Reading Skills and Reading Comprehension in English for Specific Purposes

Mag. Phil. Milevica BOJOVIC
University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Agronomy Cacak, Serbia

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Reading activity

complex, purposeful, interactive, comprehending, flexible, it develops gradually.

Reading comprehension

- main objective of reading process
- purpose of reading activity
- product of reading a text

A reading skill

- a cognitive ability a person is able to use when interacting with the written text
- task-oriented
- deployed unconsciously

Taxonomies of reading skills

Davies ('68)	Munby ('78)
• identifying word meaning • drawing inferences • identifying writer's technique • recognizing mood of passage • finding answers to questions	• recognizing script of language • deducing meaning & use of familiar lexical items • understanding: -explicit & implicit information -conceptual meaning -communicative value of sentences -relations within sentence & between parts of text • recognizing: discourse indicators & main information • basic reference skills • skimming & scanning

Taxonomies of reading skills

Lunzer et al. ('79)	Grabe ('91)
• word meaning in context • literal comprehension • drawing inferences • interpretation of metaphor • finding main ideas • forming judgments	• automatic recognition skills • vocabulary & structural knowledge • formal discourse structure knowledge • content/word background knowledge • synthesis & evaluation skills • metacognitive knowledge & skills monitoring

Possible criteria for ranking skills

- **logical implication** – one component to be considered to presuppose all components below;

- **pragmatic implication** – reader displaying one skill can be assumed to possess all lower skills;

- **difficulty** – components arranged in order of increasing difficulty;

- **developmental** – some skills are required earlier than others.

Reading skills in English for Specific Purposes

Two contributions to the approach to reading in **ESP** are of prime importance (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998):

1. *the shift* from **text as a linguistic object** to **text as a vehicle of information** (Johns & Davies, 1983), and

2. *the recognition* that **good reading requires language and skills.**

text as a linguistic object   vs.   text as a source of information

text as a linguistic object	text as a source of information
▪ text of general topics, modified, selected by teachers, controlled new vocabulary;	▪ texts according to students' needs, authentic, graded through tasks & support;
▪ no preparatory activities;	▪ preparatory activities to awaken interest, to establish purpose;
▪ focus on language (all words /sentence understanding);	▪ focus on information, links between functions and form, guessing unknown words;
▪ teacher-centered;	▪ learner-centered;
▪ comprehension questions, grammar & lexis exercises.	▪ information transfer application, applying versatile techniques.

the reading component of an ESP course requires balance between two elements:
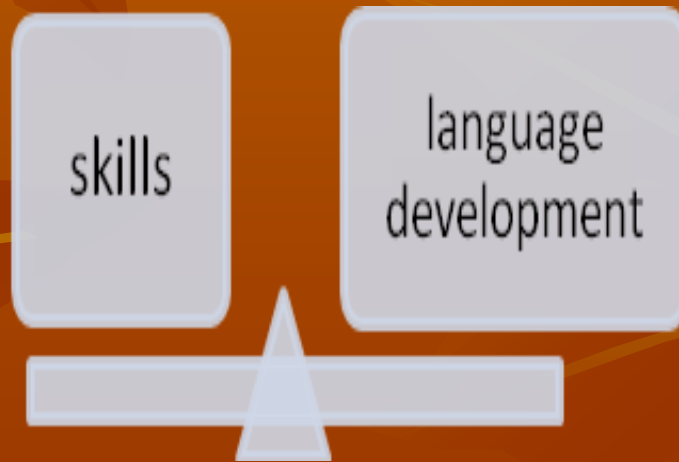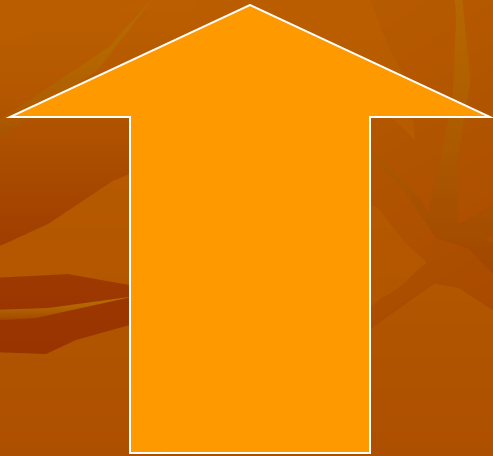
successful L2 learners go for overall meaning, guessing or skipping language and information

less successful L2 learners have fragmented approach to text

Roles of language and skills

- **poor reading in a L2** is due in part to **poor reading in L1**, together with **an inadequate knowledge of L2**;

- the learners need to reach a **threshold level of L2** before they are able to transfer any L1 skills to their L2 reading tasks.

