the beliefs of the ancient people of Ur with reference to the kings and queens of the ancient city.

The aim of presenting and analyzing this text here is to throw some light on the problem in the reading texts already discussed in 1.3.

The streets of Ur were unpaved and very narrow. Carts pulled by mules were not allowed to enter the city. The houses were built with bricks made of mud and dried in the sun. They had no lower windows. The small upper windows had reed mats to keep out the heat of the sun. The main rooms of a house were built round a central court, which was open to the sky. The guest-room was on the lower floor. It was furnished with a rug for sitting. (Al-Hamash et al 1983:57)

In his attempt to describe the city of Ur, the writer has introduced three kinds of information. In the first sentence he describes the streets of the city. Then he moves to talk about the 'carts pulled by mules' in the second sentence. I do not find the interpretation of this sentence related to the first one as the carts were not allowed to enter the city because they were pulled by mules and not because the streets of the were unpaved and very narrow.

However, the writer, then, exploits the rest of the paragraph to describe the houses of Ur.

We can see from this text that the meaning of each sentence has been made explicit to the extent that each sentence can be interpreted by the students by recognizing the literal meaning of the words. This means that the students do not need to look into the other parts of the text to look for support to guess the meaning.

Exceptional from that are the fourth and the eighth sentences where the writer has used the pronoun 'they' in the former to refer to the 'houses', and the pronoun 'it' in the latter to refer to the 'guest-room'. Apart from these two pronouns, the other cohesive devices beyond the level of the sentence are missing from the text. The writer has used no discourse markers to organize the text and show the students how the main ideas and the other details have been presented. Additionally, the writer has exploited the text to reintroduce some of the grammatical items taught in the same unit of the book in which the passage exists. That is obvious in the first, second, third, sixth and the eighth sentences where the passive voice is used.

1.5. Discussion and suggestions

In 1.1 , we have seen that to develop reading comprehension competence in the students requires developing a number of skills in them , and in 1.3 the researcher has pointed out that one of the reasons that hinder developing such skills in the students of the third year intermediate level is the nature of the reading text presented in Book 5.

Now having analysed a sample of those texts and figured out its features, I intend here to discuss those feature and show how they hinder developing the students' reading comprehension skills.

To start with, we have seen in 1.4 that the writer has gone too far in simplifying the text and that he has made almost everything explicit in the text. This means that he has left every little to challenge the students' intelligence and thus impaired activating their skills to guess the meaning of the text. Nuttal (1982:32)

Comments on such kind of simplification in her words 'If you make everything explicit, You will not be able to develop the students' capacity to infer'.

Another feature that has been pointed out in the analysed text is that it has been exploited by the writer to reintroduce one of the grammatical items taught in the oral practice activities of the book. This means that the writer has used the text to teach the language and this is not an authentic use of a text because 'outside the classroom most of our reading is not done with this purpose and it is certainly not the purpose for which most writers are writing' (ibid., 19).

The third feature that can be discussed here is the limited use of the cohesive devices (i.e. reference items and discourse markers) beyond the level of the sentence which has resulted in the possibility of interpreting each sentence of text independently.

In real life, these devices are used to link the parts of discourse with each other. Writers use them to create cohesion in texts. That is to say, they use them to organize and link the ideas presented in the texts. Therefore, if the students are not faced with these devices, they will not develop their skills of understanding the relations between the parts of the reading text and thus they will not be able to identify the main ideas presented by the writer. In this connection, Grellet (1981:15) says, 'another area in which it is essential to prepare the students is in recognizing the various devices used to create textual cohesion and more particularly the use of reference and link-words'. So far, we have seen that the present reading materials in Book 5 do not contribute much to developing the students' reading comprehension competence. In fact they represent an obstacle in the way of improving the students' reading comprehension skills. Therefore, practical steps should be taken to overcome the problem.

