A Systematic Review of the Impact of Syntax on ESL/EFL Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This systematic review examined the impact of syntax on ESL/EFL reading comprehension. Following a structured review methodology, relevant studies were identified, screened, and analyzed to explore how syntactic complexity influences learners' reading abilities. The findings indicated that strong syntactic knowledge is essential for successful reading comprehension. Explicit grammar instruction and the use of tools such as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs were found to significantly improve comprehension skills. The review also addressed instructional gaps, offered practical applications for curriculum design, and underscored the need for tailored support for learners facing syntactic challenges.

Keywords

Syntax, ESL, EFL, Reading Comprehension, Syntactic Complexity, Grammar Instruction, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Language Acquisition, Educational Strategies

Introduction

It has been argued that comprehension is an essential ingredient of reading as it underlies efficient procurement of meaning in printed documents. The ability to effectively comprehend written texts is key to the development of reading skills in ESL and EFL learners. To have an effective learning of written materials, learners should possess a good grip on grammar which involves combining words and phrases to form meaningful sentences. Syntax gives a written form orderly structure and enables readers to derive meaning from the text (Perfetti, 2007).

An important component of syntactic processing in reading comprehension includes the ability to identify and interpreting grammatical structures within sentences. It may be challenging to comprehend a text because ESL/EFL learners have difficulties such as word order, verb tense and agreement, and overall sentence complexity (Grabe, 2009; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). These

syntactic complications pose major challenges for reading comprehension, and therefore research on the role of syntax in ESL/EFL reading comprehension is required.

The syntactic complexity is also significant as it determines the abilities of ESL/EFL learners in reading comprehension. When sentence structures become more complex, especially through embedding and subordination, learners might not be in good positions to process information and integrate it into coherent understanding (Carrell, 1998; Grabe, 2009). This exacerbates comprehension difficulties, as learners struggle with syntactic complexities that can hinder overall understanding.

Understanding the interaction between syntax and reading can help enhance language teaching strategies. Researchers should investigate how syntax influences comprehension and help educators develop strategies that enable learners to manage syntactically challenging texts and improve their reading proficiency (Alderson, 2000; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). It is important to discuss issues of ESL/EFL learners and find feasible solutions for teaching and assessment.

This review paper seeks to summarize what is available on the subject and examine theoretical perspectives on the topic of syntax in the reading comprehension of ESL/EFL learners. The researcher aims to provide an overview of learners' difficulties with syntax and offer insights for improving reading instruction and language development (Grabe, 2009; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Through this analysis, the paper supports initiatives aimed at enhancing language teaching and promoting the academic success of ESL/EFL learners

The role of syntax in ESL/EFL reading comprehension is an important aspect in language learning and development. Comprehension of how learners process syntactic structures and the difficulties they face can help improve instructional practices and make reading guidance more effective. This review paper intends to contribute to the body of knowledge by analyzing the influence of syntax on reading comprehension and by offering practical recommendations to educators and researchers.

Studies have shown that syntactic complexity of texts may also affect reading comprehension skills of ESL/EFL learners remarkably. Texts with higher syntactic complexity make information processing more difficult, especially when learners encounter compound sentence structures and subordination (Huang & Eskey, 1999; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). The

knowledge of how students cope with syntactically complex written texts is critical in the creation of instructional strategies that could facilitate their comprehension abilities and help them advance their reading skills (Alderson, 2000; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002).

Syntax has been a subject of extensive research in relation to reading comprehension in ESL/EFL by scholars and educators. The current paper can contribute to improving the teaching of reading and language development among ESL/EFL students through investigating theoretical frameworks and implications (Grabe, 2009; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

The aims of the review paper are to review the issues that ESL/EFL students encounter in learning and using syntax to understand the reading passages as well as to identify effective teaching methods that foster syntactic awareness and reading comprehension, and to provide practical suggestions for classroom teaching and assessment.

Review of the Literature

Learning and language development in ESL/EFL learners rely heavily on syntax, or the process by which words and phrases are arranged to form syntactic units that convey meaning (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014). Syntactic processing helps learners to recognize and interpret grammatical rules in sentences, which makes them successfully work with written language (Koda, 2005). Learners can also create meaning of texts by understanding the connections between words and phrases and understand the messages being passed across (Radisic, 2018).

