In The Name of God

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Tarbiat Modarres University
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The Relationship between Narrative and Expository Discourse and Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL students

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the M.A. degree in TEFL

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NOTE

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Dedicated to:

My Mother

And

My Husband

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Abstract

Reading is one of the most important skills in foreign and second language learning contexts. For many researchers and teachers knowledge of the components and management of this process is extremely important. Knowledge about the process of reading is needed if we are to move from designing programs based on gusses to designing programs which truly meet the needs of our students. To detect what factors may affect reading comprehension process , many researchers have investigated this complex behavior from different perspectives. Since reading is the interaction between the reader and the text, meaning is created by the reader based on the interaction between his background knowledge and reading. That is the readers move beyond the word and sentence level to the overall organization and discourse level of the reading; because their background knowledge or schema enable them to expect and to predict the way in which the writer has organized the material.

In this regard , the preset study aims at investigating how different modes of discourse can be considered as influential factors in reading comprehension. The purpose was to compare the Iranian EFL students' comprehension of narrative discourse and their comprehension of expository discourse. 35 senior university students participated in the study. The data were gathered, and, then, subjected to a number of statistical procedures. The results of descriptive statistics showed that students have had a better performance on expository passages. After that , a matched t-test was run to test whether this difference is significant or not. It was revealed that at p=.05 the observed difference was significant. Also, an ANOVA was conducted to find out if there was a significant difference between the performance of students on all the eight passages (four in an Expository mode and four in a narrative mode). The results showed that the subjects performed differerntly from one passage to another. It is to say that Rhetorical structure of the text or mode of discourse has an important effect on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Reading is one of the fundamental skills in foreign and second language learning contexts. Reading skill is both an enjoyable activity and a source of obtaining information and expanding knowledge of a reader. So, reading, due to its significance, has long attracted the attention of many scholars, and that is why many a researcher has attempted to investigate it from different perspectives. Some researchers have tried to find the relationship between reading comprehension and syntax, numerous commentators have drawn attention to the problems that supposedly result from syntactic complexity encountered in reading (Eskey, 1971; Wilson, 1973; Pierce,1973) . Others have discussed problems due to a lack of specialized vocabulary or a range of terminology specific to a specialized field of study ; and there have been several attempts to

detail syntactic and lexical fratures that are characteristics of registers associated with particular subject areas
(Cowan, 1974). Increasingly, in the last decade, attention has been given to features of discourse structure that might present students with problems of interpretation in particular areas (Meyer, 1981; Carrell, 1985 , 1992). Following the trend, this study is another attempt to detect the possible influence of the modes of discourse on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students.

According to the principles of descriptive linguistics, a language reader should process the linguistic data in order to understand a written passage. However, the language user does not deal with texts as linguistic data, but as indications of communicative intent; he uses language in terms of discourse process or above sentence level. Widdowson (1985), trying to define the communicative character of reading, suggests that " the reader applies a schematic frame or scenario to the textual object, samples the information it represents, and makes whatever modification is necessary to incorporate information not previously accounted for into the structure of his knowledge"(p.225). In this view, meaning is no longer considered to be in the utterance or text having an independent existence from both the reader and writer, but as Barnitz (1985) points :

> *Reading is a complex communication process in which the mind of the reader interacts with the text in a particular setting or context. During the reading process , readers construct a meaningful representation of text through an interaction of their conceptual and linguistic knowledge with the cues that are in the text. (p.31)*

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) consider reading as the interaction that occurs between the reader and the text, an interpretive process. Similarly, Riley (1985) defines reading as a communicative act, i.e., the

transformation of a text into a discourse . He further clarifies this idea that reading is a " creative act" which demands a skillful response from the reader, and when the reader recreates discourse from a written text, he performs the act of reading.

Goodman (1970) regards reading as a " psycholinguistic guessing game" that involves an interaction between the printed page and the mind of the reader. Efficient reading is usually the result of selecting the most suitable cues in order to make guesses. The skill of predicting and anticipating words and phrases as one reads is crucial to make reading a cumulative activity. As Reed (1970) states , " reading is a sequential process in which on- going processing is affected by prior processing and will determine future processing" (p.3).

Theoretical support for this view of communication comes from schema theory. This theory envisions an information processing model of the mind in which knowledge is stored in related units that can be recalled and activated to operate on incoming information (Anderson , 1984). Schema theory assumes that readers use a process of semantic constructivity to create meaning from a written or spoken text, which itself has no meaning (Perkins ,1983). Thus meaning is created by the reader based on the interaction between his background knowledge and the reading. According to this theory, meaning does not reside in the written material.

Readers approach a reading task with certain previously acquired assets. The first is that their past experience in their first language has taught them that the purpose of language is to communicate . They learned early in childhood that to use language and to mean are the basic ways by which they interact with others in their environment

(Anderson, 1984). Therefore, they assume, when they start to read , that reading does indeed carry a message. They , also, bring with them a knowledge of their surrounding world and their past experiences in that world.

Schema theory , also, predicts that as readers read they are able to go beyond the word and sentence level to the overal organization and discourse level of the reading because their background knowledge, or schema, enables them to expect and to predict the way in which the writer has organized the material (Carrell, 1984a). In other words, their knowledge of story schemata, or writing patterns, makes it possible for them to use the conventions of their language to comprehend a text.

Having these ideas in mind, the researcher has made an attempt to investigate the effect of rhetorical organization (narrative vs. expository) on reading comprehension.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

A growing body of research has indicated that reading process demands students to move beyond the sentence level. Ibrahim (1979) points out that successful reading involves sentence connections and paragraph organization. According to him, foreign language students lack the experience of identifying the organizational pattern of the passage they are about to read, and this is what they need to acquire. Clark and Siberstein (1972) consider that the organizational pattern of the passage provides an important clue in deciphering the overal meaning of the text. They further add that skill in reading depends on precise coordination of a number of other special skills. These skills are either language skills (knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, etc.), or