As far as this paper is concerned, the suggestion to be made here is to use discourse markers in text which are preferred to be as authentic as possible. The idea behind suggestion the use of discourse markers is to develop the students' skills of understanding the relations between the sentences and between the parts of the text. Consequently, this will help the students to Understand the general ideas presented by the writer. Understanding the general ideas of the text is considered as a base for understanding the other details of it. In this respect, Wallace (1982:54) says, 'As with any passage for comprehension, the first task would be to ensure that the students have an overall understanding of the main information in the passage'. Similarly Cook (1989:81) suggests that 'we should expect a student to tackle a problematic discourse in the same way as we would

ourselves: that is to say top-down, starting with general ideas of the discourse and filling in details... later’.

2. The Role Of Discourse Markers In Developing The Student’s Reading Comprehension Skills

2.1. Cohesion

Sometimes we read a piece of English and, reaching the end, we discover that we have not fully understood what we have been reading though we have paid attention. This is not a rare occurrence and we often waste precious time because we have to go back again to the beginning. Why is this so? How can we prevent it happening?

As readers of English we are accustomed to teaching English in sentences, e.g. what is this? It’s a book. However, when we read English we do not consider each sentence separately as a unit on its own. Instead we read English we do not consider each sentence separately as a unit on its own. Instead we read a paragraph which is linked together, which hangs together, which forms a whole. This is called ‘cohesion’ and it is often failure to recognize and understand those factors of cohesion which leads to lack of full understanding.

What does ‘cohesion’ mean? Widdowson (1979:87) defines it as ‘the overt structural link between sentences’ and then he suggests that cohesion is ‘the prepositional relation, ... between parts of a discourse’. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976:4), the concept of cohesion ‘refers to relations of

meaning that exist within the text and that define it as a text'. In other words , if we want to understand a text or a piece of discourse, we have to understand the devices which bind all the sentences or utterances into a unified whole which hangs together where sentences or utterances have reference and meaning to what has gone before and what will come after. These devices are referred to as 'cohesive devices' Therefore, the reason why we often read the end of a paragraph and then we have to begin again is because we are not aware of the role these cohesive devices play in making the passage cohesive.

If we are aware of these devices, we will be able to comprehend any passage we read more efficiently because they help us to realize the meaning of any sentence in the passage under the light of what has gone before it or what will come after. Thus the existence of cohesive devices in the reading text helps the students to comprehend such text efficiently and it is the task of the teachers to teach awareness of such cohesive devices which operate beyond the level of the sentence.

2.2. Discourse markers

Discourse markers are one of the instrumental devices that writer use to create cohesion in their texts. These markers are used as links between the sentences of a text and as bridges between the ideas expressed in it. In this respect. Brown and Yule (1983:191) say, 'A familiar type of explicitly marked cohesive relationship in texts s indicated by formal markers which relate what is about to be said to what has been said before'. Similarly, Williams (1984:75) defines them as 'words or phrases that serve as links, and indicate the relationship between what they are linking'. Additionally,

discourse markers represent means of interaction between the writers and the readers. In other words the writers use them to transmit the functional value of the sentence to the readers. Nuttal (1982:83) expresses that as follows: 'These words serve to mark the functional value of a sentence; they tell you what the writer intends by it'.

To the readers, discourse markers are important because they function as signals to indicate the meaning of what follows. They guide the readers to find their way through the text. 'They act as 'signposts' and help the reader to anticipate and find his way through a text' (Williams 1984:175). Therefore, if the readers fail to recognize them, they may lose their way through the text and thus miss the communicative value of the text.

Thus one can say that if the readers recognize and use discourse markers properly, they will develop their general comprehension and improve their ability to distinguish the main ideas from the minor ones. Jarvis and Mingham (1986:152) suggest that if students can recognize and use discourse markers 'they have readily available a tool for following the text. Their general comprehension will be improved, and they will be better able to sort out which are main points and which are main points and which additional detail'. The former discussion leads us to say that having discourse markers in reading texts and teaching them to the students are major tasks to develop their comprehension skills. Consequently, this will help them to understand authentic texts in the real life.

2.3. Interpreting discourse markers

In order to make discourse markers good weapons in the students' hand to understand the relationship between the different parts of the reading texts and get the functional value of the sentences in which they occur, it is necessary to help the students to interpret these markers first.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976:238) discourse markers are classified into four categories. This classification is based on the conjunctive relations resulting from these markers. The four categories of discourse markers are as follows:

- (a) Additive: and, or, similarly, etc.
- (b) Adversative: but, however, etc.
- (c) Causal: So, consequently, etc.
- (d) Temporal: then, after that, etc.

