ELT Prep Students Perceptions of Their Problems with Reading: Perception of Failure or Failure of Perception?

M. Naci KAYAOĞLU
Faculty of Arts
Karadeniz Technical University
Turkey
naci@ktu.edu.tr

Fehmi TURGUT
School of Foreign Languages
Karadeniz Technical University
Turkey
feturgut@yahoo.com

Abstract: This study focused on ELT students' perceptions of self-failure in reading. The participants were 150 prep class students in the Department of English Language and Literature, KTU, in the academic years from 2005 to 2008. At the beginning of each academic year, the students were asked to make a list of the problems or issues they thought made their reading difficult. Their responses were analyzed using a qualitative approach. The students were also observed in terms of their responses towards various texts with reading difficulties. The study intended to make a picture of the problematic areas in EFL reading from the perspectives of learners: how much of the problematic areas in EFL reading was perceived by students, whether they lacked perception of self- failure in reading, whether they had control over their reading problems and whether their perceptions of self-failure matched their real problems in practice or not.

Introduction

Reading is a very complex developmental process for foreign language learners. Considering the problems students face in studying reading comprehension in the native language, studying reading comprehension in a foreign language becomes a process that drives the learner under many challenging and unfavorable circumstances. Even to make a list of the probable problems in reading is ardous work, for problems may vary according to different foreign language teaching/learning settings, based upon materials, purpose of reading, needs, and proficiency levels. Not all these problems can be diagnosed and solved within the scope of one single study. Recent has already established and reported close interactions between learning and student perceptions and the influence of students' thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about themselves, other persons, and events outcomes (Pintrich, Cross, Kozma, & McKeachie, 1986; Koon and Murray, 1995; O'Connell and Dickinson, 1993; Ryan and Harrison 1995; Cashin and Downey 1992) . This means students affect classroom events, and their learning and learning. Students themselves can formulate achievement goals, involve in various activities, and sometimes develop and use strategies which they believe will guarantee thier success. When their thoughts, beliefs, feelings and perceptions do not match, their learning is affected negatively. Since perception is a requisite property of action, without perception, action would not be guided and without action perception would be pointless; in a sense, "perception and movement are two sides of the same coin-the coin is action" (Gibson, 1966). Considering the multitude of benefits ELT students draw from critical or analytical reading, the task of picturing what perceptions motivate their actions in reading, what problems they think make their reading process enigmatic and building a bridge between the problems they perceive and those they actually experience are challenges that should not be ignored. It is for this reason that this study aimed to focus on the English-majoring prep-class students' perceptions of self-failure in reading to draw a picture of their world of

reading in English in the hope that the resulting data would lead the researchers, the teachers and the program designers to some solutions.

The study

Gibson (1966) claims that any account of the facts of perceiving must include the facts of error. He continues as follows:

"Actually, the deficiencies of perception are much more familiar to us than its successes. We take the latter for granted, but we are naturally curious about the causes of our misperceptions, misjudgments, and mistakes. We have a special curiosity about a class of inaccuracies that are called illusions. They are usually not serious enough to be called misperceptions. Often we are aware of the illusion, as we are of the image in a mirror, the bent stick in water, the circular coin that looks elliptical, and the after-sensation "in front of the eyes". But these are still failures of perception, to be exact, and they are very interesting." (pp.287)

It is for this reason that this study aims to investigate how Gibson's claims are reflected on the side of ELT students while they are practising the act of reading. Research reports that, to beter evaluate the efficiency of language teaching activity in foreign language teaching, teachers' attitudes towards and perceptions of the langaue skill they teach has a significant effect on the outcome of that particular act of teacing (Prabhu 1987, Sparks and Ganschow 1996) . Therefore, it would not be erratic to claim that the same is true for students.

The study was conducted with 150 English majoring students studying language skills in the prepatory classes in the academic years from 2005 to 2008 in the Department of English Language and Literature, KTU, Turkey. The students who had to retake the prep program were excluded from the study. The reading course the students were required to take was designed to teach reading skills and to prepare the students for their future readings of text books and other literary texts like novels, shortstories, plays and poems. The subjects of the study came to the department from different schools from almost the same programs: the foreign language programs of Anatolian High Schools or Super High Schools or other Government High Schools. The points they got on the university exam showed no significant differences to allow any intervention of external variable in the results of the study. The students reported that they did not take a seperate reading course but did reading embedded in other courses.

