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DEVELOPING READING COMPETENCE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: STRATEGIES, DEFINITIONS, AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

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Mardanova Zilola Fatxullo qizi

Teacher, PhD self-researcher at Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted nature of reading competence in a foreign language, emphasizing its linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural dimensions. Drawing from the insights of renowned scholars, it highlights the complexity of reading as an interactive process that involves decoding, comprehension, and critical analysis. The discussion underscores the importance of metacognitive strategies, such as self-regulation and monitoring, to enhance reading comprehension and engagement. Additionally, the article addresses the evolving role of digital literacy in the context of reading, reflecting the demands of the modern era. By examining definitions and instructional strategies, the article provides valuable perspectives for educators and researchers seeking to enhance reading proficiency in multilingual and globalized contexts.

KEYWORDS

Cognitive processes, comprehension, critical analysis, decoding, digital literacy, engagement, foreign language, linguistic dimensions, metacognitive strategies, monitoring, multilingual, proficiency, reading competence, self-regulation, socio-cultural factors.

INTRODUCTION

"It is time to establish a new system in our country for teaching foreign languages that will serve as a solid foundation for the future. Since we have set the goal of building a competitive state, from now on, graduates of schools, lyceums, colleges, and higher

educational institutions must know at least two foreign languages fluently. This strict requirement should become the primary criterion for evaluating the performance of every educational institution's leadership." (1) - Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

Uzbekistan's openness policy, its active entry into the global market, and expanding international cooperation in all sectors have increased the demand for foreign language proficiency.

The process of improving the system for supporting youth, fostering educated and enlightened young people, developing the creative and intellectual abilities of the growing generation, and popularizing foreign language learning is advancing rapidly in our country. In this regard, the decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Sh.M. Mirziyoyev, dated May 19, 2021, No. PQ-5117, "On measures to bring activities to popularize the study of foreign languages in the Republic of Uzbekistan to a qualitatively new stage" (2), and the decree dated June 27, 2024, No. PQ-239, "On additional measures to increase the efficiency of the system of teaching youth foreign languages" (3), clearly support the above statement.

These decrees prioritize developing foreign language education as a strategic direction of education policy, fundamentally improving the quality of education in this area, attracting qualified teachers to the field, increasing public interest in learning foreign languages, and establishing cooperation with leading centers and higher education institutions worldwide to teach English, other foreign languages, and modern professions. The decrees also emphasize improving the education system based on international education standards and programs.

Approximately 89% of the world's population (4), while not necessarily at an expert level, possesses reading skills. Although this is a significant figure, most people are literate only in their first language. Alongside these high literacy rates, the ability to read in a second or foreign language is becoming increasingly important.

Most societies and countries around the world are multilingual, and the ability of citizens to effectively communicate in multiple languages is now a vital requirement.

English, in particular, continues to spread rapidly, not only as a global language but also as the language of science, technology, and advanced research. It is widely learned as a second or foreign language by many individuals. However, developing reading skills in a foreign language does not come as naturally or easily as it does in one's first language. In fact, even becoming proficient in reading in one's native language requires considerable time and effort. Therefore, one of the primary goals of curricula in many higher education institutions where foreign languages are taught is to develop reading skills in that language.

Global experience in teaching foreign languages, particularly in developing learners' reading skills, has resulted in a wealth of scholarly research. One of the simplest approaches to discussing reading skills is to define the concept. However, pinpointing a definitive description that fully encapsulates reading skills is no easy task. No single definition may adequately explain the true essence of reading proficiency. This is due to four key reasons:

First, a single concrete definition cannot encompass the multiple approaches to reading in a foreign language. A reader may have several potential purposes for reading, and each purpose involves slightly different combinations of skills and strategies.

Second, a specific definition often fails to highlight the numerous criteria that define fluent reading. Developing reading proficiency involves a complex and

often simultaneous acquisition of many skills, processes, and knowledge bases.

Third, a definition may not explain how reading occurs as a cognitive process over fixed periods of time.

Fourth, no single definition can adequately address the social contexts in which reading takes place or explain the diverse reasons for interpreting and using various types of texts.

Despite these challenges, this section discusses the perspectives of leading scholars worldwide regarding reading skills in a foreign language.

When reading in a foreign language, there is a constant interaction between the two languages: the native language and the language being learned. According to K. Koda, three key factors must be considered when learning to read in a foreign language:

1. Reading is a complex and multifaceted process that involves a set of skills.
2. Developing each of these skills requires a certain level of linguistic knowledge.
3. The development of foreign language reading ability occurs through the interaction between the native and foreign languages [Koda, 2007].

