Verbalization and Visualization Process: Its Applicability in EFL

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Abstract: Many educators involved in teaching English as a second language believe that teaching reading comprehension in English classrooms involves a conscious understanding of vocabulary and grammar. They believe so on the assumption that this will enable students to grasp the main ideas and make inferences. However, when students fail to do so, teachers attribute it to lack of knowledge about the English language. This is not always the case. One explanation of such comprehension problems could be the students' inability to relate words to images. Bell (1991) introduced the process of Verbalization and visualization which focuses on how to teach students to use mental images to achieve a better understanding of written texts, and on language comprehension disorder among native speakers of English. As such, this study aims to investigate the applicability of Bell's process of Verbalization and Visualization in the context of learning English as a second language. As such, this study utilizes and employs Bell's process on learners of English as a second language, specifically those students in the Preparatory Year Program experiencing difficulties in reading comprehension. Results are reported and the significance of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Verbalization, Visualization, Imagination

Introduction

WORD RECOGNITION AND skills of vocabulary have always been identified by most instructors of reading comprehension as the means to understanding a text in English. That is why teaching a reading course (or in the case of this study a writing course including summary writing), involves reading the text with students, looking up unfamiliar words and maybe holding a discussion about the subject of the text. However, evaluation of students' understanding of the text is far from asking them what the meaning of the words is. An assessment of reading comprehension is framed in recollection strategies, prediction and ability to make inferences about the text. The problem arises when students, after identifying words and being exposed to discussions, are still unable to recall events/facts, locate the main idea, make inferences, and draw conclusions, let alone prediction abilities and reaching evaluation. This is what falls under cognition or reasoning where no repetition of reading (even with word explanation) helps. The most common symptom identified is students' remembrance of certain incidents, facts, dates while unable to get the whole picture (gestalt). Gestalt is by definition, the entity from which the interpretive skills of identifying the main idea, inferring, concluding, predicting, extending, and evaluating can be processed (Nanci Bell, 1986 revised 1997).

COMMON GROUND

Aim of the Study

This study aims at investigating Nanci Bell's program of Visualization and Verbalization, with some modification, in an attempt to identify its applicability in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The subject of the study is students struggling with comprehension related problems in a way that affects their academic performance. This arises from a strong belief supported by ample research that visualization is directly linked to comprehending oral or written texts. This study will be beneficial to students, faculty and institutions as it will help them to acquire better understanding of critical thinking potentials as it provides a tangible step by step program to enhance text comprehension. In addition, the prospects of skills involved in the training program and the outcome are various as it does not only affect comprehension, but is directly related to oral/written expression and critical thinking.

Rationale

The study is triggered by three main principles. First, the assumption that a system designed for native speakers of English with such a strong impact can be of benefit to non native speakers even if they are not actually diagnosed as suffering from comprehension disorder. Second, the benefit of strengthening visualization complies with research proving the strong inclination of Saudi college students to be strong visuals (Hor & Ismail, 2009). This strong inclination towards visualization is supported by this study measuring the learning preferences of a population of a hundrerd Saudi female college students using the index of Learning Preferences of Felder and Solomon. The findings present the percentage of students who are categorized as visual as opposed to those who are categorized as verbal. It reveals a 21% strong preference of visualization as opposed to a meagre 1% verbalization. On the other hand 19% scored moderate visual while 2% was verbal. A well balanced population of 46% preferring both modes of visualization and verbalization was scored.

Based on these findings, one can imagine how far such students are struggling in college environment where instruction is mainly in the form of lectures with little exposure to visuals. Consequently, a program that trains conscious visual ability should be considered.

Third and most importantly, is the fact that most people rely on both imagery and verbal systems for cognitive functioning. Yet research has proven that some people may be better visualizers while others are better verbalizes (Suler, 2009). According to Antonietti and Giorgetti (1992) verbalization is assigned to one brain hemisphere while visualization to the other. To elaborate more, the verbal system involves thinking that is more conceptual, linear, conscious and factual (taking place in the right hemisphere of the brain). Thus, communicating verbally requires considerable conscious control. On the other hand, the mental imagery system tends to be more sensory, holistic, fantasy-based, emotional, and personal (occurring in the left hemisphere). Images arouse the senses – not just seeing. That is why Nanci Bell considers the steps of the program to be mainly a process of linking the left hemisphere to the right. That further explains the relevance of asking students about "sound," "mood," and "perspective" in Nanci Bell's process of relating the left hemisphere of the brain to the right.

