

Fostering Main Idea Comprehension among EFL Learners through Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies

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Abstract

This article focuses mainly on the combined application of cognitive and metacognitive processing strategies to improve EFL readers' main idea comprehension. In order to be competent and more successful in deriving the central theme of text, EFL students need assistance in promoting both categories of reading processes. Building on previous research, this article argues that, for EFL students, additional support in knowledge and skills in the foundational elements of text understanding at the lower level is often necessary in the process of constructing main ideas. Of equal importance are higher-level cognitive processes and metacognitive strategies. The article indicates some possible guidelines for teaching main idea comprehension at each level of processing. Some modifications to strategy instruction are also recommended to suit the needs of EFL readers.

Key words: main idea, global and local comprehension, connectives, word relationships, self-monitoring

1. Introduction

The main idea is the main point or the central thought of the reading selection. It is usually a complete sentence that includes the gist of every idea from the paragraph. Aulls (1978) states that the main idea statement is related to the majority of sentences in the paragraph; it may occur at any point in a paragraph; it may be explicit or implied (p.92). Finding explicitly stated main ideas is not a difficult reading task for many people due to the fact that they can search for main points of text at specific locations of paragraphs (i.e. the first, second or last sentence). Determining implied main idea, however, requires different cognitive capabilities. It is much more difficult and can be problematic for most readers, particularly EFL readers who have more limited linguistic and discourse knowledge than L1 readers do. For EFL learners, this skill is hard because it requires them to think at the same time about several pieces of information and there often is no way to be sure what the real central theme is. The students, as a result, can easily become unmotivated. For EFL reading instructors, even though teaching main ideas is a difficult, demanding task, there is currently no explicit teaching method for the skill (Jacobowitz, 1990; Tomitch, 2000). This is an obstacle for both learners and instructors. The problem requires EFL instructors to look more deeply at their students' needs and find more effective ways to develop appropriate reading processes required for main idea comprehension as well as creating a motivating reading environment that support learning.

Reading strategies are basically divided into two major categories: cognitive and metacognitive. Cognitive reading strategies are those that enable learners to construct meaning from the text and achieve their reading task. These include bottom-up and top-down reading processes. The bottom-up approach is primarily concerned with vocabulary, grammatical patterns, derivations, relations to other words and syntactic recognition. The top-down approach, on the other hand, requires readers to make predictions and hypotheses about the text content by relating the new information to their prior knowledge. This knowledge plays a very important role in the process of deriving meaning from text. According to researchers, main idea comprehension is a complex activity which concerns a variety of reading components and knowledge sources (Afflerbach, 1990; Pressley, 1998; Grabe, 2009; Wilawan, 2011). That is, readers need to integrate various text-processing skills in order to derive the overall meaning. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) emphasize the need for ESL/EFL learners to develop both bottom-up and top-down reading approaches.

In order to understand a passage, ESL/EFL readers use the bottom-up strategy—they process words and their meanings, as well as connections between words at the basic level of the sentence. Otherwise, they must rely more on the top-down approach, integrating background knowledge with new information to arrive at the meaning of the text. Nonetheless, if the readers do not possess prior world knowledge related to the ideas in the present text, nor do they know the exact meanings at the sentence level, the chance is that they might misunderstand the points being made by the writer. In this regard, it is necessary that EFL main idea instruction integrate elements of both bottom-up and top-down reading. Metacognitive strategies are the strategies which function to monitor or regulate cognitive strategies. They involve self-reflection and thinking about reading and the learning process, planning, monitoring and evaluating the reading as it occurs (Oxford, 2002). Successful reading comprehension, according to theorists, is a complex task which rests crucially on a constant integration of cognitive and metacognitive processes (Yang, 2002; Dhieb-Henia, 2003; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000).

