Fifth-Grade Turkish Elementary School Students' Listening and Reading Comprehension Levels with Regard to Text Types

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine fifth grade elementary school students' listening and reading comprehension levels with regard to text types. This study was conducted on 180 fifth grade elementary school students in Sincan-Ankara in the spring semester of the academic year 2008-2009. The comprehension test was administered to students. The results revealed that the students comprehended the narrative text better when they heard it read by the instructor versus when they read text independently. However, it was concluded that there was no significant difference in comprehension expository texts between students who read the text those for whom the text was narrated. Moreover, the achievement of Turkish class was a predictor variable in reading and listening comprehension of students.

Key Words

Listening Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, Text Types, Student Achievement.

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Researchers agree that there is a relationship between the receptive language skills of reading and listening (Basabas-Ikeguchi, 1988; Crain-Thoreson, 1992, 1996; Hagtvet, 2003; Kuperberg, 1975; Markert, 1974; Mullally, 1972; Perfetti, 1987; Rupley, Wilson & Logan 1995; Tuman, 1980; Wise, Sevcik, Morris, Lovett & Wolf, 2007). Some studies even suggest that this strong relationship during the early years of acquiring reading skills becomes increasingly stronger from grade 2 onwards as children gain mastery in word recognition and distinguishing (Crain-Thoreson, 1996; Diakidoy, Stylianou, Karefillidou & Papageorgiou, 2005).

It is important for a comparison of listening and reading comprehension processes that the relationship between listening and reading comprehension increase as word recognition becomes automatic, whereas the relationship between word recognition and reading comprehension decreases as grade level advances (Hudson, Pullen, Lane & Torgesen, 2009; Nichols, Rupley & Rasinki, 2009; Rasinski, Homan & Biggs, 2009; Young & Rasinski, 2009).

Researchers have put forward various postulations about providing the right stimuli for reading and listening comprehension skills. One such postulation is that since the linguistic stimuli required for comprehension is provided via audio and visual channels in these two language skills, the mental processes needed for reading and listening are independent of one another. Another postulation is that, regardless of the type of stimulation needed for comprehension, the basic characteristics of language are the same and thus the two skills have similar processes (Danks & End 1987; Horowitz & Samuels, 1987). Berg (1955) approaches the issue from a different perspective and emphasizes that listening and reading have common features and are the two basic subcategories of broader linguistic processes. According to this view, listening and reading are essentially similar processes, albeit in different stimulus forms, since they are both concerned with linguistic signs, idea exchange, comprehension difficulties, and involve thinking-related elements (cited in Pauline, 1983). Similarly, Sticht (1979) states that both skills use the same language system to process ideas, in other words, they share the same comprehension system. On the other hand, even though Samuels (1987) agrees that reading and listening comprehension have some similar elements, he argues that different processes are actually required for comprehension.

Starting from a review of previous studies, Stich et al. concluded that listening and reading involve the same general comprehension processes, and they further argue that listening comprehension level denotes reading comprehension potential, and thus it is the most important predictor of reading targets and competencies to be acquired. They also stated that listening and reading performances could be easily compared after the achievement of a certain level in word recognition and distinction (Stich & James, 1984). Another view on the issue has been that listening serves to improve reading and that listening skills may be used to hone reading skills (Aarnoutse, Brand-Gruwel & Oduber, 1997; Aarnoutse, Van Den Bos & Brand-Gruwel, 1998; Trinkle, 2008). Though listening comprehension is theoretically seen as an important part of reading models, it is also considered to be the basis of gaining and improving reading comprehension skills (Stich & James, 1984).

