Comprehension Teaching in Educational Discourse

Desmond Allison
National University of Singapore

Abstract

Comprehension teaching has become problematised in educational discourse to a point where its legitimacy needs to be made explicit rather than taken for granted. The aims and practices of comprehension teaching have been portrayed by prominent educationalists as inimical to the goal of fostering independent personal and critical responses among learners. These critics represent comprehension-related activities and concerns as symptomatic of an authoritarian teaching discourse that seeks to confine what should count as acceptable interpretations of texts, and to inhibit alternative responses, in the interests of conformity and control.

While endorsing the need for vigilance, I argue in this position paper that such criticisms unwarrentedly ignore or dismiss more creditable educational reasons for comprehension teaching. Language educators and applied linguists have recognised for some time the need to justify claims that characteristic features of discourses are likely to cause difficulty to students. Where these claims can be defended, an educational case for comprehension teaching is readily made. A review of articles in leading journals reveals, however, that only a very limited amount of published research actually investigates learners’ difficulties in discourse comprehension in programmes of academic study. The discussion carries suggestions for future directions in comprehension studies as part of applied linguistic research and calls for a reappraisal of the place of such studies in current educational discourse.

Introduction

'Comprehension teaching' in this paper covers pedagogic activities, including those of assessment, that are avowedly intended to improve, develop or focus the abilities of learners to comprehend forms of spoken and written discourse, over and beyond the basic...
requirement that learners should adequately know the language that is in use. The role of language teaching as a whole is not discussed here, though adequate knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structure is obviously an essential condition for comprehension of language texts. What is in question, for reasons to be examined, is whether and (if so) why language users additionally need to be taught how to comprehend texts. 'Educational discourse', the other term in the title, refers to the discourse of educationalists about educational priorities and values. The term 'educational discourse' might also evoke a teaching discourse within a curriculum, but this paper will reserve 'teaching discourse' for this last sense.

Although criticisms of comprehension teaching are frequent when it comes to particular practices, any notion that the entire activity is fundamentally suspect is likely to strike many people as far-fetched and irrelevant to their concerns. A danger with such reactions, however, is that criticisms made at a level of first principles will simply be ignored, rather than answered, outside the immediate discourse circles in which they are advanced. Two disadvantages of such complacency are that criticisms of comprehension teaching then remain unquestioned within those areas of educational discourse, and that insights offered by these critics remain overlooked in wider circles. This paper, therefore, will outline and then examine some of the concerns about comprehension teaching that are prominently (although not exclusively) voiced in the educational discourse of 'critical pedagogy'.

One consequence of the critical concerns to be discussed is that it becomes problematic for teachers and others to justify an assumption that a text has been misunderstood by readers or listeners, as opposed to being understood in acceptable ways that happen to differ from what a teacher or materials writer may have expected. There is less of a problem in cases where people acknowledge their own comprehension of a text, and such instances are not extensively considered here. The latter part of the paper reviews evidence that is available to support claims that comprehension does arise (as a special and problematic instance of divergent comprehension), so suggesting that it needs to be addressed in comprehension teaching. As research evidence proves surprisingly sparse and difficult to interpret, the paper calls in its final discussion for greater attention to be paid to this area of language learning studies.
Comprehension teaching and critical pedagogy

Much comprehension teaching can be characterised, in brief, as seeking to ensure that points made in a text, either spoken or written, are identified, understood, and related to one another. The point of departure for such work, especially in the case of reading comprehension, is typically that of 'the text', and attention is then given to the points made and the position adopted by an author. Among other things, students can be asked to identify the 'main points' of a text, and to describe how ideas in adjacent clauses are connected. Such issues can also form a focus for assessment purposes. Work of this kind, then, appears to be designed to help students develop understandings of texts that will take due account of the signalling of ideas and information in these (and other) texts. Comprehension teaching need not presuppose a single correct way of understanding a text, but in practice it can easily do so.

Among the more conspicuous criticisms that have been made of comprehension teaching, we can extract a number of general observations and reactions, summarised here as follows:

The points made in a text are not uniquely identifiable; different readers or listeners will pick out different messages. Any notion of 'right answers' in comprehension tasks or tests is therefore unwarrantedly prescriptive.