Indeed, linguistic development is a primary focus in the process of learning to read in a foreign language. However, merely knowing the norms of a specific language is not always sufficient for reading comprehension; learners must also develop the ability to understand information at the text level. This includes recognizing discourse markers, understanding text structure, and identifying the genre-specific features of a particular text.

At the initial stages of foreign language teaching, reading often serves as the goal. In later stages, however, reading becomes a tool to support the development of other language skills, such as writing and speaking [5]. Consequently, different stages of education require the development of various, often non-overlapping, skills. The methodology for teaching reading in a foreign language can vary significantly depending on the specific goals and objectives of the educational process.

According to Y. Al-Masri (6), reading is a type of speech activity aimed at extracting information from written texts (produced as a result of speech). In his research, Al-Masri notes that psychologists identify key features of reading skills and define it as a specific type of speech activity. One such scholar, Professor Z. I. Klychnikova, describes reading as "the process of perceiving and actively processing information encoded graphically according to the system of a given language." She emphasizes that reading (along with writing) represents a form of communication carried out in written form, mediated by distance and time. Based on whether the communicative act is directed towards "sending" or "receiving," reading is classified as a receptive form of speech activity, akin to listening comprehension.

S.A. Perfetti (7) characterizes reading ability as the interaction of various cognitive and linguistic components, highlighting the roles of bottom-up (decoding) and top-down (contextual) processes in reading. This skill involves the interplay of linguistic knowledge (phonology, syntax, semantics) and cognitive processes (memory, attention, inference), enabling the creation of meaning from linguistic signals within a text.

According to Verhoeven and Perfetti (8), fluent reading skills involve the automatic and effortless decoding of words by the reader, integrating memory-based awareness and achieving skilled reading fluency. This fluency, in turn, allows cognitive resources to be directed towards comprehension.

S.G. Paris (9) suggests that reading ability develops in stages, progressing from emergent literacy to skilled reading under the influence of instructional practices and individual differences. This development encompasses a transition from basic decoding skills to deeper comprehension and critical analysis of texts,

illustrating that reading is a gradually evolving process over time.

Duke and Pearson (10) emphasize the importance of teaching reading skills through strategies. Competent readers use various strategies to improve text comprehension and memory retention. Reading competence refers to the ability to effectively perform reading tasks through explicit instruction in strategies such as predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing. Below are definitions of reading competence as described by renowned scholars:

Table 1. Definitions of Reading Competence by Leading Scholars

| Scholars | Definitions |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| J.A. Dole et al. (12) | Reading competence is the ability to interact with a text and create meaning by integrating prior knowledge and experiences with new information presented in the text. |
| Mokhtari & Reichard (13) | Reading competence involves metacognitive skills such as self-monitoring and regulating comprehension. This includes the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate text comprehension. |
| Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (14) | Reading competence encompasses the ability to critically analyze texts, understand the ideologies, power structures, and biases embedded within them. |
| Pugh et al. (15) | Reading competence includes activating neurological processes that support reading, such as decoding, |

| Scholars | Definitions |
|----------------------|---|
| | comprehension, and fluency, linked to specific brain regions. |
| S.E. Snow (16) | Reading competence is viewed as an interaction between the reader and the reading environment, involving the text, the reader’s goals, and the socio-cultural context. |
| D.J. Leu et al. (17) | In the digital age, reading competence includes the ability to navigate, interpret, and critically evaluate digital texts and use digital tools to enhance comprehension. |

This compilation reflects the diverse perspectives on reading competence, illustrating that it encompasses cognitive, metacognitive, neurological, and socio-cultural dimensions. Moreover, the emphasis on digital literacy by contemporary scholars highlights the evolving nature of reading skills in modern contexts.

In conclusion, reading competence, especially in a foreign language, is a multifaceted skill that involves the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors. As highlighted by leading scholars, effective reading encompasses more than decoding text—it integrates prior knowledge, strategic comprehension techniques, and critical analysis. The role of metacognition, which includes self-regulation and monitoring, is pivotal in ensuring that readers not only understand but also engage with texts meaningfully. Furthermore, the influence of digital tools and the necessity of navigating digital environments have added a contemporary dimension to reading

competence, emphasizing its evolving nature in the modern era.

Ultimately, developing reading skills in a foreign language requires a comprehensive approach that considers both the linguistic complexities and the broader context in which reading occurs. As such, fostering these skills involves equipping learners with strategies to decode, comprehend, and critically engage with diverse types of texts, ensuring their ability to communicate and learn effectively in a globalized, multilingual world.

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