Literature Review

The ability to reach mental images while reading a text is at the core of Nanci Bell's training process as she identifies it as a crucial component of comprehension. Proof of the strong impact of visualization on comprehension and its relationship to verbalization takes us to the fields of cognitive psychology and reading where imagery is linked to language comprehension. The reference to the importance of visual perception is acknowledged by numerous figures from different domains of knowledge. Jean Piaget speaks of images involved in the process of perception and how they are accommodated according to new experience and exposure (1936). Arnheim (1966) introduces the idea that memory takes shape as memory images concluding that experience is all about "depositing images." He goes on to quote the psychologist Edward B. Titchener who compares human brain to a gallery of "impressionist paintings." Contribution in visualization is continued in the seventies and eighties with Piavio (1971), Pribram (1971) and Kosslyn (1976). In 1981 Linden and Wittrock directly linked reading comprehension to successful imagery. More confirmation came with Oliver (1982) as he established in a set of experiments that Visualization enhances comprehension. The work of Long, Winograd, and Bridge (1989) further link imagery to memory, analytical and comparative skills, coding and storing meaning.

In fact the National Reading Panel acknowledged mental imagery, which is a key component of the V/V program as having reliable effects on improving memory for text in its review of scientifically based reading research found to support reading instruction (2000). Yet this reinforcement of the role of imagery (visualization) is linked with verbalization with such research as that conducted by Paivio (1990) as he introduced the concept of dual-coding. Paivio describes storage of human experiences either through verbal or non-verbal systems. It is when these systems are inter-connected that comprehension is enhanced. Moreover, Sadoski, Paivio and Goetz (1991) confirmed the dual coding theory affected studies in reading research. In fact Kosslyn (1994) review of 20 years of research in the area of imagery processing and its relation to oral and written language is a further affirmation. In addition, there is the "think aloud" teacher intervention method where teachers talk students into answering questions related to the text being discussed. This method is claimed to enhance understanding while giving instructions both visually and verbally (Lewis and Havercamp 2002). But the most prominent of such assumptions is the one offered by Nanci Bell (1991) in enhancing visualization for refining a vast spectrum of skills. She presents both explanation of the rationale behind her work in addition to actual work plan that if followed precisely is claimed to lead to positive results. A lot of research has put Nanci Bell's theory and method to practice but none to non-native speakers especially at University level. One of the most prominent applications of Nanci Bell's system is the one offered by Stephen Truch (2004) in which he extensively uses the term hyperlexic to describe cases where hindrance of comprehension is attributed to failure of imagery rather than a failure to read (decoding/encoding).

Comprehension Disorder

Nanci Bell's work deals with native speakers' comprehension disorder as she differentiates between decoding disorders (for example dyslexia) and the inability to process written or oral information. Such a disorder is referred to in other instances by the name Hyperlexia

(Truch 2004). It is the case where individuals are fluent readers, but are unable to reach levels of comprehension even after being introduced to meanings of new vocabulary that could hinder understanding. It is then that difficulties of comprehension are attributed to difficulties to create what Bell identifies as 'gestalt' (whole). This condition is identified when bits and pieces of information are processed while missing the main point. When students are asked about what they experience, they use expressions like "words are going from one ear out of the other," or "I read it yet I am missing the main point." Research indicates that gestalt is achieved by the ability of visualization. This relationship between gestalt and visualization is identified by researchers such as Bower and Morrow (1990) as they define gestalt as the ability to create an imaged whole.

Another crucial level of this problem lends itself to poor oral/written expression (even with native speakers.) Their verbal/written accounts are described as scattered and out of sequence with the interjection of irrelevant comments. Such subjects are often accused of inattention, difficulty to follow instructions, or having a weak sense of humor.

Nanci Bell's Training Program

Visualizing and Verbalizing for Language Comprehension and Thinking (V/V) is a program created by Nanci Bell of Lindamood-Bell (1986). It was originally evolved as a clinical program designed for cases related to brain rehabilitation until its uses for students struggling with comprehension was adopted. It is applicable in a variety of settings (whole class, small group or one-on-one). It comprises a series of sessions representing steps each leading to the other. Instructors providing the sessions need to go through training to be able to apply the program. All students are introduced to the same steps, but the duration of each step is determined by each student individual development. The first step is always an introductory session where the purpose and process of visualizing and verbalizing is explained. The other steps are Picture to Picture, Word Imaging, and Paragraph by Paragraph Imaging. V/V relies on teacher's direct questions to assist students in forming images. Twelve structure words are used to provide a framework for prompting image formation. These words (what, size, color, shape, mood, where, movement, etc.) are introduced on cards. In the first step a group of colored pictures with a simple structure is shown for students to describe. This simple structure offer training on the idea of a gestalt image (a whole image). The students are required to verbally discuss the image in the context of the twelve structure words. Once that is mastered, students are moved to the next step of using the same technique without pictures, but by using familiar words. The role of the instructor is to make sure students are actually imaging the word in question. This is achieved by questions (yes/no questions is discouraged) that induce more description of a picture that is presumed to occur in the student's minds eye. The same prompt questions of what, size, color, shape, mood, where, movement, etc. is used. Once this stage is established, we move to the next step of sentence imaging where a sentence is broken down to its basic words to be imaging followed by the sentence to sentence imaging and paragraph imaging. At the sentence to sentence stage colored cards are placed for every sentence as a reminder of details. Students are trained to recall each of the details with the researcher's touch of the card related to it.