Pertaining to main idea determination, there has not been much progress in the instruction in this domain of reading (Jacobowitz, 1990; William, cited in Tomitch, 2000). Since virtually no explicit approach to the comprehension of essential content of a text currently exists, many studies available have focused on the use of top-down strategies to investigate their impact on text understanding (Gallini et al., 1993; Gallini and Spires, 1995). Other studies, mostly performed with English native speakers whose linguistic competences and discourse knowledge are assumed to be automatic, have focused mainly on self-monitoring (e.g. Jitendra et al., 2000), cooperative learning (e.g. Stevens et al., 1991), and reciprocal teaching (e.g. Spiak, 1999) in order to enhance students' main idea comprehension. The approaches seem to lay emphasis on top-down, rather than bottom-up strategies (Dhieb-Henia, 2003). These teaching models, therefore, may not be appropriate for EFL readers who seem to experience greater difficulties in reading than first language readers due to their lower proficiency in lexical, grammatical and discourse knowledge. In order to suit the needs of EFL students, their reading strategies should be developed in both bottom-up and top-down fashions (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Hirsch, 2003; Kintsch, 2005; Weir & Khalifa, 2008). These two types of processing are viewed as interactive in nature and complementary to each other. They particularly equip EFL readers with compensatory methods to tackle difficulties in their reading task (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000). In addition to these cognitive strategies, EFL students should also be provided with metacognitive processing. In other words, they should learn to read texts more effectively by regulating their own comprehension, monitoring their reading processes, or dealing with the difficulties they encounter during interpretation processing.

Grounded upon contemporary reading theories and research, this article encourages EFL reading instructors to draw on both top-down and bottom-up, as well as metacognitive processes so as to enhance their students' main idea comprehension. It aims to suggest an appropriate instructional intervention for processing text at different levels concurrently in establishing the central concept of English text. The three essential components for main idea processing (top-down, bottom-up and metacognitive processes), interchangeably referred to as *global comprehension*, *local comprehension* and *self-monitoring*, respectively, are individually described in detail. Suggestions for teaching each level of main idea processing more effectively to EFL learners are also discussed. The next section of the article includes three teaching approaches focusing on strategy instruction through which main idea comprehension can be improved.

2. Global Comprehension

Global comprehension refers to the understanding of the general meaning of a text. It focuses on interrelated sentences, particularly the discourse as a whole. At this level, meanings of the larger elements of a discourse, such as paragraphs as wholes, are derived from generalizations of the microstructural propositions or sentences. The global comprehension involves high-order processing; that is, how information units are grounded in each other and how they are to be comprehended on the basis of the context and the meaning of individual sentences already processed. It is necessary that a reader employs different sources of information (e.g. encoding words or phrases, interclausal relations, prior knowledge, text signals, etc.) in order to summarize the meaning of individual information units, and thus to develop a macrostructural representation of content in a text. Most importantly, the interpretation of a text at this stage depends greatly upon the reader's integration of the message encountered in the text with their preexisting background knowledge (i.e. knowledge of content, general knowledge of the world, knowledge of structural aspects of text, knowledge of different types of text and genre).

Afflerbach (1990) proposes that the construction of a main idea from text is tremendously influenced by the reader's prior knowledge of the content domain of the text. For this reason, sufficient background knowledge of the reader is required in main idea construction processing. Readers who have inadequate world knowledge for the text topic inevitably experience serious problems of determining the most important information. Carrell (1988) argues that a lack of background knowledge activation would lead to insuperable processing difficulties with second language readers. In this perspective, relying exclusively on their linguistic knowledge (e.g. going word by word, stopping to look up every unknown vocabulary item) does not seem to be adequate for the main idea task (Pressley, 1998; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000; Landry, 2002; Hirsch, 2003; Kintsch, 2005). One of the most important functions of EFL reading instructors, then, is to help students recognize the knowledge that they already have about the topic of a text, which enables them to make sense of what is written. Activating background knowledge which is relevant to the concepts being discussed is particularly necessary for ESL/EFL readers (Abraham, 2000). It helps them make predictions about what may plausibly be the overall theme and also provides them with a foundation in the process of meaning construction.