Another aspect of comprehension handled in this study is text types. In all models about comprehension, texts

are divided into two heading: informative and narrative texts (Weaver & Kintsch, 1991). Kintsch and Kozminki (1977) and Sinatra (1990) showed that listening and reading comprehension outcomes are affected by text difficulty and length. The more abstract and complex information usually given in informative texts and the various structures used in informative texts (Singer, Harkness & Stewart, 1997) mean that listeners and readers have more difficulties with informative text listening and reading than narrative texts. As grade level advances, pupils are expected to be exposed more often to informative texts and learn more from them. However, at the beginning of school, pupils have very little experience with these types of texts (Duke, 2000). Naturally, their listening and reading comprehension success are determined by unfamiliar structure, content, the frequency with which a given type of text is encountered, and the difficulty of text type at hand (Diakidoy et al., 2005).

Even though various studies about listening and reading comprehension exist in the literature outside of Turkey (Aarnoutse et al., 1997; Brand-Gruwel, Aarnoutse & Van Den Bos, 1998; Crain-Thoreson, 1996; Kintsch & Kozminki 1977; Roch & Levorato, 2009; Sinatra 1990; Tuman, 1980), only one study exists about the effects of text type on listening and reading comprehension to the best of our knowledge (Diakidoy et

al, 2005). A survey of the literature in Turkey, on the other hand, yields no previous study which examines pupils' listening and reading comprehension levels together. Therefore, the need for this study was born.

Method

The study was conducted on a total of 180 fifth-graders in the six classrooms of a public primary school in Sincan, Ankara during the spring semester of 2008-2009 school year. Convenience sampling was used in this research. In convenience sampling, the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied (Cresswell, 2005), so this study was conducted in a school where one of the researchers (second author) has been working as an elementary school teacher. Because of this, the researchers were provided more help by the school staff. The researcher was able to collect necessaray data in a short time. The age range of pupils was 11-12 years. Of these, 85 were girls and 95 were boys. In selecting the classes, first semester Turkish grades in pupils' reports were examined and six classes that had similar arithmetic means were selected. This criterion was an important factor in class selection. Three of these classes were further selected through random sampling for informative and narrative text listening comprehension tests, and the other three were given informative and narrative text reading comprehension tests. For the comprehension tests, an informative and a narrative text were selected first, followed by the identification of common attainments covering listening and reading comprehension skills (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2005), and then both texts were scrutinized for agreement with these attainments. Cohen Kappa agreement correlation coefficient was found to be approximately $\kappa = .70$, indicating good inter-rater agreement (Şencan, 2005). The researchers preferred to use Cohen Kappa because there were two raters and Cohen Kappa measures the agreement between two raters. Cohan Kappa coefficient value also decreases chance factor in the agreement between raters (Cohen, 1960). KR 20 reliability coefficient was .80. In the three classes selected to identify pupils' listening comprehension levels, the narrative and informative texts were read once according to prosodic features of the texts by the researchers, and no second reading or repetition was used. Prosodic reading refers to intonation, stress, pause, and punctuation that contribute to expressive reading of text (Yildirim, Yildiz, Ates & Cetinkaya, 2009).

The reading of the two texts took approximately five minutes. Later, pupils were asked to answer the comprehension test distributed to them. In order to identify pupils' reading comprehension levels in the other three classes, pupils were told to carefully read the narrative and informative texts once. When they finished reading, the texts were taken from them and comprehension tests were distributed to be answered. Necessary analyses were made in line with the data obtained.

Discussion

In order to better understand the data obtained, the study should be approached from two main perspectives. The first one is about listening and reading skills which are also known as receptive skills among basic language skills; and the other one is about text types which are narrative and informative. While some of the pupils in the sample read informative and narrative type texts individually, the rest listened to the same texts as they were read to them in normal speech speed. In this study, the effects of presenting different type texts via different channels on the comprehension levels of pupils were compared.

The results with respect to listening and reading skills showed that while listening emerged in narrative texts as a more effective method than reading, this was not the case in informative texts. It was found that in the comprehension of informative texts, there was no difference between listening and reading as a source of comprehension. With respect to text types, it was found that pupils understood narrative texts better than informative ones, be it through listening or reading. The parallelism between pupils' narrative and informative text comprehension achievement in both listening and reading and their Turkish grades in their reports reveals that success in receptive language skills increased success in the Turkish course. Below, the results of the study are discussed with respect to the relationships between receptive language skills (listening-reading), text types and academic success in Turkish.