Data required for this study were collected through three stages. In the first stage, to see how they viewed the term 'reading', the subjects were asked to write individual words for their own definitions of 'reading' on a piece of paper. This was what Nuttall (1996) did with EFL teachers at the very beginning of her book. This study did the same activity with its participants because, as she put it, it would be useful to know about students's ideas of reading, for their understanding of the term 'reading' would give some hints about their approaches towards the act of reading. In Stage 2, the subjects were asked to make a list of the things which they belived made their reading difficult or problematic. They were asked to make the list by rating the items from the most important to the least. The intention was to have a picture of the students' world of reading, of problems or so-called / perceived problems in reading. The third stage was a stage of observation. In order not to rely merely on the data coming from the students' self-reports and to construct some kind of triangulation over the data, and to develop prolonged engagement in the research process, the study used the observation method. Although the classroom observation method may have its own disadvantages like the duration and the frequency of the observation- the investigator will need to visit the same class over an extended period of time if meaningful data are to be gathered- the way the observation is conducted- the presence of the observer in the classroom while the activity is taking place may influence the progress of the activity (Cohen and Manion, 1998), these did not pose such a problem for this study because the observer in this study was the reading instructor in the classrooms under observation. But research critics also recognize some advantages in gathering data through classroom observation. Observation may give the research study a more objective, and a more impartial status (Cohen and Manion, 1998). By using observation, the observer may have the opportunity to see problems/issues through his/her own eyes and to filter the data in order to see whether there are any discrepancies between what the subjects report and what is performed.

Researchers recognize two types of observation tools: the Immediate Indicators Tool (ITT) and the Observational Prompt Tool (OPT) (Holbrook, Gray and Fasse, 1999). While ITT enables the observer to record quick snapshots of what is happening in the classroom environment, OPT prompts for what to look for during individual, small-group, and whole-class activities, what to look for during particular classroom activities and what to look for when certain goals are active. The most important characteristic of this tool is that it provides the

researchers with guidelines for what to look for in the classroom and structure for their individual field notes (Fasse and Kolodner, 2000). Since this study dealt with two classrooms, with some particular classroom activities (reading and comprehension in English), and with some certain active goals (diagnosis of reading comprehension problems of the participants in English), the OPT tool was the more suitable and helpful one to use in the classroom observation. During the observation stage, students were given some tasks. These tasks included some sentences and longer texts which had some certain levels of difficulty in terms of content, text type, structure, vocabulary and sentence complexity, background information etc. Here the objective was to observe how the students responded these texts based on their perceptions of difficulty.

Findings and Conclusion

Among the words the participants used to define the term 'reading', the following ones appeared to dominate the list: *to decode, to know the unknown words, fluency, identify, pronunciation, to recognize the written words.* Only a small group included the words like *understand, meaning, respond to the text*, which define reading as an act of creating meaning in the text. The words in the first group refer to the first thing(s) of all about reading, not suitable for academic settings. In such settings, where students read at academic levels to study lingustics and literature, the main focus should not be on the pronunciation of what they are reading or in the grammatical structures used. Fluency can influence comprehension, but this does not mean that students should read words very quickly and easily. During the observation stage, students appeared to have problems with fluency. However, in order to seem fluent readers, they tended to read words very quickly, with an automacity ignoring the word as an inseparable part of the sentence or longer text. This part of the study revealed that the participants' understanding of the term "reading", which was rather simplistic and reductionist, influenced both their perceptiopns of reading in foreign language and their approaches to the text.

The second part of the study showed this influence more clearly. In their responses to the second part- what they thought made their reading difficult- , two items came to the fore interchangeably: 1- *difficult or unknown words; 2- long and complex sentences or difficult sentence structure*. It did not pose a problem that the participant students came up with the idea that difficult/unknown words and complex sentences made their reading problematic. In literature, this is much more than an idea; a well established fact by reading researchers (Nation and Coady 1988, Goodman 1976, Grabe 1991, Grabe and Stoller 1997). Here the problem was that the participants were unaware of other difficulties and that they restricted their act of reading to "vocabulary" and "grammar". They thought they were the only two problematic issues in EFL reading that influenced their performance negatively. The idea that the most important problem in EFL reading is that of difficult or unknown words limits academic reading to a 'word-level reading' activity. Hence, the students focused on individual words or on their dictionary meanings/annotations without considering their contextual meanings or connotations. When they encountered an unknown word, they stoped for a while, hesitated, or read haltingly. They easily got demoralized. The probability of other unknown words in the ensuing parts of the text made them irritated. Perception is a general term refering to the awareness of objects, qualities, or events stimulating the sense organs; it also refers to a person's experience of the world (Stranks 2003). So when one perceives something through his environment, somehow puts it into practice (Hulse, Deese, & Egeth, 1975). In the case of this study, perceptions replaced realities. Research findings suggest that students' perceptions about a particular learning activity may have considerable influence both on students' approaches to that activity and the outcome (Hallowell, 2008; Knowles, 1990). This was ture for the participant students. They were observed to organize their reading heavily based on their perceptions of "reading" and "reading" problems. Another most important finding the observation stage revealed was that the prticipant sudents had a tendency to attach equal importance to each word in a text. But reading research reports that not all words are equally important. Nuttall (1996) puts vocabulary into three categories: (1) active vocabulary; (2) receptive vocabulary; (3) throw-away vocabulary (pp.62-77). Active words are those students know well enough to use them, but receptive words are the ones students recognize and can respond to, but cannot confidently use. Throw-away vocabulary includes those words which students meet only once when they are reading an unsimplified material. The subjects of this study could hardly distinguish between these vocabulary-categories during reading. When they were given some texts that contained no unknown or difficult vocabulary, and when they were given some other texts with no difficult structutres, seeing that the texts still were difficult to read and understand made them surprised and discouraged very much. When asked to what they could attribute their failure in reading and understanding these texts, they were not able to come up with any plausible answer.