Comprehension work is weighted towards the purposes of authors (and teachers, and education systems), not those of readers and listeners (and learners).

Comprehension teaching is an instance of skills training, rather than education.

Comprehension teaching is an obstacle to the development (as encouraged by critical pedagogy) of independent and critical responses both to texts and to the wider social, educational, cultural and political contexts in which texts arise.

Comprehension teaching seeks to lead learners towards preferred interpretations of preferred texts. In doing so, it effectively helps to coerce learners into accepting viewpoints and values that are favoured...
by powerful forces in a society, and that are inculcated through that society's educational institutions.

Some of these criticisms are associated with comprehensive radical critiques of the place of education within modern societies. Others arise more widely in educational discourse concerned with language and language learning. While all these criticisms are themselves open to challenge, they point to issues that it would be educationally perilous to overlook. A number of authors have warned against the dangers of imposing unduly narrow sets of interpretations on spoken and written texts or exchanges, and of confining responses, especially in comprehension tests, to the extraction of surface information from texts (e.g. Alderson and Urquhart, 1984; Hill and Parry, 1994). Zamel (1992) is critical of comprehension work that focuses on preconceived main and supporting points in texts. As she observes of such work: 'Reading is often reduced to the act of finding a particular idea, as if this idea resides fixed and absolute in a text' (Zamel, 1992:464). The working philosophy criticised by Zamel is at odds with more enlightened views of reading as active and selective interaction between text and reader (see, e.g., Widdowson, 1984).

Scepticism over meanings in texts has recently been associated with exciting intellectual challenges to conventional assumptions that correct and disinterested interpretations are possible at all (Kress, 1989; Taylor, 1992). Such assumptions appear now to be routinely discounted in critical language theory. A critical pedagogic approach (Fairclough, 1992) takes all texts and interpretations as interested, and aims to help learners to uncover the interests, views and values of text producers and interpreters (including themselves) and to respond in independent and personal ways to what they hear and read. In such ways, work with texts both illuminates and is illuminated by the study of power relations and their realisations in and through language (see Fairclough, 1989).

A related and prevalent tendency in contemporary educational rhetoric is for critical language awareness 'to be set against skills training' (Fairclough, 1992:27) rather than to complement it. Ironically enough, this judgement appears to perpetuate a powerful traditional academic discourse that sets education over training. From such a perspective, the efforts of others to teach or test comprehension can
Comprehension teaching in educational discourse

easily appear incompatible with educational values. At issue, therefore, is not the possible inadequacy of particular tasks, exercises or tests, but the educational validity of the entire enterprise of comprehension teaching. Alternatively, and perhaps more modestly, one might represent the issue in terms of the place of comprehension teaching within contemporary educational discourse.

The thrust of the present paper is to challenge the view that the aims and practices of comprehension teaching and assessment are inimical in principle to the educational goal of fostering critical reading and listening. In brief, I find a crucial difference in principle, which is sometimes though not always clearly recognisable in practice, between taking issue with the position of another speaker or writer (an exercise of critical response) and misunderstanding or failing to recognise what that position is (a case of comprehension failure). Effective critical response presupposes an adequate grasp of what is being said - i.e. adequate comprehension - as well as a sufficient distancing from the rhetorical force of that message. I would therefore prefer to consider critical language reading pedagogy as building upon and extending good practice in comprehension teaching (for an example of such work, see Wallace, 1992), rather than as inexorably opposed to it.

My defence of the principle of comprehension teaching is not intended to undermine or minimise the value and importance of critical insights into discourse. Efforts to help learners overcome certain obstacles to comprehension ought not to imply that the learners are then quietly brought into line to adopt a sole approved interpretation of what they hear or read. A commitment to comprehension teaching does mean, on the other hand, that the value-laden and ever-incomplete processes of text interpretation need not be impoverished by fundamental but potentially avoidable failures to recognise what is taking place in instances of particular spoken or written genres, specifically in cases of instructional discourse at fairly advanced levels. While it is entirely right for critics and others to require evidence in support of claims that comprehension failures occur, it does no service to learners to dismiss the entire notion of comprehension difficulties (especially those of miscomprehension) as a mere pretext for authoritarian control of meaning on the part of teachers.
Meanings and (mis)interpretations

