

COHESIVE DEVICE RECOGNITION SKILL-BUILDING EXERCISES: A WAY TO HELP STUDENTS IMPROVE THEIR READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract: This study was designed to investigate the possibility that there might be a significant improvement on the students' reading comprehension achievement following the treatment through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises. It was conducted under the principles of the one group pretest-posttest (repeated-measures) design. 41 students of Economics Education of FKIP-Unila attending English as a general subject were chosen as the subjects. These students were introduced and trained with the skill and encouraged to firstly recognize the cohesive devices employed in the texts, then classify their types and functions across the sentences and paragraphs, and finally to check their comprehension about the texts on hand. As the design suggests, this research administered pretest and posttest as the main instruments in collecting the data. The data were analyzed using Repeated Measures-Matched T-test. The result shows that t -observe (6.179) is higher than t -table (2.704) which means that there is a significant improvement on the students' reading comprehension achievement following the treatment. This seems to suggest that this technique worked well and was found effective in this study. Since the study was conducted to an intact class and even though the test allows us to generalize, the design of the study precludes such generalization. Therefore, further study involving randomly selected and randomly assigned subjects would certainly provide more interesting findings.

Key words: recognition skill, cohesive devices, reading comprehension.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the language skills that should be taught to the students learning English as a foreign language in Indonesia is reading. Among the four language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing), reading is, like listening, considered to be the skill that is receptive. Reading as pointed out by Anthony, Pearson, and Raphael (1993) is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation. This seems to suggest that the meaning of the text is constructed by the reader by trying to make connections between the text and what he/she already knows about the world based on his/her cultural values, native language and discourse processes. This shows a process of comprehension. The level on which comprehension takes place, according to Dallmann, et. al. (1974) can be classified in a variety of ways. One of the classifications suggests that comprehension may be on the factual level, interpretative level, and the evaluative level.

Reading on the factual level refers to understanding what is actually written on the page. Words or vocabulary should be an important factor, to consider in the process of selecting materials. Reading on the interpretative level designates reading in which the reader comprehends the meaning that is expressed 'in so many words', but can be implied or inferred. In evaluative reading the reader evaluates what he reads through mental activities such as judging the authenticity of the material, predicting outcomes, associating what he is reading with his own experiences, etc. All of the above should be among the considerations for teachers of EFL reading in developing techniques and/or activities and in selecting the materials to be employed in their reading class.

In the process of reading, the use of background knowledge about the topic, type of the written material (genre), and language (vocabulary and grammar) is required in order to be able to make inferences and predictions. Besides that, the ability to get clues from the text (layout, headings, illustration) and to identify words and groups of words which are important and bring the meaning as well as the ability to understand and interpret the meaning of those words and groups of words is crucial in reading. Last but certainly not the least, understanding reading strategies (scanning, skimming, chunking,

etc.), and having the ability to employ the one(s) which is (are) appropriate with the type of the text and the set-up purpose are also not less important.

Reading, as widely accepted, has been the skill most emphasized in traditional foreign language teaching, and even today it constitutes the mainstay EFL instruction in many countries. In Japan, for example, English instruction at the university level is usually in form of an intensive reading procedure, which implies close study of short passages, including syntactic, semantic, and lexical analyses and translation into the first language to study meaning (Susser and Rob 1990).

It should be acknowledged that there has always been much concern over the importance of reading and the teaching of reading. A number of efforts have been made in order to cope with the reading problems. Various discussions, investigations, and reports have been held in order to produce a complete agreement about methods of teaching reading. Indeed, the differences of opinion are often sharp and the debates are sometimes acrimonious. Nevertheless, there is a substantial body of agreement on many important issues. For instance, it seems clear from the research that no one method is best for all children under all circumstances, that children differ widely in the instruction they need. It seems clear also that a wide variety of approaches must be used in order to get the best result with most children. We have learned much about the psychology of reading, about the role of emotion, motivation, home background, and other factors in reading retardation. We have also learned most of all, perhaps, about the nature and extent of individual differences in reading, which possibly provide the greatest challenge to the teacher of reading.

