

## "The Topic Sentence & Reading Comprehension In A Foreign Language; A Case Study"

Assistant Lecturer  
Juliana D. Yousif  
College of Arts  
University of Basrah

### ملخص البحث:

يستوجب الاستيعاب في اللغة الثانية قدرة المتعلم على فهم المعنى الاساسي الذي تعبر عنه الجملة (proposition) بل ويتناسب معه طرديا. تهتم هذه الدراسة بمدى تأثير استيعاب الطلبة بعاملين هما ترتيب الجمل في النصوص المكتوبة ووجود او غياب الجملة الرئيسية (جملة الموضوع) Topic. sentence تهدف الدراسة الى فحص بعض المشاكل التي يواجهها طلبة قسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية التربية في استيعاب الفقرات التفسيرية expository paragraphs من خلال مجموعة من الاختبارات التي اجريت على طلبة المرحلتين الاولى والرابعة بواقع ثلاثين طالبا لكل مرحلة ويتبين من النتائج ارتفاع نسبة استيعاب الطلبة عموما لهذه الفقرات عند وجود الجملة الرئيسية رغم تفوق طلبة المرحلة الرابعة على اقرانهم في ذلك. بيد ان نتائج البحث تبين في الوقت ذاته الصعوبة التي يواجهها هؤلاء في كتابة عنوان او جملة تلخص الفقرة رغم تخطي طلبة المرحلة الرابعة لهذه الصعوبة بسبب ازدياد خبرتهم اللغوية في الاستيعاب.

### Abstract:

Comprehension in a foreign language entails the learner's ability to understand sentence propositions. The higher level of proposition, the greater probability of it being recalled and comprehended. This study is concerned with the extent that foreigner learners' comprehension is affected by two factors: arrangement of sentences in the text and the presence or absence of the topic sentence(TS).

The study aims at measuring college students' ability in comprehending expository paragraphs through a set of experiments in which (60) second-year and fourth-year students were assigned a recognition task and a production task to reveal their comprehension. The results indicate that these students performed better with the presence of TS although the fourth-year students outperformed the second-year students in this respect. However, both groups rated low in the production task in comparison with the first task but with the exception of the fourth-year group again achieving better than the junior group and this might be attributed to the fact that the senior group are more acquainted with the language than the junior group.

### **I. Introduction**

Studies of the recall and comprehension of texts usually describe texts in terms of propositions organized hierarchically (Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978 and Meyer, 1975 are just two cases in point). Accordingly, the higher the level of proposition, the greater the probability of its being recalled and comprehended. This, naturally, depends on other factors. We, in this paper, are interested in two of them: the way texts are organized (well-structured texts are easier to recall than are disorganized ones) and on whether the specific topic of the discourse is explicitly stated or not.

The above-mentioned studies and many others (cf. Danner, 1976), however, are mainly concerned with problems of comprehension experienced by native acquirers of English. In addition, they left many issues unaddressed. One such issue is the expression of the macrostructure of a text through, for instance, a title or a topic sentence (TS).

The main purpose of the present research, therefore, is to examine some problems of comprehension experienced by non-native learners of English. The research will be focused on the effect of a structural variation at the level of individual sentence on comprehending simple expository paragraphs by a sample of foreign learners of English taken from department of English, College of Education , Basrah University.

Relying on a part of an experiment conducted by Williams et al (1981),the researchers attempt, as well, to compare adult learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) with native acquirers of English. In order to achieve this aim, the researchers conducted an experiment the details of which are reported below.

## **II. The Experiment**

### **II.I Objectives**

Through the experiment, the researchers wish to determine the ability of first-year and fourth-year studies of the department of English, College of Education, to identify the specific topic of the discourse of expository paragraphs. This has been assessed by measuring their ability to choose appropriate titles and their ability to write acceptable summary sentences or titles. Most importantly, however, the purpose is to decide whether their ability is affected by the presence or absence of an explicit statement of the specific topic of discourse which is often stated by a TS. This is normally "the proposition that occurs at the highest level of organization of the paragraph and is super ordinate to all other propositions." (Van Dijk,1980).

## **II.II Test content**

The researchers selected twelve expository paragraphs from a number of textbooks. Some of these paragraphs were, then, modified slightly so as to more suitable for the objectives of the experiment. Six of the paragraphs were chosen randomly for a recognition task. This is the task in which students have been asked to choose the best title of each paragraph. Each one of these paragraphs contained a TS (as described above).The researchers used a multiple-choice format of four choices. Four titles were written for each paragraph as follows:

- (a) a title representing the general idea of the paragraph
- (b) a title representing the specific idea of the paragraph
- (c) a title consisting of the general topic along with irrelevant material
- (d) a title consisting of the general topic along with irrelevant material

The above procedure may be explained by considering the following sample paragraph:

In Britain a question often asked is whether the voting age should be lowered from twenty-one to eighteen. Many people think that eighteen-year olds should be allowed to vote. However, most people think that teen-agers are ignorant about politics and do not think that eighteen-year olds should be allowed to vote. They feel that since teen-agers do not know enough about Politics to make sensible decision when voting, they should not have to vote.

It can be easily noted that the above paragraph has a TS (the first sentence) and several detail sentences supporting the TS.A general topic can also be identified. It forms part of the TS,and, in this particular paragraph, it is the word concept "voting".