The over-all conclusion of the present study was that the reading and level of difficulties in reading these students perceived differed from recommendations in the literature, and that students organized their reading styles, their approaches to the act of reading, their relationships with the text based upon their perceptions of failure or problem in reading. When perceptions replaced realities; that is, when they perceived that a certain issue played the most important role in their failure, they thought merely dealing with that issue would guarantee their success. Upon learning that the text they were reading required more knowledge and abilities than they perceived, they got surprised and blocked during the reading process. From this we van conclude that the perception or the idea that the most and the only problems in EFL reading are difficult sentences and unknown words would undervalue the role of reading in learning. Reading, whether in native or foreign language, cannot be limited to these two items. A number of other issues are involved in EFL reading. These can be listed as:

1. pre-viewing
2. building a bridge between what s/he knows and what s/he will learn
3. categorizing
4. deciding what is important and what is not
5. arguing with the text
6. analyzing and snynthesizing the information and evidence
7. summarizing, predicting, comparing ideas and connecting them to each other
8. organizing new information and ideas
9. making logical inferences
10. commenting on what s/he reads
11. critiquing the text and its writer
12. earning new concepts
13. combining the information in the text with that of the real world
14. reading a variety of texts from different genres easily
15. recognizing the text structure
16. constructing sentence relationships easily
17. coping with difficult vocabulary and use strategies to solve his problems (Henry, 1974; Nunan, 1999; Nuttall, 1996).

The students in this study were unaware of these elements of foreign language reading. Maybe it is lack of these issues on the side of both teachers and students that makes reading a complex, difficult and problematic activity in EFL instruction, making it inevitable to make some drastic alterations in or additions to EFL learners' perceptions of problems in reading.

References

Cashin, W. E., & Downey, R. G. (1992). Using global student rating items for summative evaluation.
Journal of Educational Psychology, 84(4), 563-572.

Cohen, L. and Manion, L. (1994). *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge. USA.

Fasse, B.B. and Kolodner, J.L. (2000). *Evaluating Classroom Practices Using Qualitative Research Methods: Defining and Refining the Process*, College of Computing, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332-0280.

Gibson, James.J. (1966). *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. Boston 1966.

Goodman, K.S. (1976). *Reading: a psycholinguistic guessing game*. In H. Singer and R. Ruddell (eds) *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*. International Reading Association, Newark. 2nd ed.. [14.2]

Grabe, W. (1991). *Current developments in second language reading research*. TESOLQuarterly 25, 3: 375406. [14.4]

Grabe, W. and Stoller, F. (1997). *Reading and vocabulary development in a second language: a case study*. In Coady and Huckin: 98-122. [14.4]

Hallowell, D. (2008). *Cognitive Approaches to Learning*: *New Developments in Educational Psychology*. Drexel Learning Center

Henry, G. H. (1974). *Teaching Reading as a Concept Development: emphasis on effective thinking.* International Reading Assosciation. Newark, Delaware. USA.

Holbrook, J., Gray, J. and Fasse, B. (1999). *Observation Prompt Tool Learning by Design Document.* Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, USA.

Hulse, S. H., Deese, J., Egeth, H. (1975). *The Psychology of Learning.* Tokyo. McGraw/Hill Kogakusha.
Knowles, M.S. (1990). *The Adult Learner: a Neglected Species.* 4th edition, Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, Book Division

Knuth, R.A.and Jones, B.F. (1991)*. What does research say about reading?* NCREL, Oak Brook, USA.

Koon, J., & Murray, H. G. (1995). Using multiple outcomes to validate student ratings of overall teacher effectiveness*. Journal of Higher Education*, 66(1), 61-81.

Nation, I.S.P. and Coady, J. (1988). *Vocabulary and reading*. In Carter and McCarthy: 97- 110. [14.1]

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning.* Heinle and Heinle Publishers Boston USA.

Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching Reading Skills in a foreign language*, Macmillan Publishers, Oxford, UK.

O'Connell, D. Q., & Dickinson, D. J. (1993). Student ratings of instruction as a function of testing conditions and perceptions of amount learned. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 27(1), 18-23.

Pintrich, P. R., Cross, D. R., Kozma, R. B. & Mc Keachie, W. J. (1986). *Instructional Psychology. Annual Review of Psychology,* 37:611-651.

Prabhy, N.S. (1987). *Second Language Pedagogy*, OUP.

Ryan, J., & Harrison, P. (1995). The relationship between individual instructional characteristics and the overall assessment of teaching effectiveness across different instructional contexts. *Research in Higher Education*, 36(5), 577-594.

Sparks, R.L.; Ganschow, L. (1996). Teacher's Perceptions of Students' Foreign Language Academic Skills and Affective Characteristics. *Journal of Educational Research*. Vo.89, Issue 3, p.172, Washington D.C.

 Stranks, J. W. (2003) *Health and safety at work : key terms.* Butterworth-Heinemann. Amsterdam.