Reading is a challenge to the teacher also because it is such a complex process. Reading is not a general ability but a composite of many specific abilities. It is therefore necessary to break down general comprehension into specific skills that constitute it. It is necessary to get to know how well the students are able to grasp the general meaning of a passage; how well they can differentiate between fact and opinion; how well they can follow direction; how well they can interpret maps, graphs, and tables; how well they can organize what they read and classify ideas; how well they can visualize what they read; and finally how well they can locate information.

A single reading skill, although a very important one, well illustrates the complexity of reading. Any teacher of reading who undertakes to cultivate, for instance, students' critical discrimination in reading finds that he is dealing with a whole cluster of abilities that often need particular attention. Among these are classifying ideas, establishing cause and effect relationship, making generalization, interpreting idiomatic and figurative language, making inferences, recognizing emotional reactions and motives, judging relevancy, and finally drawing general conclusions.

There seems to have been a controversy among experts in the teaching of reading. Some claim that it is a general ability, while others think of reading as a combination of various specific skills, such as getting the main idea and predicting outcomes, which should be identified for the purpose of helping the learners improve the ability in comprehending what they read. Those who believe that there are specific skills (abilities) that constitute the effective comprehension will probably want to pay attention to those skills in their instructional procedures; others who do not share this view are likely not to place much, if any, emphasis on the acquisition of these various abilities. Following Dallmann et. al. (1974), it is important that help be given to the learners in acquiring such skills as noting details that support the main idea of a selection, judging the authenticity of a report, and making generalizations on the basis of what is read. Although there are differences of opinion as to how to define comprehension, there seems to be a general agreement that reading with comprehension is meant getting meaning from what is being perceived in writing. In fact, reading without understanding would not be called reading, for reading necessarily involves comprehending.

Today, English as a Foreign Language reading instruction is moving increasingly from teaching texts to teaching readers. Specifically, we now teach learners reading skill/strategies for understanding such elements as content, textual features, rhetorical elements, and cultural background. Skill-Building Exercises emphasizes skills/strategies for text comprehension. There has been much research on skills-based teaching procedures, including basic skills (finding the main idea, skimming, making inference) and advanced skills (schema-building, meta-cognitive skills).

In the field of reading, there is a great deal of interest in cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976), in terms of both the theoretical insights it provides

and its pedagogical implications. Cohesion is a system of analysis that describes the coherence of a text as a function of semantic relations realized in the surface-level features. Thus, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976:14) the textual structure in a passage such as:

“Did the gardener water my hydrangeas?”
“He did so.”

is created by the cohesive ties between “he” (reference) and “the gardener,” and “so” (substitution) and the proposition in the first sentence.

The proposal that the source of textual coherence is contained in surface features is an attractive one for those involved in reading, since it suggests a straightforward way to improve comprehension: teach students to attend to the cohesive devices, and their understanding of the meaning of a passage will greatly increase (Steffensen 1998).

A study by Chapman (1979) indicated that children who were reading fluently were able to complete anaphoric relations in a cloze test, and he concluded that mastery of textual features, including cohesive ties, is a central factor in fluent reading and comprehension. Another study by Cohen and his colleagues (1979) also showed that foreign readers of English in the sciences and economics did not pick up on conjunctive words in their specialized texts. The researchers proposed that nonnative speakers read more locally than do native speakers and, because they do not attend to the conjunctive ties, they have trouble synthesizing the information at the intra- and intersentential level as well as across paragraphs.

A number of efforts have been made in order to cope with the problems. Teaching methods and classroom procedures are being developed to remedy such deficiencies. For example, William (1983) provides a system of symbols and strategies for teaching foreign readers how to use cohesive signals in order to increase their comprehension of texts.