2.4 Suggestions

The previous discussion in section 1 and section 2 leads us to make some suggestions that we find useful in tackling the problem of reading comprehension in third year of the intermediate stage. The suggestions that are made here are concerned with three areas: the reading texts, the reading comprehension exercises and the methodology.

2.4.1 The reading texts

As we have mentioned before, the present reading materials in Book 5 lack features of authenticity and much of the information that may challenge the intelligence of the students has been over-simplified. The suggestion to

be made here as an alternative is either to improve them in a way that they can meet the students' needs in real life, or to replace them by texts which have authentic features as possible. In case of improving the reading text, one can suggest adopting Nuttal's advice to "preserve whatever in the original will appeal to the intelligence of ... students" and to "retain as much as possible of the textual quality and discourse structure of the original" (1982:32). Accordingly, cohesive devices should be retained in the texts and the students' attention should be drawn to these devices as feature of discourse in real life.

Concerning the other alternative (i.e. using authentic texts) Wingard (1981:280) assumes that there is a positive value in the call for authenticity provided that it is not "carried to extremes". He also suggest that all languages that all language teaching material, even for beginners, should be authentic. His justification for this is the assumption that "the leaning of a foreign language is in essence the same as the learning of the mother tongue"(ibid., 279). Meanwhile, using authentic text means exposing the students to examples of language use in real life. In this regards, Williams (1984:25) says, "The advantage of using authentic texts is that they allow the learners to experience 'real' instances of language use".

2.4.2 The reading comprehension exercises

In 1.2, I have mentioned that the reading comprehension exercises and questions are designed in a way that the answers required for them are straightforward answers. Such kinds of questions and exercises are considered inadequate to activate the students' skills of reading

comprehension because they require the students to use only one of their skills (i.e. their powers of judgment and appreciation) and thus they should be avoided (Greltet 1981:8).

Therefore, these exercises and questions should be improved or replaced by new ones that activate all the students' reading comprehension skills. Meanwhile, when we improve them or design new ones we should make them varied and extended to cover all students' skills taking into account the fact that reading is "an active skill ... , it constantly involves guessing, predicting, checking and asking oneself questions" (ibid.)

2.4.3 The methodology

The method which is adopted for teaching English in Iraq is the audio-lingual method. Basing on this method, the author of Book 5 suggests the following monotonous steps to be followed in teaching any section of any reading passage:

- (a) Read the appropriate section aloud and explain the words and expressions that may be difficult,
- (b) Read the section again and ask your pupils to repeat after you chorally.
- (c) Ask the pupils to read the section silently. Answer any question they may ask while reading.
- (d) Ask one or two pupils to read aloud. Correct the mistakes you notice. You may ask other pupils to read, But this mainly depend on time available.
- (e) Ask general questions on the content of the paragraph and help and help your pupil to answer them. (Al-Hamash et al 1985:25).

We can see from the procedures mentioned above that this method is a teacher-centered one in which the students are considered passive in their work and they have no opportunity to use their own skills and strategies to understand the message the writer has intended to convey through the text.

Therefore, it is necessary to adopt new methods and techniques that help the students to play an active role in the process of reading. This will help them to develop their reading comprehension skills.

One of the techniques that can be suggested here is to adopt pair-work and group-work as the process of reading inside the class does not lend itself to individual work only. It is interesting to compare several interpretations of a text which will eventually lead to discussion and thus help activating the students' skills. In fact, dividing the class into pairs or groups is a creative way of bestowing the students more time to practice the language and the reading skills in particular. It will certainly lead to the involvement of the learners in the activities and help in developing new ideas as well (Doff 1988a:141).

2.5. Conclusion

The present reading materials in Book 5 have been evaluated and considered inadequate to develop the students' reading comprehension competency. Thus, certain suggestions have been made to use discourse markers in texts preferred to be as authentic as possible to meet the students' need .A relevant text has been analysed to throw some light on the aforementioned suggestions.

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