THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OVERALL READING COMPREHENSION AND DETERMINATION OF FACT/OPINION IN L2 Shahram Ghahraki and Farzad Sharifian Email: <u>sh.ghahraki@iaukhsh.ac.ir</u> Email: Farzad.Sharifian@arts.monash.edu.au

Abstract

The aim of this inquiry was to find out whether there is any relationship between the ability to determine fact and opinion, and overall reading comprehension skill in L2. This question was explored across three proficiency levels. Ninety-two (31 male and 61 female) Iranian senior university students participated in the study. The overall reading ability was measured by the reading subsection of a version of MTELP. Participants were provided with nine paragraphs selected from English newspapers and were asked to determine whether each paragraph dominantly presented factual information or an opinion. The correct responses received a score of 1 and the incorrect ones received 0. Overall, the results showed a significant correlation between the ability to determine fact and opinion, and general reading comprehension skill. However, when computed separately, only the results with the higher proficiency group showed a significant correlation. Thus, it may be hypothesized that the ability to determine fact/opinion is not a subskill of general reading skill at lower levels of proficiency in L2 but tends to develop, or becomes a sub-skill, as the L2 proficiency increases.

Introduction

Despite the fact that psychologists and educators have been conducting research on various aspects of reading skill for more than a century (e.g., Alderson, 1990a, b, 2003; Alderson & Urquhart, 1983; Dewey, 1935; Johnston, 1983; Robinson, 1966; Singer & Ruddell, 1976; Smith, 1970; Thorndike, 1917a, b, c), there are still controversies surrounding the exact nature of skill, or skills, that are involved in reading comprehension, either in L1 or L2. The analysis of the studies that have been conducted appears to be complicated by the fact that usually many different dimensions are found and similar dimensions are often named differently, as well as different dimensions being named alike. In general, however, studies that have addressed the nature of reading skill(s) seem to have subscribed to one of the two views: a) reading skill is a unitary, holistic, and indivisible skill which cannot be split into different sub-skills (e.g., Alavi, 2002; Alderson, 1990 a, b; Andrich & Godfrey, 1979; Lunzer et al., 1979; Rost, 1993), and b) reading skill consists of various sub-skills (e.g., Bloom, 1956; Davis, 1968; Mirhassani & Khosravi, 2002; Munby, 1978).

According to Stein and Glenn (1979) and Downing (1982), skilled readers often use particular sub-skills of their reading skill simultaneously over the years and these sub-skills, originally distinct, become fused and no longer activated separately. Hughes (1989) refers to "macro skills" and "micro skills" of reading comprehension. The distinction between these two levels of sub-skills is not made explicit, but it appears that the term "macro skills" refers to understanding the general ideas in the text (e.g., information, gist, argument) while "micro skills" refers to recognizing and interpreting the linguistic features of the text (e.g., referents, word meanings, discourse indicators). Hughes maintains that micro skills should be taught not as an end in themselves but as a means of improving macro skills.

In this context, Cummings (1983:1) adopts a middle-ground position and maintains that "early reading consists of interrelated sub-skills, but skilled reading is holistic". According to this position, sub-skills of reading comprehension are induced and developed separately in children and later, by constant practice, they are fused into an integrated and holistic skill. Naturally, the proponents of this position propose the testing of different sub-skills of reading comprehension during the first years of reading instruction.

Critical reading and determination of fact and opinion

Critical reading demands that readers evaluate the text they are reading (Graney, 1990). This usually involves mapping what is represented in the text against our own experience and knowledge (Wallace, 1996). Critical reading also involves an attempt to understand the purpose or the motivation behind the creation of a text. This is because the writer's purpose directly affects the way the text is constructed. In this context, Graney (1990, p. 148) views the ability to determine whether a text is fact or opinion as one of the elements that contributes to a reader's evaluation task. He maintains that in deciding whether a text is fact or opinion a reader relies on both linguistic knowledge and background knowledge, which aids the reader in putting the text into a perspective.

The question for Graney (1990) was what aspects of a text readers use in making the determination. The results of his experiment showed that context, established through headlines, had a significant effect on determining fact and opinion. He further that readers use specific types of words to make fact/opinion determinations. These mainly included adjectives, factual/counterfactual verbs, implicative verbs and modals. Kirparsky and Kirparky (1970) viewed factivity/non-factivity a product of the presupposition of many predicates. A predicate such as *tragic*, for example, presupposes that the accompanied information is factual. Hermann and Rubenfield (1985) observed that participants in their study associated fact and opinion with certain lexical items. For example, words such as *officer* and *clerk* were associated with factual information while words such as *punk* and *hippie* were associated with opinion. Overall, as Graney (1990) put it, lexical units seem to be the loci for fact/opinion information.