Özbay (2005) argues that listening is the basis for all other language skills and the only comprehension skill practiced before school. Akyol (2006), on the other hand, states that children have some knowledge, albeit small, about the concept of stories starting from preschool. According to this, narrative texts are the only text type children encounter in the preschool period, and this happens through listening. In other words, children's schema about the text is "narrative text", and their

schema about the source of comprehension is listening. Children can only improve their reading schemas after they learn how to read within the process of formal education, and researchers seem to believe that listening contributes to the development of reading or listening skills may be used to improve reading skills (Aarnoutse et al., 1997; Aarnoutse et al., 1998; Trinkle, 2008). Although researchers agree that there is a relationship between the receptive language skills of reading and listening, there is no consensus as of yet about the mental processes required by these two skills. As seen in the previous parts, the main reason behind these differences in people's views is the variety in the (audio-visual) stimuli needed for word recognition and distinction processes and comprehension. Another issue overlooked in these debates and may contribute to the understanding of the results obtained here is that the factors which affect listening and reading comprehension should be examined with respect to their relations with comprehension.

Samuels (1987) divides the factors that affect listening and reading comprehension into two as internal and external factors. While certain factors may be common for the two skills (listening-reading), each skill also has unique factors. Internal factors are related with the pupil while external factors are related with the presentation channels of the message. In other words, while elements such as intelligence, individual language skills, background knowledge and schema about the topic, motivation and upper cognitive strategies are known as internal-shared factors, elements such as listener awareness of speech sounds and the effects of context for listening and instructional language, analysis skills and visual literacy for reading are known as unshared internal factors. Clarity in speech and clarity in writing style, topic of speech and topic of text are the external factors of comprehension. Effectiveness of a speaker, awareness of listener needs and the context are the external factors that affect listening comprehension, while the quality of instruction, tendencies of the writer, text readability, design, structural elements of the text and time are those that affect reading comprehension. The difference not seen in informative texts but existing in narrative texts in favor of listening may be explained by pupils' schemas related to stories and listening. The experience of pupils in listening and stories may have made their schemas in these stronger than their schemas in reading and informative texts.

In this study, text type appeared to be an important factor affecting comprehension. Although the better understanding of narrative texts

may be related more to language acquisition (Graesser, Golding & Long, 1991), the understanding of informative texts relies more on formal education (Lehto & Anttila, 2003). Indeed, children only encounter informative texts after learning to read and then throughout their school years. Thus, reading as a new source of comprehension and informative texts as a new text type are important new schemas for children which require a lot more work. Even though pupils also encounter narrative texts after starting school, at almost every grade level and in almost every theme (Akyol, 2006; MEB, 2005), informative text types and studies in recognizing and understanding them increase with grade level. Diakidoy et al. (2005) conducted a study at different grade levels and found that second graders were better at comprehending an oral narrative text than fourth and sixth graders but worse at it than eighth graders. They attributed this difference to the frequency of different text types in different grade levels.

In various studies where text type was studies in relation to listening comprehension, reading comprehension and listening and reading comprehension together, similar results to the present study were obtained. For instance, Lehto and Anttila (2003) studied second, fourth and sixth graders and found that oral narrative texts were understood better than oral informative texts at all grade levels. Yıldız (2008) concluded that fifth graders were much better at narrative text comprehension than informative text comprehension. Sidekli and Buluç (2006) also studied and fifth graders and Temizyürek (2008) studied eighth graders to reach the conclusion that pupils understood oral narrative texts better than they did oral informative texts. Likewise, Diakidoy et al. (2003) showed that second, fourth, sixth and eighth graders generally comprehended oral and written narrative texts better than informative texts. As can be seen, the results of previous studies suggest that narrative texts are better understood than informative texts regardless of grade level and the source of comprehension (listening-reading). These results may be attributed to language skills which affect both comprehension skills such as words and their order, and the background knowledge and schema of pupils about the texts they either hear or read. The difference may also have been due to the frequency that pupils encountered these text types, their schemas for both text types and structures (Graesser et al., 1991), and word and concept intensity stemming from the content of the informative texts. Saenz and Fuchs (2002) maintain that many fac-

tors may cause difficulties with pupils learning informative texts. The four factors that they mention are: text structure, conceptual intensity of text, familiarity with these, and word knowledge and background information.