To begin a reading assignment, EFL instructors should explain the term "main idea" to students. This is for the students to have a clear idea of what they will be reading for, so that they can learn how to perform a task. Students should also be informed that main idea sentences may not always be explicitly stated in the text. Under such circumstances, they must attempt to capture the important content of the text and generate main idea statements themselves. Before the reading takes place, students' background knowledge about the topic of a text should be activated. This can be performed through discussion of titles, subtitles, headings, captions, etc. These cues provide a good overview and are very useful in getting the students to brainstorm what they know about the topic and helping them speculate the likely text content (van Dijk, 1980). Instructors posing questions is another means of creating a motivating reading environment, expanding students' ideas as well as arousing their interest in processing text. Examples of questions instructors can ask are: "What topic might this story be about?", "What do we already know about this topic?", or "Do we have any experience related to this topic?" Class time should be allocated for these class, group or individual previewing and predicting activities as preparation for the actual reading.

As previously mentioned, the determination of main ideas primarily depends on a series of reading techniques—a reader cannot solely rely upon a single approach in order to achieve the overall text meaning. Top-down processes by themselves are clearly insufficient to facilitate the comprehension of the central theme.

3. Local Comprehension

Local comprehension involves linguistic knowledge (e.g. morphological, syntactic, and lexical structures of sentences). It is at the level of creating the meanings of words and phrases, understanding how words are structured into sentences, recognizing how text elements connect to one another, as well as establishing semantic relationships between or among clauses and sentences in order to form the meanings of the sequences of propositions as a whole. According to Anderson (2008), the explicit instruction of local comprehension (or bottom-up reading) has thus far received relatively little attention from researchers and educators. He claims that a strong bottom-up reading component will make less-skilled readers become more skilled readers more quickly. Other researchers maintain that it is necessary to increase knowledge and skills in the foundational elements of text understanding at the lower level before a reader conducts higher level reading processes (Perfetti et al., 1996; Perry & MacDonald, 2001). Due to the fact that local comprehension concerns knowledge of the language, teaching linguistic elements can help EFL students improve their text understanding at this level. Recognizing relationships among sentences is a crucial linguistic subcomponent that would need to be considered in EFL main idea instruction.

Thuring et al. (1995) contend that coherence is a crucial component which reinforces the comprehension processes. A reader's ability to understand a text is significantly influenced by the extent of coherence. In order for the reader to construct a mental model, coherence of a document must be improved. This can be done in part by increasing local coherence, i.e. relations that connect pieces of information together. These relations could be maintained through the use of connectives, pronouns relating to antecedents, and word relationships (e.g. repetitions, synonymous and antonymous terms)—all these devices help guide the reader through the semantic relations between sentences.

Local coherence provides a reader with a means of integrating linguistic constituents, relating the text contents, and thus facilitating comprehension. Two of the mechanisms operating at the level of local coherence involve: using explicit connectives that signal text structure and recognizing word relationships.

3.1 Explicit Connectives

Linguistic awareness can be stimulated in EFL students by directing them towards observing explicit connectives. Several researchers claim that knowledge of connectives has the potential to support readers' text comprehension by signaling the relationships between ideas and information both at the level of sentences and clauses and across larger units of discourse (Degand & Sanders, 2002). A number of texts usually make substantial use of conventional connectives in order to maintain relations between adjacent clauses and sentences, and relations among different parts of a text. These types of text require readers to infer the underlying structure of the text, which is a difficult task for EFL learners. For this reason, EFL instructors should familiarize their learners with explicit connectives. Crosson & Lesaux (2011) note that knowledge of connectives is an important aspect of English language reading which learners may exploit to make sense of textual relations. With these linguistic devices acting as guiding cues, EFL students can understand the relationships between text propositions and indicate more clearly the way in which information is organized in text. The underlying text structure also becomes more obvious to them and the text information is much easier to understand (Grabe, 2004; Zwaan & Rapp, 2006), thereby helping to facilitate the construction of a text representation.