Graney (1990) attributes the capability to determine fact/opinion to 'sophisticated' readers and maintains that "when a somewhat sophisticated reader directs attention towards this task [determination of fact and opinion], he can do it, he can say whether a text is more fact or opinion" (1990, p. 148). In other words, Graney views the ability to determine fact and opinion as one of the subskills of reading ability in skilled readers. In the present study we aimed at finding out if there is any relationship between overall reading comprehension skill and

the ability to determine fact and opinion in three levels of proficiency in L2. The results can enhance our understanding of the cognitive capabilities involved in L2 reading comprehension.

Method

Participants

Participants were 92 (31 male and 61 female) Iranian university students randomly selected from volunteers who were at the time majoring in English at Khorasgan Azad University. Participants' level of proficiency in English was determined by the reading section of a version of Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP, form Q) (Corrigan, et al 1979). The obtained scores were converted to z-scores and the participants were then assigned to three proficiency groups (i.e., two or three standard deviations below the mean, L; one standard deviation below or above the mean, M; two or three standard deviation above the mean, A). There were 17 participants in group L, 57 in group M, and 18 in group A.

Materials

The materials used in this study were the reading section of a version of MTELP (herein referred to as 'MTELP') and nine paragraphs (herein referred to as 'F/O'). The MTELP consisted of five self-contained texts followed by 20 multiple-choice questions. The F/O consisted of nine paragraphs extracted by Graney (1990) from three newspapers: *The New York Times, The Washington Post,* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The paragraphs were from news articles and editorials whose understanding required no technical knowledge (Graney, 1990, p. 155). The texts were typed on a single booklet and each text was followed by three alternatives ('fact', 'unable to decide', 'opinion') to be selected by the participants. To ensure that the 9 paragraphs included dominant factual information or an opinion, three university lecturers in TESOL were asked to read the passages. All three verified that every paragraph was clearly dominated by either fact or opinion.

To measure participants' comprehension of the nine paragraphs, twenty short-answer reading comprehension questions were prepared (herein referred to as 'RC'). A comparison of the score for these questions with the mean score of the MTELP subtest would reveal the level of difficulty of the paragraphs for the participants (see Table 1). To estimate the reliability of the RC test, the KR-21 formula was applied and the obtained reliability of the total test (n=92) was found to be r=.71.

To measure the criterion-related validity of the RC test, we calculated the correlation between the scores obtained by the participants on this test and those received on the MTELP subtest. The correlation was found to be significant (r=.6471, p<.001), which was an index of the criterion-related validity of the RC test.

Procedure

Three steps were taken in this study. First, the MTELP was administered to the participants. Next, the F/O test was distributed and the participants were

required to determine whether the passages included factual information or the author's opinion. The difference between fact and opinion was explained using the following guidelines:

Fact is that which is provable. An opinion is a judgment. Thus, the sentence, 'Her hair is black' states a fact. The sentence, 'Her hair is beautiful' states an opinion. (Source: Cheek and Collins, 1985).

During the third step, after participants finished determining whether the paragraphs represented fact or opinion, they were asked to go through the paragraphs again and answer the 20 short-answer comprehension questions (i.e., RC) that were provided. The tests were all administered to participants in one session lasting about one and a half hour.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was carried out using the t-test and the Pearson correlations formula. First, all the obtained raw scores of the two tests (i.e., MTELP and F/O) were standardized using z-scores. Second, the means obtained on MTELP and RC were compared using a t-test. Next, the relationship between MTELP, F/O, and RC scores was computed using the Pearson correlation formula. Correlations were also computed for each proficiency group (i.e., L, M, A) separately.

Results

As indicated earlier in this paper, the RC test was constructed to ensure that the 9 paragraphs were appropriate for the participants in terms of their difficulty level. To determine this, the results obtained by the participants on this test were compared with those received on MTELP using a t-test. The results were as follows:

Paired Sample t-test: Z MTELP Z F/O				Z-Sc Z-Sc	LP)	
Variable	No. o	f Case	es	Mean	SD	SE
RC		92		14.1739	3.560	.371
MTELP		92		8.8261	3.930	.410
(Difference Mean)	SD	SE	2-tailed corr.	Prob.	t-value	df 2-tailed prob.
5.3478	3.164	.330	.647	.000	16.2	91 .000

Table 1. The result of the t-test for comparing the participants' scores on MTELP and RC tests

As the results show, the mean score obtained on RC was significantly higher than that obtained on MTELP, which is an indication that the 9 paragraphs were at the comprehension level of the participants.

