

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRIOR KNOWLEDGE IN CURRICULUM DESIGNING FOR ESL CLASS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a solution for enhancing the English language proficiency of the rural learners pursuing their Under Graduate course in Arts and Science colleges in Tamil Nadu. A writer while writing a text does not explain every detail and fact. He/she leaves a lot of information unexplained keeping in mind the assumed background knowledge of his/her target readers. A learner should possess this background knowledge to comprehend a text. E. D. Hirsch, an American academician, in his book *Knowledge Deficit*, talks about the significance of the unstated to understand a text. He puts forth the notion that prior knowledge or schemata of the reader is crucial to understand a text. In this paper, the researcher proposes that texts closer to the schemata of the learners can expedite language acquisition of the rural learners.

KEY WORDS

Rural Learners, Language Acquisition, Decoding, Reading Comprehension, Neo-colonialism, Curriculum, Schemata, Prior Knowledge, Assumed Background Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims at enhancing the English language proficiency of the rural learners belonging to the marginalised section of the society in Tamil Nadu. Despite the exposure to the English language for more than twelve years and the various steps taken by the

English teachers, learners pursuing their higher education in Arts and Science colleges in Tamil Nadu find it extremely tough to get their Bachelor degree because of the subject General English. Moreover, most of these rural learners are unable to communicate effectively in the English language. It is to be understood that affirmative action and promotional measures are often necessary to eliminate existing inequalities and disparities in education. This paper tries to address the learning gap responsible for the poor English language proficiency of the rural learners and attempts to provide an appropriate solution to enhance their English language proficiency. Though various factors such as testing and evaluation, pedagogic strategies and lack of exposure to the English language may cause the learning gap, this paper focuses purely on the role of materials in English language acquisition of the rural tertiary level learners in Tamil Nadu.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND READING COMPREHENSION

A language is usually acquired through reading and listening in that language. When the learners understand what they read and what they listen, language acquisition will be faster and comfortable. Michael West, a famous English teacher and English Language expert states “learning to read a language is by far the shortest road to learning to speak and write it” (Ardhendu De). Moreover, in his book, *General Service List of English Words*, he came up with roughly 2,000 words that learners will come across repeatedly while reading texts in the English language. Professor Stephen Krashen, a renowned American linguist, proposed the Reading Hypothesis according to which it is crucial to involve reading in the language classroom to increase knowledge of the language and way it is used in real-life contexts. He articulates that the more the learners read in a Second Language, the higher their vocabulary will be. He talks about Comprehensible Input ($I + 1$). According to him, the learners acquire a language when

they are exposed to Comprehensible Input which is one level beyond their linguistic competence.

In *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, Krashen says:

Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognising that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production. (119)

E. D. Hirsch, an American academician, in his book *The Knowledge Deficit* states “The implication is that many more students could become highly literate if they were presented with the right sort of curriculum, particularly in their early years” (116). Educational institutions try to help the learners to acquire language by exposing them to printed materials in the target language. However, rural learners get excluded from this process of English language acquisition because of their inability to comprehend the texts. Actually, the curriculum excludes rural learners from the process of English language acquisition. There are various factors responsible for the learners' difficulty in comprehending a text. One significant factor is the false notion held by the curriculum designers on reading comprehension. The curriculum designers of English as a Second Language frame the syllabus with a noble objective to make the learners communicate effectively in English. Sometimes, the curriculum designers are influenced by the neo-colonial

ideology and consider western literature to be standard and superior. In his book, *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah argues that colonialism has been replaced by Neo-colonialism. In the Introduction to this book he states “In place of colonialism as the main instrument of imperialism we have today neo-colonialism” (1). He also says, “Neo-colonialism is also the worst form of imperialism” (3). Usually, the curriculum designers hold a notion that by prescribing a canonical text in the syllabus one can inspire the learners to draw attention closely towards the morphological signs, phonological aspects, syntactic patterns and the semantics of a word.

In his analysis on the low achievers and the need for effective strategies to import the learning skills, E.D. Hirsch, an American academician, holds an opinion that most academicians in America are primarily wrong about the notion on reading comprehension, which has affected the American children massively. According to him, the intention of most of the academicians in America is noble. However, their views on reading comprehension are wrong. In his book *Knowledge Deficit*, E. D. Hirsch states:

The reason for this state of affairs-tragic for millions of students as well as for the nation-is that an army of American educators and reading experts are fundamentally wrong in their ideas about education and especially about reading comprehension. Their well-intentioned yet mistaken views are the significant reason (more than other constantly blamed factors, even poverty) that many of our children are not attaining reading proficiency, thus crippling their later schooling. An understanding of how these mistaken ideas arose may help us to overcome them. (3)

Generally, the curriculum designers perceive that reading comprehension involves the learners' ability to decode the meaning of individual words which in turn helps in the understanding of the entire text. This notion indeed is the notion possessed by the formalists on reading comprehension. In his book *Knowledge Deficit*, E. D. Hirsch states that the incorrect ideas forced on the school staff because of the formalistic notion held by the academicians are responsible for the poor performance of the disadvantaged learners:

It is not the school staff that is responsible for what is going wrong in the school but the incorrect ideas that have been imposed on the staff—the formalistic theory behind these dull activities (4).