Subjects of the Study and Criteria of Choice

One of the most challenging aspects of this study is the choice of subjects. The main reason for that is the difficulty to identify comprehension disorders in students in an ordinary classroom environment. They display ordinary reading ability and in an EFL classroom, are easily disguised as struggling with the second language rather than with the text itself.

That is why the researchers have resorted to the Tutoring Center at the University. This center primarily offers help to students who are struggling with their courses. The population of the study is two groups of college students; three in each group from the English Department applying to the Tutoring Center to get help with their English courses. They are particularly poor in Writing Courses 101, 123, and 103 all requiring analyzing texts for summary writing as a preliminary step to conducting research. Furthermore, all three courses require students to produce well developed essays or short research papers. Students' age ranges from 18 to 21 and they are experiencing frustration due to underachievement or repeated failure of these courses. All six students have received previous private instruction on English and reading as a way to overcome their difficulties in comprehension, however, they describe these attempts as futile. When asked about the type of help that they expect, they mention English language (grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, etc). Students are placed at an intermediate level of English language (scoring between 500 and 550 in TOEFL assessment) as a prerequisite to being at the college level since the language of instruction is in English.

Methodology

A sample of students referred to the Tutoring Center on account of struggling in their English courses is given two essays of different levels to summarize: one lower intermediate and the other lower advanced (as indicated from their text books). Both texts are selected from their text books. Students who are able to identify the main idea even orally are excluded.Those who get only part of the idea, not the whole and fail to connect supporting points to the main topic being discussed are the ones chosen as eligible to this study. Their summaries come out as irrelevant, poor and incoherent. Moreover, they fail to see how they have missed the main point even though it is mentioned, for example in the title, or after the researcher goes over the potentially difficult words with them. This is a very important step as it indicates that their difficulty is not because of language incompetence. Another test is conducted where these students are instructed to follow some written instructions. Again students display the same tendency to only get parts of the whole.

After it is evident that they fall under the category of students lacking ability to form gestalt (whole envisioning of the text), the purpose and the process of the Verbalization and Visualization (often referred to as V/V) program is introduced to them. Participation in the program was on voluntary basis. As early as this stage, modification to Nanci Bell's suggested preliminary introduction session is necessary. Whereas Bell suggests explaining to students the work of the two hemispheres of the brain, it is more motivating to college students to use the image of "making a movie" as we read as a means to remember and understand better.

The first phase assigned by Nanci Bell referred to as 'picture to picture'. The researchers applied minor modification. This is due primarily to the type of pictures chosen for Bell's original suggestions of simple child like pictures. The context in this study is different where

the subjects are college students. However, the main characteristic of simple structure and unity of topic need to be maintained. A single bride with no background is successful for the first session. Some pictures with challenging features trigger speculation. For example a mother at the hospital with her newborn baby of different skin color raises the discussion of how this may be (maybe she is not the mother; he takes after his father…etc.) Another one about a lady in bed sneezing with tissues all around can be sick or upset. These add to the excitement and enrich the verbalization process. Prompt words remind the students of the type of information they need in imaging (what, where, color, size, number, perspective, mood, movement, etc).

When students are completely familiar with the details of imagery, pictures are no longer used. This is achieved after four weeks (eight hours). Familiar words replace pictures but this time the aim is for students to form a picture of the word they are describing in their mind. Words used can be as simple as clown, doll, dog, cat, designer bag, etc. Students' interest can be more aroused as these words vividly take shape. The researcher at this point asks detailed questions to ensure that students have an actual image in their minds. Four of the students are comfortable with this exercise proving that the move was suitable. In fact they are ready to move on. The other two students are completely unable to cope. That is why they are shifted back to picture to picture phase and isolated from the others. In fact their overall performance in all subjects points out to the possibility of severe comprehension disorder. It is clearest for example in their literature courses where they are presumably aware of the events of the stories and yet their answers are to say the least incoherent as they jump from one idea to the other. They remain on the picture to picture step for an extra three weeks. This difference is maintained throughout the trial.

To move to the sentence step, the words in the previous step can be used to form simple sentences as students verbalize the pictures formed in their mind. The researcher's questioning about details of such images should also be an indication of students' visualization as they answer the questions in the same manner as they answer about the actual picture (week five to week six i.e. four hours for four students). The struggling two students are given an extra one week. At this stage the idea of the gestalt is emphasized as more sentences are added up.