A critical view of texts sees them not only as artefacts within a particular culture, but also as constructed attempts at persuasion, or even coercion. Texts, in this view, may work within school systems to impose certain ways of seeing and doing. I shall now briefly introduce and discuss an instance of such thinking as propounded by a prominent educationalist, Gunther Kress. Kress (1989) is concerned over what he takes to be the coercion of readers into reading positions that are constructed in texts, particularly instructional texts in schools. His argument could be extended (with some adaptations) to listeners and listening positions also:

"... Clearly the best reader will be a critical, a resistant reader, one who both sees the constructedness of the text and of the reading position and who can at the same time reconstruct the text in a manner useful to herself or himself. Hence the aim of the teaching of reading in school should be just that: to train effective readers, readers who are active in relation to the text, able to construct the text to their benefit.

Paradoxically, reading in school positively counteracts the engendering of such modes of reading. ... Just as in the lesson the children respond not to inform the teacher but in order to demonstrate certain kinds of knowledge, just so in reading children are asked to read not, primarily, in order to learn, but primarily in order to 'comprehend'. ... "


For Kress, the contrast between 'comprehending' and 'reading to learn' renders a focus on comprehension teaching imical to the encouragement of active and critical modes of reading. I have (informally) found this view of comprehension to be influential and persuasive among teachers of English in academic settings, though perhaps less so in schools.

Although I am arguing that the teaching of comprehension and the encouragement of critical response are not opposed, Kress's position offers a valuable reminder that it is often very difficult for a
Comprehension teaching in educational discourse

teacher to reconcile the exercise of authority and control in a classroom setting with educational goals of encouraging learners to develop and articulate their own responses to what they hear or read. In arguing that attention to comprehension is still necessary, I fully recognise the importance of warning that it is a grave educational failing to treat it as sufficient. My reservations about Kress's position, therefore, should not obscure the importance of the issues he raises.

One difficulty with Kress's account is that it does not give much consideration to the pedagogic purposes of the extended textual material that Kress presents in seeking to establish his point. Some of the comprehension tasks to which he draws attention, such as a command 'Find this line on a map', and questions that follow it, lead students to work out possible consequences of alternative courses of action (e.g. in fixing an inter-state boundary) in ways that are presumably not mere exercises in control for its own sake, and that do not appear to be necessarily incompatible with learning, or with training effective readers.

An important issue for my purposes is to know how, if at all, we might ascertain that a reader's or listener's response has indeed been derived from seeing 'the constructedness' of a text and of a reading or listening position, together with the textual content being offered on these terms by the text producer, without misunderstanding what the text has to offer. Can adequate comprehension simply be taken for granted? This question points towards what we could call the floodgates issue: does an encouragement of individual interpretation and response, and of resistance to 'coercion', imply also that any textual interpretation whatsoever is possible and legitimate (opening the floodgates), or are there still recognisable limitations upon acceptable interpretations of texts?

Addressing such concerns, Kress argues that the discourses and genres available to a reader in a sociocultural situation already provide one set of limits: personal opinions do not come arbitrarily from nowhere, but are socially constructed. Another set of limits comes from the text itself, which 'imposes limitations on its reading, on its reconstruction [that cannot be set aside] without doing massive violence to the text' (Kress, 1989:43). We may notice that a right to evaluate others' interpretations (e.g. as doing violence to texts) does
not seem to have been abrogated. Taylor (1992) offers comparable arguments that tend to dismiss as extreme any fears that sceptical accounts of the possibility of correct understanding would remove all constraints on possible interpretations of texts - in Taylor's example, leaving students free to interpret Blake's poem 'The Tyger' as a story about a baseball player from Detroit. We could sum this up by saying that people are unlikely (and ultimately unable) to produce just any interpretation of what a text means, adding that wilfully perverse readings can be recognised (and perhaps dismissed) as such by others.