According to the formalists, word on the page is significant. To them, historical backdrop, author's personal life and setting of the work are not essential to comprehend a text. On the contrary, new historicists believe in analysing the history and author's biography to understand a text better. Moreover, context or pragmatics plays a tremendous role in determining the meaning of words. It is to be understood that sum of the meaning of individual words does not always make up the meaning of the text. Various complementing factors convey the meaning of the text.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UNSTATED

During the process of creation of a text, the writer tries to gauge his/her target readers' shared knowledge. The writer generally does not explain every detail in a text and he/she leaves a lot of information unexplained, assuming that his/her target learners already possess that information in their brain. The reader's ability to comprehend this unexplained assumed shared knowledge plays a significant role in arriving at the meaning of the text. Without the knowledge

of the unexplained assumed shared background information, the reader will find it extremely difficult to comprehend a text.

Hirsch deplores the dogma that reading is a formal skill that can be transferred from one task to another regardless of the subject matter. He states that the idea that reading skill is largely a set of general-purpose manoeuvres that can be applied to any and all texts is one of the main reasons for the poor performance of the American students in reading skills. He advocates the systematic acquisition of broad knowledge which is extremely important for a person to become a good reader. He categorically states that the factual knowledge that is found in books is the key to reading comprehension. A deficit of factual knowledge leads to a deficit in the language of the students.

Curriculum designers generally prescribe texts, probably believing that reading comprehension is a skill that can be transferred from one text to another.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DECODING AND COMPREHENSION

Reading involves a lot of complex psychological processes. The first step in reading is decoding, which is recognising the printed symbols in the text. Sometimes, decoding the printed symbols a text is mistakenly considered synonymously with comprehending a text. In his book *Knowledge Deficit*, Hirsch distinguishes decoding the sounds in a text from comprehending a text. Decoding the sounds in a text is the process in which the reader converts the printed symbols into sounds and words. Decoding the sounds and sounding out words are the first steps in reading. This decoding ability is crucial for a reader. However, the reader may not necessarily understand the text simply because he/she is able to decode the printed symbols, convert these symbols into sounds and read the text:

Recently schools have begun to do a much better job of teaching all children to become good first-step readers who can turn printed symbols into sounds and words quickly and accurately, a process called decoding. (17).

Decoding is a skill that can be transferred from one text to another. But unlike decoding skill, reading comprehension cannot be transferred mechanically from one text to another. In his book *Knowledge Deficit*, E. D. Hirsch says:

It has been assumed that just as you can transfer general decoding skill to all texts, you can similarly transfer a general ability to understand the words that have been decoded. It is true that given a good start in decoding, a child will develop fluency and accuracy in decoding with practice. And it is also true that decoding is a skill that can be transferred from one text to another. But the progress of a child's reading comprehension is different. That progress does not follow a reliable course of development. Comprehension is not a skill that automatically grows into an ability to cope with complex materials once a child has been given a start with simple ones (36).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UNSTATED

The process of reading involves the reader's ability to understand what the text implies but does not say explicitly. In other words, the reader needs to understand what is not stated in the text. It is to be understood that in a discourse, the speaker/writer conveys half of the message through words and leaves the other half unstated. The speaker/writer does it because he/she assumes that half of the message left unstated is already known to the reader/listener. What the speaker/writer does not state is lengthier than what he/she states. In short, the unstated message exceeds the stated message. As a result, comprehension skill cannot be automatically transferred

from one text to another, because the skill of comprehension is basically the skill of filling in enough of what has been left unsaid — that is, filling in enough blanks — to make sense of the text. The ability to fill in these blanks depends entirely on whether the reader knows what is to be filled in. Therefore, if the reader fails to guess the unstated messages, it is highly unlikely that he/she understands the text correctly. The success of reading tasks depends heavily on the learner's ability to guess the unstated information and supply the missing inference. In his book *Knowledge Deficit*, E. D. Hirsch says:

Researchers have discovered that what the text implies but doesn't say is a necessary part of its understood meaning. In fact, what the text doesn't say often far exceeds what it says. The reader or listener has to fill in the blanks and make the unstated connections in order to make sense of the text. This is hardly a new observation. The ancient Greeks knew it, and Aristotle even gave the phenomenon a name — enthymeme, which is technically a syllogism with some of the logically necessary steps left out (37).

In his book *Knowledge Deficit*, Hirsch states that to comprehend a discourse, the listener or reader fills in many unstated information using his/her domain-specific knowledge and creates an imaginary situational model which constitutes the understood meaning of the discourse:

Cognitive psychologists have determined that when a text is being understood, the reader (or listener) is filling in a lot of the unstated connections between the words to create an imagined situation model based on domain-specific knowledge. This constructed situation model constitutes the understood meaning of the text (38).

If the learner has prior knowledge of the references, allusions, historical events, historical personalities, cultural codes, and social contexts of the text, he/she will be able to read the text

quickly. On the contrary, the lack of prior knowledge will hamper the reading speed of the learner. Besides, this prior knowledge or schemata or domain specific knowledge is cumulative, and it grows through the learner's everyday exposure and experience. The learners will find it easy if they are provided with texts closer to their schemata. Therefore the curriculum designers should give importance to the role of prior knowledge in reading comprehension while prescribing a text so that the learners find the teaching-learning process easy, inclusive and comfortable.

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