Due to the fact that the highest score on MTELP was 20 and it was 9 on F/O, the scores were standardized using z-scores before computing the correlation. The correlation between MTELP and F/O test scores was found to be significant (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation between MTELP and F/O scores (z-scores)

Correlation	F/O
MTELP	.3587 (92) p000

As mentioned earlier, the MTELP and F/O correlation was also computed for each proficiency group separately. The results showed a significant correlation for group A but not for groups L and M (see Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation between MTELP and F/O scores (z-scores) at three levels of proficiency.

Group L	Group M	Group A
r=.1352 (17)	r=.2988 (57)	r=.4677 (18)
p=.605	p=.24	p=.05

Discussion and conclusion

The ultimate goal of the present study was to know whether there is any relationship between the ability to determine fact/opinion and overall reading comprehension. On the whole, the results showed a significant correlation between the overall reading comprehension, as measured by a subsection of the MTELP, and the scores obtained on the F/O test (r=.3587, p<.001). The results, however, were modified when we calculated the correlations separately for each group. That is, no significant correlation was observed between the MTELP and F/O scores obtained by the L (r=.13, p<.05) and M groups (r=.29, p<.05). However, the results were significant in the case of the A group (r=.46, p<.05). Overall the results suggest a relationship between the ability to determine fact/opinion and the overall reading comprehension skill at the more advanced level of proficiency in L2. It is to be noted that the relationship that is explored here seems to increase with the proficiency level. Thus it may be hypothesized that the ability to determine fact/opinion is not a sub-skill of the general L2 reading skill at lower levels of proficiency but may develop, or become a sub-skill, as the level of L2 reading proficiency increases.

In sum, we observed a relationship between the ability to determine fact/opinion and overall reading comprehension in the more advanced group of participants in our study. This suggests that the nature of reading skill may be different at different levels of proficiency in L2. Clearly more research is needed

to throw light on the nature of sub-skills at each stage in the development of proficiency in L2.

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<u>Appendix A</u>

Stimulus materials (from Graney, 1990)

1. Soviet Warns of Risks to Health; 3rd Chernobyl Death Is Reported

Today for the first time since the Chernobyl nuclear accident on April 26, the [Soviet] Government published detailed information for dissemination inside the Soviet Union about the health risks posed by radioactive emissions from the stricken Ukranian Power Station.

2. Reagan's Support for the Contras Is a Charade

As the debate over aid to the "contras" renews itself year after without any appreciable change in the situation in Nicaragua, more and more observers of all political persuasions are beginning to question the premise of President Reagan's policies. Liberals argue that such aid can only drag us into war, while some conservatives say the defeat of the Sandistas would require a much larger commitment. While there is truth in both positions, few commentators have really grasped the nature of the game the Administration is playing.

3. Palme Case: A President Hun

By today, the 74th day of the investigation into the murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme, who was gunned down here on his way home from the movies with his wife, police investigators had fed 23,272 separate documents into the computer they are using to collect a constantly expanding of mass information.

4. Summit to Revise Monetary Policy

The world's seven largest industrialized democracies yesterday embraced the first major revision in international monetary policy in 13 years, agreeing to use a system of economic checks and balances to help stabilize currency exchange rates.

5. Continue Manned Flights in Space

With vivid scenes of the Challenger space Shuttle tragedy still fresh in our minds, it is hard to look ahead at new launches, explorations and technological discoveries. Yet, we must.

6. U.S. Nuclear Sub Runs Aground Near Gibraltar

The nuclear –powered attack submarine USS Atlanta ran aground Tuesday in the Strait of Gibraltar with such force that a hole punched in a ballast tank and sonar gear in its nose was smashed, the Navy has announced.

7. Mr. Packwood's New Plan

Senate finance committee chairman Bob Packwood has a sensible thing. He has dropped the old fights he was losing on tax reform and picked some new ones he may be able to win. His new proposal still has some pretty big blanks to be filled in, and it is not clear it can pass his jaded committee. But in some ways the new plan would produce the most reform-the simplest, fairest code-of any such plan so far.

8. D.A.: 2 Who Ran Facility for retarded Defrauded City

Arrest warrants have been issued for operators of a home for retarded children and adults that the city Health Department ordered closed three years ago for mismanagement of city funds, District Attorney Ronald D. Castille announced yesterday.

9. How we Tried to Tell the Russian about TMI

Eight months after we in Pennsylvania had confronted what then was known as the worst accident in the history of commercial nuclear power, I attempted to share some of the lessons of Three Mile Island with high-ranking Soviet energy officials in Moscow. If the attitude those officials displayed then has persisted over the years, it may well have contributed to the tragic events now unfolding at their power plant in Chernobyl.

Correlations	MTELP	F/O
F/O	.3587**	
RC	.6471**	.4057**
KC	.04/1***	.4057**

Correlation Matrix for F/O, RC, and MTELP scores

** p< .001