This line of argument, however, still does not directly address the issue of whether misinterpretations, as distinct from divergent but valid interpretations, can be shown to occur, not least among people who are relatively unfamiliar with particular genres. For comprehension teachers, this is a vital practical issue, even if it remains a knotty philosophical one. To claim that misinterpretations are possible is, of course, to lay oneself open to charges of prescriptivism, and it is understandable that some writers should prefer not to pronounce on the matter. Charges of prescriptivism, however, lose much of their force when one recognises the dubious nature of attempts to distinguish rigidly between description and prescription in linguistic studies in general (Cameron, 1995) and in comprehension studies specifically. Prescriptivism, or prescription, in comprehension teaching itself might more usefully be acknowledged and investigated, rather than condemned, in order to encourage debate about grounds for judgements. What matters, I suggest, is that judgements made by comprehension teachers (and others) should be grounded in communicable insights, not in personal authority. Such communication in a teaching situation is always difficult to achieve in practice, even when teachers are at pains to attempt it.

**Evidence of miscomprehension**

Just over a decade ago, Alderson and Urquhart commented rather wryly on a tendency for applied linguists and materials writers to describe and teach rhetorical features of discourse 'without much evidence, if any, that the rhetoric causes difficulty to students' (Alderson and Urquhart, 1984:176). In a polemical paper, Swan (1985) also drew attention to the need for evidence that discourse functions
needed to be taught to second and foreign language learners. Despite a considerable volume of subsequent research in reading and listening comprehension, there are still only a few investigations into comprehension difficulties encountered by learners in the course of their academic study, as opposed to research that uses other kinds of spoken or written text (Clerehan, 1995). Although anecdotal evidence may suggest that comprehension difficulties are commonplace, more sustained forms of enquiry are needed to distinguish among difficulties of vocabulary, language structure, familiarity with concepts, rhetorical expectations, and other dimensions affecting language use. In particular, where teachers or others may seek to maintain that learners are liable to misunderstand texts, as opposed to understanding texts in various ways or avowedly failing to understand them at all, it is desirable for such claims to be well grounded.

Many recent studies in psycholinguistics, and to some extent in applied linguistics, are relevant in principle to concerns over comprehension in language education. Valuable reviews of the varied research strands can be found in Grabe (1991) for reading studies, and Flowerdew (1994) for listening studies, particularly those relating to L2 lecture comprehension. Flowerdew also draws on reading research since, as he notes, there has been far less work on listening comprehension. A pertinent review by Nunan (1991) indicates that, unfortunately, comparatively few research studies have actually been carried out in second language classroom settings. A further restriction (as noted by Clerehan, 1995) is that researchers often use materials and measures that bear no particular relation to students' courses of study. This applies to much of the interesting work in schema theory, a recent instance being Roller and Matambo (1992), whose study draws on earlier work by Bransford and Johnson (1972).

A major pedagogic implication of schema-related studies is that effective comprehension development ought to take place in association with students' content curricula, as comprehension difficulties are much reduced when students have access to appropriate content schemata. Several discussions have consequently made efforts to situate reading or listening comprehension within curricula that students were following, or for which they were preparing themselves (see Benson 1991; Hudson 1991; Shih 1992; Kasper, 1995). The irony is that there has still been little work on precisely those discourse
comprehension difficulties that persist within curricular contexts. Reports of student miscomprehension do occur, but most have tended to focus on the very important and once neglected area of vocabulary learning (Block, 1992; Marshall and Gilmour, 1993; Parry, 1991; Block’s article also looks at reference items) more than on learners' discourse expectations. Only a few comprehension studies have actually investigated comprehension difficulties, apparently not solely or mainly explicable in lexical terms, that appear to constitute barriers to academic novices and outsiders appreciating what speakers or writers typically say and do in the course of instructional texts and lectures, and in academic discussions. While detailed accounts of these studies are not possible here, I must repeat that what is at issue is whether text receivers understand points that an author is making, and not whether they agree or disagree with the author’s position. Serious misconceptions could involve failure to recognise what are being explicitly represented as important points in the development of an extended discourse, or to distinguish between views that an author reports (and later repudiates) and what the author actually asserts (Allison, 1991), or otherwise to recognise evaluative comments by authors (McCarthy and Carter, 1994).