This study is mainly dealt with the implementation of Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises in an attempt to improve students' reading comprehension achievement. It is particularly concerned with the students' ability in recognizing (identifying) cohesive devices in written discourse which is then expected to improve their reading comprehension. Therefore, the

objective is to investigate the possibility that there might be a significant improvement of the students' achievement in reading comprehension following the treatment. Consequently, the study, focused on the question: *Do the students make any significant improvement on reading comprehension achievement after being taught through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises?* The result of the study is expected to contribute to the attempt of helping students improve their achievement.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted under the principles of experimental research design. More specifically, it was done under the one group pretest-posttest (repeated-measures) design. The subjects were students of the Economics Education Study Program of the Teacher Training and Education Faculty, the University of Lampung attending English as a general subject in the academic year 2005/2006.

In this experimental research, the students were treated (taught) through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises. Three sets of Practice Test focusing on Reading Comprehension adopted from Lougheed (1992) and another three sets of Reading Passages from *Business Concepts* (a reading textbook for Economics students) were used to accompany the technique. Hence students were introduced and trained with the skills and encouraged to work in group of three to five to firstly recognize (identify) the cohesive devices employed in the texts, then classify their types and functions, and finally to check their comprehension about the texts on hand.

The data of this research were collected through tests. For this purpose, two sets of test taken from Section III of the TOEFL-Equivalent test were used. One was for pretest and the other was for posttest. The former was intended to know the students' ability before treatment and the latter was intended to know the students' ability after the treatment. These two sets of test are deliberately chosen on the assumption that they fulfill the criteria of validity and reliability of test.

As has been mentioned previously, this research was carried out based on the one group pretest-posttest (repeated-measures) design, where the comparison is within one group. In such design, the means are from the

same group of students. Following the design, the researcher compared the performance of a group of students prior to instruction and after the instruction. The scores were from the same students at two different times, i.e. pretest and posttest. Therefore, the data were analyzed using Repeated-Measures-matched T-test, as suggested by Hatch and Lazaraton (1991), to find out the possibility that there might be a significant difference (improvement) of the achievement before and after the treatment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

It has been mentioned previously that this research was done in order to investigate the possibility that there might be a significant improvement on the students' reading comprehension achievement following the treatment through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises. It was conducted under the principles of experimental design employing the one group pretest-posttest design (repeated-measures) design. Forty students of Economics Education Study Program of the Teacher Training and Education Faculty of the University of Lampung attending English as a general subject were chosen as the subjects. These students were treated (taught) through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises. Three sets of Practice Test focusing on Reading Comprehension adopted from Lougheed (1992) and another three sets of Reading Passages from "*Business Concepts*" (*A Reading Textbook for Economic Students*) were used to accompany the technique. In this case, the students were introduced and trained with the skill and encouraged to work in group of three to five to firstly recognize (identify) the cohesive devices employed in the texts, then classify their types and functions, and finally to check their comprehension about the texts on hand. As the research design suggests, this research administered pretest and posttest as the main instruments in collecting the data. In such design, the comparison is within one group, meaning that the means are from the same group of students.

Pretest was basically administered to investigate the students' performance in reading comprehension prior to instruction. The test materials

were adopted from the TOEFL-Equivalent test. It consists of 50 items and in form multiple-choice version with 4 options each. The scoring system certainly follows the TOEFL-Equivalent scoring system in which the lowest raw score is 20 and the possible highest raw score is 68. The result of the test shows that the lowest score gained by the student is 35 and the highest is 50. On the average, the students gained 40.71 (which is the mean score of the whole students).

Unlike the pretest, posttest was administered in order to find out the students' achievement after the treatment. The test materials were also adopted from the TOEFL-Equivalent test. The number of items, the scoring system, and the lowest as well as the possible highest scores are exactly the same as those of the pretest. The result of the posttest indicates that the lowest, the highest, and the average (mean) scores were 35, 57, and 48.61 respectively.