Text structure shows how the ideas in the text are organized in transmitting a message (Weaver & Kintsch, 1991). The narrative text structure, which pupils are familiar with from preschool times, continue in the formal education process, almost unchanged. In contrast to these texts, informative texts come in a wide variety of structures. The literature shows that the main elements in narrative texts are the protagonist and side characters, setting, event (problem) and result (solution) (Garner & Bochna, 2004; Graesser et al., 1991). On the other hand, there is a number of informative text structures commonly agreed upon. While the literature holds different names for these, Blachowichz and Ogle (2008) and Wilhelm et al., (2007) list the six ways of informative text organization as: a) description, b) comparison and contrast, c) enumeration, d) problem solution, e) process definition, f) cause-effect. This variety in informative text structure, the conceptual intensity of this text type (Crowe, 2007; Singer et al., 1997) and the relative small number of familiar concepts when compared to narrative texts may be the reasons why listeners and readers have more difficulty with listening and reading informative texts. Also, this type of texts may include jargon or technical words, whose lack may present pupils with analysis and meaning-making problems (Armbruster & Nagy, 1992; Bryant, Ugel, Thompson & Hamff, 1999).

Recommendations

Even though the debate about the mental processes between reading and listening comprehension seems likely to continue, certain researchers claim that measuring listening comprehension is the best way to identify the discrepancy between pupils' current reading performance and their ideal reading level (Badian, 1999; Siegel, 1989; Spring & French, 1990). This would particularly help the identification of children with reading deficiency because their listening performance will be meaningfully higher than their reading performance in their age level. On the other hand, pupils with low reading and listening performance will be considered to have general cognitive or linguistic damage (Badian; Sticht & James, 1984). This approach relies on two assumptions: a)

Listening comprehension tests show language competency. b) Listening comprehension process does not only have the same functions as reading comprehension process, but is also the basis of reading comprehension. According to these assumptions, if the reading comprehension of certain children in regular classrooms is weaker than their listening comprehension, listening is the more appropriate tool to measure their language comprehension performance (Carlisle & Felbinger, 1991). As a result, it may be argued that listening and reading should be used in conjunction to measure pupil competencies in receptive language skills. Even though readers who are not at a desired level of word recognition and distinction or beginner level readers may have difficulties with reading, they may not experience a similar difficulty with listening.

When text type and structure is considered, it may be recommended that pupils be with opportunities to practice strategies to be used in the process of reading and listening comprehension, common informative text structures (such as enumeration, definition, comparison-contrast, cause-effect), and strategies and clues to use when encountered with texts where the main idea is not clear (prosodic elements in speech and writing, bold, italic or bigger font size writing, etc.). Pressley (2000) emphasizes that most texts have a varied and complex structure and that teachers should teach the features of informative texts and strategies to facilitate the comprehension of such texts in order to develop pupils' schema. Blachowichz and Ogle (2008) state that gaining familiarity with the way ideas are organized is one way of uncovering meaning in a reading text. The structure of informative texts is different from that of narrative texts. It is harder for pupils who are not familiar with these informative texts organized in different ways to understand and make guesses about the organizational pattern. This makes it doubly important to teach and guide pupils in these topics (Crowe, 2007). Coyne et al., (2009) state that various strategies and direct instruction may be used to educate pupils in narrative and informative text structure, strategy use, activating background knowledge, word and comprehension strategies.

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