For illustrative purposes, I shall focus on the quite fundamental issue of failure to recognise what are being explicitly signalled as main points in a teaching discourse. I use the expression ‘failure to recognise’ to indicate that recognition has not occurred, not to apportion blame for this, nor to question the obvious and important point that listeners and readers have purposes of their own for attending to instances of discourse and for prioritising ‘points’ arising in these instances. Any difficulties in recognising what are signalled as main points must form a major barrier to critical reading or listening, in that a text producer’s overall directions and stated purposes, and consequent critical or distanced presentations of arguments in academic discourse, will not be understood as such.

There is now evidence that many main and supporting points in lectures are simply omitted by L2 learners, as distinct from being represented in varying ways; similarly, main points in extended written texts are by no means always clearly discernible in any guise in students' spoken or written commentaries or summaries. If such omissions imply major difficulties in comprehension, these problems
cannot simply be set aside. There are, however, obvious difficulties in interpreting students' omission of textual material from notes or summaries: different instances may, for example, variously reflect incomprehension, miscomprehension, or lack of perceived importance for the student.

Data from recent notetaking studies (Clerehan, 1995), on-line summaries (Rost, 1994) and immediate recall spoken summaries (Allison and Tauroza, 1995; Tauroza and Allison, 1994) all confirm that L2 learners omit many of the points that L1 users record when writing down accounts of the content of lectures, including some of the points signalled by speakers as main points in a hierarchy. These studies involved Asian learners of English as L2: Japanese learners (Rost), Hong Kong Chinese learners (Tauroza and Allison) and international students in Australia, all from 'the Asia-Pacific region' (Clerehan, 1995:140). Some of these researchers suggest links between omission and misunderstanding of material. Rost speculates that misunderstandings of certain concepts in a lecture 'may be most apparent in the form of omissions in the summaries' (Rost, 1994: 103). Clerehan comments on her corpus of L1 and L2 student notes from a lecture that 'we may infer from the large number of L2 omissions ... that many L2 students are missing the rhetorical/logical structure of the discourse... It is possible that L2 students are not noting the hierarchical structure of the discourse because they are not looking for it' (Clerehan, 1995: 148). There are, however, alternative explanations. Students may, for example, be able to interpret a discourse in terms of a less elaborate structure (Tauroza and Allison, 1994). Learners from some cultures are reported to value discourse vagueness (Hinkel,1994), and are for this reason less likely to record explicit signals of discourse structure. Evidence based on omission, therefore, remains intellectually inconclusive. In many cases, nonetheless, wholesale omission of content does appear likely to reflect incomprehension or miscomprehension of the spoken or written textual material.

Clearer evidence of miscomprehension comes from learner summaries that attempt to report a point but that (for the teacher or researcher) evidently and explicitly misrepresent the point, as Olsen and Huckin (1990) have reported for the solution to an engineering problem in one lecture. Olsen and Huckin's suggestion that learners follow an information-driven strategy rather than a point-driven one
has appealed to other researchers (Chiang and Dunkel, 1992; Clerehan, 1995; Jensen and Hansen, 1994), but Tauroza and Allison (1994) caution that this is a large general inference to draw from a small exploratory study, and report that students in their own study had relatively few major problems with the central argument in the lecture segment they followed. Given the prevalence of 'the main points' in school instruction, and indeed in learner talk on these matters, I also find it implausible that learners should not have some notion that main points are to be sought when they listen or read. An alternative explanation could be that students' interpretations of the main points are reached on quite limited textual evidence and on listener or reader preconceptions, and are then resistant (in a pre-critical sense) to modification even in the light of other explicit signalling in a text, with which the initial interpretations cannot be reconciled without contradiction (Allison, 1991; Henzell-Thomas, unpublished thesis, discussed by Marshall and Gilmour, 1993). Another consideration, which deserves wider investigation in relation to learners' own comments, is that unfamiliarity with particular instructional genres makes it harder for students to recognise the signalling of main lines of argument, as Love (1991) argues for process and product as organising principles in geology textbooks.