The four possible titles for the above paragraph are:

- (a) "voting" (general idea).
- (b) "voting age in Britain".(specific idea).
- (c) "teen-agers should not vote" (information from the paragraph+ general idea).
- (d) "women's right of voting" (general topic+ irrelevant material)

The researchers selected three of the six paragraphs at random and presented them with the TSs plus three detail sentences. The remaining three paragraphs were presented without the TSs albeit with four detail sentences. All these paragraphs were presented in one block(called Block I ). Those paragraphs that had been presented with TSs were, then, presented without ones and vice versa in Block 2).Each block was presented in two random orders. An equal number of students were given each of the presenting sets of paragraphs.

As for the production task (i.e., the one in which subjects are required to write one sentence, or a title, expressing the specific idea of the paragraph) the same procedure was followed as in the recognition or selection task. Accordingly, six paragraphs were selected from different textbooks. They were, then, divided into two parts, each containing three paragraphs with TSs and three without TSs. Two random orders were determined in ,almost, the same way described in the selection task above(ex- of course, that sufficient blanks were left to write the titles).

### **II. III. Subjects and Procedure**

The subjects of the experiment were thirty first-year students of the Department of English, College of Education, University of Basrah, and thirty fourth-year students of the same department. All of them were assigned randomly to the two tasks (and to the three-paragraph sets within task). Half of them received the recognition task while the other half received the production task and vice versa (i.e., four resulting sets). The test was administered during regular class periods at the final two weeks of first term. The subjects did not ask for help in decoding any word(s) they found difficult.

### **II. III. Results and Discussion**

The researchers measured students' ability in the selection task by counting the number of choices of the specific idea of the paragraph. As for the production task, each researcher selected at random, ten first-year subjects and ten fourth-year subjects to ensure the reliability of the scoring of this task which demands counting the number of sentences/titles judged as expressing the specific topic of the paragraph. The correlation between scores was (.98).

Table (I ) below shows students' scoring on the recognition task .Table(2) shows Their scoring on the production task:

**Table ( 1 )**  
**Results of the Recognition Task**

Type of Title	<u>Ts+</u>		<u>Ts-</u>	
	First year	Fourth year	First year	Fourth year
	%	%	%	%
(a) General idea	16.66	14.44	15.55	18.88
(b) General Topic+Related Idea	12.22	3.33	17.77	7.77
(c) Specific Topic	70.00	82.22	60.00	73.33
(d) General Idea+Irrelevant material	01.11	–	6.66	–

**Table ( 2 )**  
**Results of the Production Task**

<u>Ts+</u>		<u>Ts-</u>	
First year	Fourth year	First year	Fourth year
54.60	74.44	48.88	63.33

As is clear from the results of table ( I ), students' performance in the selection task is, on the whole, satisfactory. This is especially the case with paragraphs containing TSs. Moreover, the results show that fourth-year students are slightly better in this task. They have chosen the title containing the specific topic of the paragraphs 82.22% of the time (paragraphs with TSs) and 73.33% when the paragraphs did not contain TSs. On the other hand, they selected the titles

containing the general topic 14.44% of the time. First year students, however, selected the specific topic of discourse 70% of the time when there was a TS while they made less specific topic responses (vis.,60%) with paragraphs containing no TSs. Now, if we add to that their scores on the general topic of discourse(16.66%), one is correct to assume that their responses on the selection task have been satisfactory as well.

Fourth-year students' performance is not surprising, taking into consideration the length of their EFL study at the department of English(more than three years).This is, moreover, an indication that they have had more experience with expository paragraphs.

A comparison of the results of table ( I ) with those of table(2), however, shows that the subjects' performance on the production task is less satisfactory. This is, again, not surprising. The production task is, as has been indicated in II.II above, different from the recognition task in that it requires the actual writing and composition of a sentence or a title. Again, fourth-year subjects responses have been superior to those of first-year subjects' for the same reason mentioned earlier. What is significant, however, is the effect of the absence of the TS on the students' responses, especially those of first-year subjects as it led to a drop in their performance on the production task 60% to 48.88%.

The above result seems to reveal , the fact that the presence of a TS does not significantly raise the level of fourth-year students' performance, especially on the recognition task (cf.William,et al,1981:854). This can be explained by suggesting that they are not able to process TSs effectively. Or, one may, rightly,

assume that the paragraphs used in the experiment are, for advanced students like them, organized in a very simple way. Thus, they have been able to build up easily the specific topic of the paragraphs with or without the TSs. In other words, fourth year students of the Dept. of English have been able to determine the macrostructure of expository paragraphs.

First year subjects' performance, as tables (I ) and (2 ) show, is, however, affected by the presence of the TSs: its absence lowered their level especially on the production task. Thus unlike fourth-year subjects, they are able to process TSs effectively.

This has some implications, as well, for the teaching of reading comprehension in a foreign language. These kind of paragraphs used in this experiment can be of value in this respect as they may provide useful teaching material. In addition, a comparison of the findings of this research with those of Williams et al( 1981), appears to show that, at the very least, there are some parts of discourse grammar which foreign advanced learners and native children may learn by similar psychological processes, whatever these processes may be.

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