The professionals came to realize that ESL/EFL students usually struggle with word order, verb tense, agreement and the complexity of sentences as these can cause them problems in deriving meaning of what they are reading (Alderson, 2000; Wang & Wen, 2002). Such syntactic difficulties are normally attributed to the power of learner first language and the distinction in syntactic regulations amid languages (Ellis, 2008). Thus, teaching and training of syntactic constructions are usually required to improve reading comprehension skills among learners in English as a second or foreign language (EFL/ESL) (Nation, 2009).

Effective reading in English is a significant requirement of a number of people not only to know the language but also to succeed in general study and career life. The ability to understand and analyze written information is also vital in academic pursuit as formal learning greatly involves the skills of reading and analyzing English. The skill helps students to interact well with

textbooks, research papers, and examination questions and develop a good basis of academic performance (Hulme & Snowling, 2011).

In addition to school, reading in English would also give access to a whole world of information. Reading English enables one to tap on the abundance of published knowledge, including scientific studies, literature and news. Such access widens their knowledge horizons and world views in a well-rounded sense of understanding different topics and world matters. Being able to read and analyze written information is crucial to the individual and professional development (Attarzadeh, 2011).

Using the situation of globalization, English skills, especially reading become more significant. The English texts are applicable in many professional disciplines including technical manuals, business reports, and legal documents. Effective reading competencies in English therefore improve chances of getting a job, and success at work, as they can be used to be fully engaged with the economy and keep abreast with the current trends and development in the business.

There are diverse definitions of reading comprehension among scholars and this shows how scholars differ in their views as regards the reading process (Gough, 1972; Carroll, 1964). Others imply processing words, building and creating representations of main ideas, and linking information to create new knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). The other definition points out that reading is the capacity to derive meaning out of printed, or written symbols; where those symbols are applied to access information remembered and build knowledge of what the writer of those symbols is saying (Clapham, 2009).

Learners of ESL/EFL usually face serious problems when encountering differences between syntaxes of their first language and that of English. The influence of first language on the acquisition of the second language is quite established with the first language structure affecting the learning process more than others (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Applications of syntactic rules of their native language to English often result in errors of transfer by learners and interlanguage phenomena. Such problems may provide significant obstacles to reading comprehension because the structural differences between the two languages result in confusion and an incorrect understanding (Odlin, 2003).

Students, whose first languages do not have a strict word order can have problems with the relatively fixed syntax of English, which interferes with their ability to parse the sentences correctly. Moreover, variations in using verb tenses, agreement principles, and sentence structure may make understanding also more complicated. These syntactic issues do not help learners process and incorporate the information found in texts efficiently, which influences their overall reading skills. These differences in syntactical aspects could be learned and solved through specialized training and exercise in order to reduce these difficulties and enhance the reading abilities of these ESL/EFL learners.

In addition, ESL/EFL students may not be able to handle and synthesize information under the influence of complex sentence structures. A study demonstrates the impact of complicated structures, including embedded clauses and passive voice, which may complicate the understanding process and extracting important data (Yaghoubi-Notash & Khosravi, 2017). Students will not be able to hold syntactic relations, discerning primary ideas and understanding the cohesion of a text (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). These difficulties may hamper the reading process and hinder successful comprehension.

Word order is one of the major difficulties that learners experience. The word order in English is usually fixed and the subject most often comes before the verb. Student who first language does not have a rigid word order may find they are unable to comprehend and decipher English sentences (Davies, 2003). Another example would be a sentence such as the cat chased the mouse, and due to their mother tongue adhering to a different arrangement of words, learners will then find it difficult to understand.

Another syntactic issue faced by the ESL/EFL students is the use of verbs tenses. The system of verb tenses in English is rather complicated and related to past, present, and future, and it may be challenging to learn it (Larsen-Freeman, 2014). The verb tenses play an important role in understanding the relationships between the events in times. Being unable to recognize and acquire the meaning of verb tenses, learners can experience problems with encoding and decoding of textual sequences of events (Laufer & Paribakht, 1998).

Another area of concern of ESL/ EFL learners might be subject-verb agreement. In English, the verb must agree with the subject in number and person. In the example of the title, that is, in "She walks to school," it means that the verb, which is the word walks, agrees with the singular

subject, which is she. Students whose native language lacks such system may have difficulties aligning verbs with their subjects and as a result end up making mistakes in interpreting the actual meaning of a sentence (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 2003).