With the sentence by sentence imaging students are more aware of the force of the unity of subject. The idea of the movie formulating in ones' mind is enhanced. A brief group of sentences is introduced orally to students asking them to visualize each sentence. With each sentence, a colored card is placed on the table to represent the image. By the end of the paragraph approximately four colors are placed and a revision of each image is performed as the instructor places a finger on one card. As students are trained in forming their own images, they are required to group the images into a picture summary of the text.

At this point instructors are advised to ask for details from the text to achieve two aims. First to make sure of students' understanding of the gestalt while the other relates to students' self confidence as they feel more able to locate main ideas.

The following steps of paragraph imaging, and paragraph by paragraph imaging involves longer material with denser content. The basic process is repeatedly visualizing gestalt and verbalizing summaries. This is gradually extended to answering questions of interpretation, prediction, conclusion and evaluation.

Results

All subjects of the study (six students) have completed at least 64 hours of V/V training. The program itself has proven practical and applicable. At a college level situation, such a process can be incorporated in the writing center where struggling students are referred. Four students moved from the first step to the other in eight hours while another two spend 14 hours before moving on to the word to word phase. This inconsistency in student progress is one of the acknowledged drawbacks of the V/V program. It is up to the instructors to be sensitive to the students' readiness to move from one step to the other. However, students' thorough training on the picture to picture step is crucial. The second step (word to word) where students are to describe a word through visualizing it in their minds, took approximately four hours. The struggling students are given an extra week (two hours).

At this stage the idea of the gestalt is emphasized as sentence imaging is introduced. This takes from week seven to week nine for the four advancing students to master. The researchers stop using the prompt words (when, where, color, size, perspective, etc.) as students are now completely comfortable with the means of description of words. With the sentence by sentence imaging students are more aware of the force of the unity of subject. The idea of the movie formulating in ones' mind is enhanced.

From the single sentence imaging more sentences are added to form the paragraph imaging. A brief group of sentences is introduced either orally or written to students asking them to visualize each sentence. With each sentence, a colored card is placed on the table to represent the image. By the end of the paragraph approximately four colors are placed and a revision of each image is performed as the instructor places a finger on one card. As students are trained in forming their own images, they are required to group the images into a picture summary of the text. The remaining time of the trial is dedicated to various samples of texts so students are familiar with visualization and in the meantime their fluency of description is evident to both researchers and students. Students are thus encouraged to use the visualization technique with their regular classes to report it.

As research indicates, combining the visual and verbal systems by training on a strategy to connect and interpret both oral and written language is a powerful way to learn. In fact Hiebert assumption that when students experience explicit instruction of comprehension strategies, it improves their comprehension of new texts and topics (1998) has been confirmed. Overall, students involved in the study were significantly more skillful at text comprehension as reflected in main idea identification, recalling details, drawing observations. Moreover, they evidently took a further step with inference, prediction, and logical analysis of cause and effect situations which are all indications of critical thinking. Another crucial asset to the study is students' evident self-confidence as opposed to feelings of frustration that were previously detected due to repeated failure to perform tasks. This is true even with the two students who were apparently suffering from severe difficulties as they only needed more time for showing improvement. This time was approximately double the time that other students took.

Limitation of the Study

The major limitation of this study is the small number of students who participated in the study thereby making the results difficult to be generalized. A larger sample might be more

conclusive but in a college level situation the diagnosis of learning difficulties can be a challenge. However, based on this paper, the proposal of scanning students being referred to the writing centre can be suggested together with the introduction of the Visualization/Verbalization program. The second limitation might be attributed to other factors such as difference of pace in which students are ready to move from one point to the other.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is acknowledged that factors involved in reading comprehension and writing abilities are complex. This is true for both native speakers of English and non-native speakers where elements of knowledge of English are added only to further complicate the matter. These factors involve prior knowledge of the world, background experience, cultural influences, school education, family environment, individual cognitive abilities, etc. and they are more than the scope of any study to cover. However, the strongest asset of this study is its applicative rather than theoretical nature together with the noncomplex means of following. It must be admitted from the considerable response to this program that such a basic training in conscious visualization attends to the needs of a vast number of students positively. Results of this study mainly indicate that helping students to gain visualization skills is an important way to develop greater comprehension when reading. This is consistant with similar research conducted by Cathy Puett Miller (2004), Gambrell and Zawitz (1993) Finally, we have to agree with Reid (1987) in her assumption that students' learning ability is adaptable, and that it can be identified and modified through turning the unconscious acquisition process to conscious application of concepts. Teacher structured guidance through the program of visualization and verbalization (V/V) can initially motivate EFL students to identify and utilize their visual abilities to take deliberate advantage of those abilities.

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