Crucial skills to be learnt or transferred into the new language (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998):

selecting what is *relevant* for the current purpose;

using all the features of the text such as *headings, layout*;

skimming for content and meaning;

scanning for specifics;

identifying *organisational patterns*;

understanding relations within a sentence and between sentences;

using *cohesive and discourse markers*;

predicting, inferring and *guessing*;

identifying *main ideas, supporting ideas and examples*;

processing and *evaluating the information* during reading;

transferring or *using the information* while or after reading.

Classroom reading procedures

Pre-reading	While-reading	Post-reading
➢ predicting ➢ word association ➢ discussions ➢ text surveys	➢ list of questions ➢ scanning & skimming ➢ work out meaning of unfamiliar words ➢ pattern study guides ➢ summarizing ➢ clarifying ➢ questioning	➢ review of the content ➢ work on grammar ➢ vocabulary in context /word roots ➢ writing assignment ➢ discussions ➢ debates ➢ role-plays ➢ project work

Reading testing techniques

Formal	Informal
• cloze test • gap-filling test • multiple-choice techniques • matching • ordering tasks • editing tests • integrated approaches (cloze elide test, short-answer test, free-recall test, summary test) • information-transfer techniques (tables, diagrams, flow-charts, maps)	• interviewing readers about their habits, problems • self-report techniques (think-alouds, diaries, reader report) • cloze technique *These techniques – more appropriate in assessing extensive reading.*

Research objectives and methods

The research objective – improvement of reading comprehension in English as a second language – ESP (English in Agronomy, Food Technology and Agroeconomy);

Organization of research: November 2007 – June 2009, Faculty of Agronomy in Cacak, Serbia;

The participants – undergraduate students – total number 93 (seniors, juniors, sophomores and freshmen);

Assumptions

- intensive reading training and testing frequency, applied separately, can improve reading skills in L2;

- change of the nature of the text used in testing does not affect achievements in reading comprehension tasks.

Research instruments

- **authentic English passages** – English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or General Purpose English (GPE);

- **reading comprehension tests** (multiple choice, true/false technique, cloze test, filling gaps, matching, information transfer techniques – completing diagrams/tables/flowcharts with the required information);

Reading comprehension questions **focused on text meaning**.

Variables & results: Group I on initial and final ESP tests and GPE test

Group I (Agroeconomy)		Nr of student-s	Nr of begin-ners	Study-ing English at Faculty (years)	Period of reading skill training (years)	Initial ESP test (%)	Final (II) ESP test (%)	GPE test (III) (%)
highly intensive training in reading skills	Seniors	5	2	3	1	51	67.27	68.5
	Juniors	7	0	2	0	68.57	66.23	67.46

Variables & results: Group II & III on initial and final ESP tests and GPE test

Groups II & III	Nr of students	Nr of beginner-s	Study-ing English at Faculty (years)	Period of reading skill training (years)	Initial ESP test (%)	Final (IV) ESP test (%)	GPE test (V) (%)
Group II sophomores – agronomy & agroeconomy – medium-intensity training in reading	13	0	1	0	33.60	71.79	59.40
Group III sophomores - food technology – with no specific reading training	11	0	1	0	46.85	60.61	59.60

Variables & results: Group IV on initial and final ESP tests and GPE test

Group IV – elementary level students, true/false beginners	Nr of students	Nr of true/false beginner -s	Study-ing English at Faculty (years)	Period of reading skill training (years)	Initial GPE test (%)	Final (II) ESP test (%)
Sophomores – agronomy, agroeconomy, food technology – intensive reading training	25	3/22	1	1	43.11	33.67

Variables & results: Group V on initial and final ESP tests and GPE test

Group V	Nr of students	Nr of beginners	Study-ing English at Faculty (years)	Period of reading skill training (years)	Initial ESP test (%)	Final (III) ESP test (%)	GPE test (IV) (%)
Freshmen - with no specific reading training	32	6	0	0	42.44	42.88	49.31

Conclusions

- separately applied intensive reading training and frequency of testing improve student's reading skills;

- combination of reading skill training of medium intensity and high frequency of testing showed the best results (Group II); it can be efficient with the students with lower level of knowledge and achievement in English language tasks (Groups II);

- shift from ESP to GPE texts did not influence student achievements at higher academic levels (Group I);

- change of the nature of the text used in testing does not affect achievements in reading comprehension tasks, except with the students with inadequate level of general foreign language skills (Groups II and IV) and at low levels of academic education (Group V).

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