Sentence complexity is another issue that influences the reading comprehension of the ESL/EFL learners. Sentences in English may be very complicated, including several clauses, phrases, and nested syntax. This elaboration may render learners hard to trace the movement of a sentence, find principal ideas, and create a connection between various sections (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Syntactic integration could be a problem to learners; therefore, interfering with their metabolizing of intended meaning out of texts (Carrell, 1991).

In order to deal with these challenges, teachers were recommended to teach and train specifically in syntactic patterns. Word order, tenses and subject verb agreement should also be taught explicitly to improve the comprehension of the English language syntax (Ellis, 2008). The sentence completion exercise or sentence rearrangement task can be thought of as scaffolded activities that give the learners a chance to repeat and rehearse their syntax (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Moreover, authentic texts based on real-life language use can stretch the learners as far as to encountering different types of grammatical constructions and encourage active participation and cognizable interpretation (Urquhart & Weir, 1998)

The relationship between syntax and reading comprehension is important in advising the teaching process to assist in language teaching efforts. The instruction in the topic of grammar and sentence structure can help ESL/EFL learners pursue their syntactic knowledge and skills, and teachers can be influential contributors to such learning (Lee & Huang, 2018). Educating students on word sequence, verb tense, subject-verb agreement and sentence formation will provide them with the mechanism of overcoming the problem of syntax during reading comprehension.

Reading by learners of complex sentences may also be practiced through letting the teachers provide the learners with opportunities to read texts that have different varying degrees of syntactic complexity (Alderson, 2000). The exposure to various sentence structures defines the way in which learners learn to feel acquainted with the English syntax patterns and the way in which they learn to understand and analyze the syntax patterns.

Also, educators can assist students on how to cope with syntactic problems in reading comprehension. One of them is to simplify complicated sentences into small units that can be absorbed easily. When the sentences are broken down into their components and analyzed, the learners will be able to comprehend the relationship between words and phrases and get the meaning out of the sentence as a whole (Grabe, 2009).

The other strategy involves teaching the learners how to recognize main ideas in sentences. It is instrumental in emphasizing the necessity of recognizing key information, which enables learners to concentrate on things that are vital and be able to comprehend the message (Wang & Wen, 2002).

It is also worth adding that technology may become an effective asset in helping ESL/EFL students develop syntactic knowledge and reading comprehension abilities. Online learning opportunities and computer-aided language learning (CALL) resources may allow the learner to practise certain points of syntax and have instant feedback with interactive exercises and a variety of activities offered (Lee & Huang, 2018).

Research Questions

1. How does syntactic complexity influence the reading comprehension abilities of ESL/EFL learners?
2. What instructional strategies and technology-based interventions are effective in improving syntactic knowledge and reading comprehension in ESL/EFL learners?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the impact of syntactic complexity on ESL/EFL learners' reading comprehension abilities.
2. To identify effective instructional strategies and technology-based interventions that enhance syntactic knowledge and reading comprehension in ESL/EFL learners.

Methodology

This study follows a systematic approach to the literature review that examines the association between reading comprehension and syntactic complexities in ESL/EFL students. Book chapters, research articles, and conference events published between 2002 and 2019 were retrieved from databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, and Scopus. These studies were included if they specifically addressed syntactic difficulty in the context of reading comprehension among ESL/EFL learners. Publications dealing with non-English languages or unrelated language skills were excluded. The search started with over 80 studies. After checking which ones were most relevant, about 25 studies were chosen for a closer look. Each study was reviewed to find out what problems learners faced, what teaching strategies worked, and what patterns appeared. This careful review ensured the discussion was based on clear evidence and was easy to follow.

Significance of the study

This research matters because it will offer essential ideas about whether syntax plays a key role in ESL/ EFL reading comprehension. The insights on the impact of syntactic complexity will allow the educators to implement more efficient teaching practices, which will result in the improvement of the reading skills and the overall language proficiency of learners. It also appears in the possibilities of technology-based interventions in aiding syntactic instruction. The study contributes to filling the void in the teaching strategies of syntactic development, provides a possible lesson in curriculum development, and highlights the idea of individual, focused support of learners with syntactic issues.