This research, as previously mentioned, is mainly concerned with the investigation of whether students make significant progress (improvement) after being taught through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises. To that purpose, pretest and posttest had already been administered to the students. The research question formulated in this research asked whether or not students made significant improvement following instruction (treatment). The result of the study reveals evidence that interestingly, almost all students made progress from pretest to posttest even though there are some students who made no progress at all in which their scores decreased even after the treatment.

Of the progresses the students made, the progress ranges from 5 to 17 points. This seems to suggest that there is a tendency that students made improvement after treatment. Table 3 above also clearly indicates that the mean of pretest is 40.71 and the mean of posttest is 48.61. This shows that there are 7.9 points different of the mean which suggests that there is an improvement on the students' achievement. The question, as already posted previously, was: "Is the difference (jump) of 7.9 points in the mean a significant change?" The result of Matched T-test as presented in the following table is supposed to provide the answer.

Group	N	Mean	T-observe	T-table	df	p
Pretest	41	40.71	6.179	2.704	40	0.01
Posttest	41	48.61				

Matched T-test on Gains after Treatment

The table above shows that the value of t-observe is 6.179 while the critical value for t (t-table) is 2.704. This is a clear indication that the value of 6.179 exceeds 2.704. Therefore, we can have a confidence in concluding that the treatment does have an effect on the students' performance in these data. Students' scores differ significantly from pretest to posttest. On the basis of the findings, we can reject the null hypothesis of no difference between pretest and posttest. The hypothetical class did improve. The Matched T-test gives us confidence that the difference is real in these data. Therefore, we can eventually accept the hypothesis that there is a significant improvement of the students' achievement on reading comprehension following the treatment through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises. Nevertheless, since the students in this research were not randomly assigned – it was an intact class – the test was used for descriptive purpose only. This would mean that even though the test allows us to generalize, the design of the study precludes such generalization.

B. Discussion

We have all generally acknowledged that reading is an interactive process of communication. The interaction between the writer and the reader is made possible through the text. It is through the text that the writer encodes his message, and it is also through the text that the reader gets the meaning of the message by decoding it.

What is a text? A text is a semantic unit: a unit not of form but of meaning. It may be spoken or written, prose or verse, dialogue or monologue. It may be anything from a single proverb to a whole play, from a momentary cry for help to an all-day discussion on a committee. Most texts extend well beyond the confines of a single sentence (cfr. Halliday and Hasan 1976).

A text is distinguished from a non-text by its texture. The texture is primarily provided by cohesion, which is a semantic concept, which refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of the other. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. Since speaker or writer uses cohesion to signal texture, the listener or reader has to react to it in order to interpret it (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Cohesion holds segments of a text together. The importance of cohesion lies in the continuity it expresses between one part of the text and another. This continuity is necessary for the interpretation of text.

COHESIVE DEVICES AS SIGNPOSTS IN EFL READING

Different readers get different amounts of meaning from the same text. An efficient reader reads faster and gets more of the message, whereas a poor reader reads slowly and gets less information. In line with this, Goodman (1973) stated that the efficient reader relies on strategies which yield the most reliable prediction with minimum use of the information available. He perceives “only partly what he sees...and partly what he expects to see...because he has learned to organize his predictions according to what is and is not significant in the language,” and also because he knows not only “what to pay attention to” but also “what not to pay attention to” (Goodman 1973: 49). That is, the efficient reader does not read every word in a text. He only picks up the key words in reading, which increases his speed and comprehension.

The major task of an EFL reading course is to cultivate efficient readers. One of the ways that the teacher can help her students is to teach them how to use cohesive devices as signposts, because these devices are textual markers indicating what they should pay attention to, and key words important for the minimum use of visual information. In the view of Halliday and Hasan (1976) the continuity that cohesive relations bring about is a semantic continuity. This makes it possible for cohesive patterns to play an indispensable role in the processing of text by a listener or reader. It is therefore necessary to help our students identify different kinds of cohesive chains,

which form the backbones of different types of text, because those chains signal organizational patterns of different types of text.

Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises constitutes a way to help students improve their reading comprehension performance (achievement). Recognizing cohesive devices in English as a Foreign Language Reading is of important. Quite often, as research revealed, students were not able to see the relation between sentences within a paragraph, let alone, the relation between paragraphs within a larger text. This was merely because they were not able to identify the cohesive devices employed by the paragraphs, and the text as a whole, let alone their functions in making the paragraphs or the text cohesive. This situation has quite often made the students fail to comprehend the text.

This research was intended to mainly investigate the possibility that there might be a significant improvement on the students' reading comprehension achievement following instruction through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises. Hence, the students experienced classroom instruction on cohesive devices of English (substitution, ellipsis, reference, conjunction, and lexical cohesion). They were trained to identify the cohesive devices employed by the text and their functions across sentences and paragraphs. Surprisingly enough, such instruction was found interesting and effective to make the students aware of how ideas in a text re unified by these cohesive elements.

Having been aware of how ideas in a text are unified by the cohesive devices, the students are finally helped in comprehending the text. That was what this research found out. The students were found enthusiastic when asked to identify the cohesive devices in the text and explain their functions across the sentences and paragraphs.

The result was that they felt helped in comprehending the paragraphs and the text. Their reading comprehension after the treatment improved significantly. This can be seen from the result of the research that there is a significant improvement on the students' reading comprehension achievement following the instruction (treatment).

The hypothesis was tested and proved. This seems to strongly imply that the mastery on the cohesive devices (the ability to recognize cohesive devices and their functions across sentences and paragraphs) is central in

reading comprehension. This finding seems to support Cooper's (1984) which shows that scores from tests on the grammatical and lexical cohesive devices correlated highly with scores of general reading comprehension.

To summarize, we have so far discussed the importance of cohesion in the interpretation of text and demonstrated how we can help our students improve their EFL reading by analyzing cohesive chains and using cohesive devices as signposts. From this discussion and analysis we can conclude that cohesion has an important role to play in EFL reading. However, for more systematic application of the theory to the teaching of EFL reading, more research is needed in order to identify the overall relationship between different cohesive chains and different organizational patterns.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

A. Conclusions

Having analyzed the data as presented on the result and discussion section, it could be concluded that there is significant difference of the students' achievement in reading comprehension before and after being taught using Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building. The difference in achievement found in this study seems to indicate that there is a significant improvement on the students' reading comprehension achievement following instruction through Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises. This might suggest that Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building Exercises as a way to help students improve their reading comprehension achievement worked well and was found effective in this study.

The other conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that mastery of textual features – including cohesive ties (Halliday and Hasan 1976) – appears to be a central factor in fluent reading and reading comprehension. In other words, recognition of both grammatical and lexical cohesive devices is crucial to the information-gathering skill of the second or foreign language readers.

B. Suggestions

This study, as described before, was done to a group of students attending English as a general subject. They were students of Economics

Education Study Program. They constituted a class. In other words, the study was conducted to an intact class, meaning that the subjects of this study were not randomly selected and randomly assigned. This would also mean that even though the test allows us to generalize, the design of the study precludes such generalization. Therefore, further study involving randomly selected and randomly assigned subjects would certainly provide more interesting findings. Nevertheless, it could be suggested that those who are interested in applying this Cohesive Device Recognition Skill-Building should be encouraged to make use of more varied activities and exercises in order to get more significant and convincing findings.

Furthermore, considering that mastery of textual features (including cohesive ties) is crucial in reading comprehension, it could also be suggested that reading teachers/lecturers should include classroom instruction on the cohesive devices of English (grammatical and lexical cohesive devices), and their functions across sentences and paragraphs. Such instruction can make students aware of how ideas in a text are unified by the cohesive elements.

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