Discussion

A limited number of contextualised research studies offer some evidence that L2 learners are likely to encounter difficulties, over and above those of grammatical and lexical knowledge, in extracting from extended argumentation what are textually represented as main points and links between points. Related to this are certain difficulties in distinguishing what speakers or writers are doing at key points, such as outlining an argument with which they will subsequently take issue. I have argued that lack of familiarity with such moves in academic discourse can be a major barrier to participation in that discourse by students. Work in comprehension teaching to remove or reduce such barriers to understanding is not only compatible with, but is badly needed for further commitments to fostering independently critical and autonomous responses on the part of learners as they undergo an academic education.
Barriers to understanding may, of course, be approached from more than one side. Raising awareness among teachers, both of English language and of other subjects, concerning moves in spoken or written discourse that learners are especially likely to find problematic (or fail to perceive) can encourage teachers to give greater emphasis to such moves in their own discourse in order to render communication more effective. The plausibility or otherwise of this observation depends considerably on one's view of how far teachers are willing to review their own practices. My own EAP teaching experience on several occasions has indicated that some subject teachers are very ready to draw inferences for their own teaching from accounts of student response, to propose and try out changes that might make their teaching more effective, and to participate actively in what Zamel (1993) refers to as 'questioning academic discourse'.

What is, and should be, the place of such concerns within contemporary applied linguistic enquiry? One sometimes encounters the view that applied linguistics and EAP have been unduly dominated by psycholinguistic studies (e.g. Bruce, 1995). There is, however, very little justification for such beliefs when it comes to the study of comprehension in second language classrooms as part of academic curricula. On the contrary, there is room and need for many more studies if comprehension difficulties within study contexts are to be better described, understood and addressed, rather than set aside. On the other hand, it is clear that such comprehension studies need to be fully situated in the social and educational contexts of content studies in classroom settings, thus ensuring that any observed difficulties arise in the course of actual tasks in courses of study rather than while working with texts and tasks that have been chosen for other reasons in the comprehension class or the research study. There is a conspicuous need for multiple approaches to these (and other) issues in applied linguistics. Social constructionist perspectives, for instance, draw attention to convincing arguments that evidence and factuality in texts remain to be interpreted against socially constructed frameworks (e.g. Johns, 1990).

The need for more than a psycholinguistic perspective in comprehension studies is immediately apparent when one begins to consider applications to teaching. The social and educational context of the classroom will largely determine the best ways to address learners'
comprehension difficulties, as one aspect of teaching and learning goals and experiences. If learners’ interpretations of what they hear or read prove to be unaware of differences in viewpoint communicated within a single text, and apparently also of differences across texts, then a lively and cognitively challenging exploration of worthwhile content would appear to be the most obvious and satisfying way to proceed. This generalisation will, of course, need to be weighted and interpreted according to particular educational and cultural expectations and constraints. An emphasis on reading and listening in order to learn, and not just to practise skills in isolation, should help to ensure that comprehension abilities develop in context, so that they are not divorced from the encouragement of individual response and critical thinking. On courses in English for academic purposes, at least, many teachers will endorse the view that ‘some aspect of EAP reading courses should contain material which has to be learned, not just comprehended’ (Benson, 1991:86), and similarly for listening work. Proposals by Zamel (1992) among others to integrate reading and writing (and perhaps also spoken and listening abilities and activities) can best be pursued through an orientation towards content of some substance and relevance to student learners.

Despite my consequent agreement with comments on the pedagogic limitations of a skills approach to comprehension that deals with short self-contained texts, I would like in closing to acknowledge that such comprehension teaching is likely to retain a credible if limited role in instructional settings where shorter student attention spans, short timetabled classes and intensive staff workloads affect teachers’ choices. The need for initial warm-up or focussing activities under such conditions is widely recognised among teachers and materials writers. Such work should not invariably predigest the spoken or written input that is to follow if learners are to be helped to come to grips with texts and meanings for themselves (Block 1992). Among teachers and teacher educators alike, there must be room to discuss the reasons for what we do, and for awareness of limitations as well as advantages in the procedures we use and the contexts in which we work. Perhaps teacher educators and other academics could occasionally be reminded that such awareness may already be quite widespread among practitioners. In such ways, it should also be possible to encourage a more sensitive and less contentious positioning of existing practices and practitioners than has been rhetorically
Comprehension teaching in educational discourse

presupposed by some of the more powerful voices within current educational discourse.

References


Comprehension teaching in educational discourse