Results and Discussion

Previous major studies have always shown the importance of syntax in reading comprehension of ESL/EFL students. One of the most impressive studies was conducted by Lee and Huang (2018) who analyzed a group of EFL students, separating them into two groups according to the level of syntactic complexity. The experiment found that learners who scored high in terms of syntactic complexity had a high probability of success in reading text comprehension tests compared to learners who had a low score. These findings emphasize the significance of syntactic knowledge in reading achievement and underscore the fact that the complexity of syntax is a major determinant of comprehending written material.

These results suggest that students who understand the syntactic structures better are in a better position to interpret the written materials. Their prowess in the apt initiation of words and phrases in sentences increases their understanding capabilities. As such, explicit teaching of grammar and sentence structure is needed to build a strong syntax basis when teaching ESL/EFL. This explicit teaching has the ability to improve their knowledge and make sense of complicated written text, thereby enhancing overall reading comprehension.

The incorporation of Technology-Enhanced learning, e.g. Computer- Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs might be beneficial as well. Such tools can aid syntactic learning by providing interactive and stimulating activities through which a learner can practice and learn and secure his or her syntactic knowledge. CALL programs have the capability to give immediate feedback and adaptive learning situations and are an asset in developing syntactic competence and reading comprehension skills.

Although the existing research has produced a great deal of insight, it is important to study in more detail how syntax affects reading comprehension and what exactly causes such effect. Further research needs to be done on getting more other instructional methods to counter problems of syntax and look into the feasibility of teaching technology-based methods of instruction to further depth in the syntactic knowledge and reading abilities of learners. Future studies have the potential to produce a more efficient teaching process and more effective results of the learning process among the ESL/EFL students.

Learners whose native languages have differing syntactic rules can experience particular problems adjusting to the syntax of English. Comprehension abilities might also be influenced differently by the demands of different genres, e.g. academic and conversational. Teachers can assist learners, giving them variable texts of different syntactic complexities and making them familiar with various sentence structures and enhancing their comprehension in general. This will help them understand English syntax better and improve their reading skills.

Sentence complexity might also have a dramatic effect on the processing and integration abilities of the learners as it influences their interpretation of texts. Having good syntactic knowledge, learners will find it easier to move around and comprehend complex sentences and

identify key points, and employ the context to clarify the meaning. This skill improves their general reading comprehension and makes them participate more actively with the texts, leading to stronger academic performance and linguistic growth (Koda, 2005).

Conclusion

According to the review, syntactic complexity is a significant component of reading comprehension among ESL/EFL students. Individuals who possess solid syntactic knowledge are the ones who excel in the domain of comprehension. To acquire these skills and enhance the overall reading comprehension, it is important to teach grammar and sentence structure and integrate technology-aided learning tools. Moreover, the results indicate that specific teaching methods can minimize the challenges created by complicated syntactical constructions and further study is required to optimize these learning practices and help them produce the desired effect. It is also evident that individual differences among learners should be considered in organizing instruction, as this can greatly improve reading outcomes. Also, effective implementation of these findings in various educational situations will depend on the collaborative efforts between researchers, educators, and policymakers.

Recommendation

Teachers are encouraged to incorporate direct grammar and sentence structure lessons in ESL/EFL teaching to make the learners keenly understand syntax. This involves giving elaborate instructions on ordering of words, tense and agreement of subjects and verbs. Teachers train learners on the rules as well as the patterns of syntax so that learners are able to navigate and analyze grammatical structure of sentences and facilitate their capacity to derive meaning from reading materials. By adding scaffolded practice, including sentence completion tasks and sentence structure activities, it is possible to provide the learners with the corresponding practical experience and practice to strengthen their syntactic knowledge using methodical practice.

Also, teachers ought to exploit technology-based instructional aids, including Computer-Assisted Language Learning (C.A.L.L) programs, to facilitate syntax training. The tools can make learning syntax interactive and engaging, giving learners feedback and shaping individualized practicing experiences in real-time. The availability of a rich repository of temporal texts of

varying syntactic complexity would assist the learner in being acquainted with a wide range of sentence types, thus enhancing general reading comprehension. By overcoming syntactic difficulties through both traditional and technology-based approaches, teachers can help the ESL/EFL students understand reading more efficiently and connect more effectively to the written texts.

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