In this regard, EFL instructors should give their students direct instruction by raising their awareness of specific text structuring. This can be done by showing them the organization pattern or text structure of a sample expository text. The instructor demonstrates to the students how information and ideas in text are organized and presented. Once the students begin to realize how the text is organized, explicit connectives can be introduced. The learners should be informed that connectives are words that link sentences together; they are text structure signals which aid in comprehension and inference by helping the students to understand relationships between concepts and ideas, and events in paragraphs. The instructor then shows a connectives chart with examples of the various connectives in sentences. Different types of connectives should also be discussed—these are, for instance, conjunctions (e.g. *and, also, in addition to*), causality (e.g. *because, therefore, consequently*), contrast (e.g. *in contrast, similarly, on the other hand*), sequence (e.g. *first, second, before, after, when*) and concession (e.g. *but, although, however*) (Almasi, 2003). They are used to signal text structures of expository prose, including listing, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, chronological order, definition, and problem-solution. Along with these linguistic cues, various types of graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, concept maps, and charts, should be visually shown to the students. Later they can be provided with a sample paragraph and directed to identify and label the connectives. The students should be encouraged to work collaboratively in pairs or small groups to see how the text is organized and arrange the information in graphic organizers. With these visual tools, EFL readers are able to break complex information into small, understandable pieces. That is, they can distinguish important ideas from supporting details more easily and, accordingly, more capable of formulating a main idea.

3.2 Word Relationships

EFL reading instruction should raise students' awareness of other types of linking elements in the text which refer to one another in the reading passages. EFL learners should be guided through the recognition of word relationships. The instructor should first explain to learners the concept of word relationships and how they can give them important clues to what the main information of a text is (Hoey, 1991; Wilawan, 2011). The instructor then shows how vocabulary items in a text coordinate across sentences and models how to explore connections between words to form semantic networks. These include finding various morphological forms of words (i.e. *music-musical-musician*), identifying repeated words (i.e. *bear-bears*) or semantically related items (i.e. *birds-parrots-swallows*) and searching for the synonyms (i.e. *stop-cease*), and antonyms (i.e. *cheap-expensive*). Kern (2000) asserts that students should be instructed to focus attention on word derivation (i.e. how words like *write, written, writing, and writer*, are related) which will enormously expand their knowledge of vocabulary. This notion of word associations is, to a certain extent, similar to Hoey's (1991) suggestion that vocabulary should be taught and learnt in the morphological forms (i.e. *protect, protecting, protection*). The awareness of these linguistic resources may help develop students' ability to read in a foreign language and to increase their understanding of the text they encounter. Additionally EFL learners should be provided with lexical cohesive items of various types before they read the text.

For instance, they should be given guidance on words like *economy/economic*, *biologist/scientist*, *company/firm*, *cow/animals*, *disinvestment/disinvest/investment/investors*. This would provide readers with a grounding in key topic-related words in the text. Readers will then be given a lexical framework to build their understanding. EFL readers should be made familiar with these associated words and be encouraged to observe them when they read independently.

Underwood and Vivienne (1996) describe the influence of word repetition on the understanding of a text. If a word is mentioned in a preceding sentence and it is repeated in a subsequent sentence or sentences, the interpretation processing will take place more quickly than the first time. For example, when the word 'butter' is repeated in a text, the reader collects information from the first time the word is mentioned, and once the word is presented again, he or she tends to recall the materials received earlier. The process is said to speed up the comprehension of the text. This also occurs to other semantically related words such as 'bread'. The word 'butter' that is presented previously can facilitate the processing of the word 'bread'. Similarly, EFL readers should be taught to identify words that are lexically connected, i.e. *Christmas—Carols—Santa Claus*. This is because when one word in the group is recognized, the same sensory input is activated along the links. The links help to confine the meaning of these words. As a direct consequence, it is argued that readers can predict the probable content of the text more easily. EFL learners should therefore be trained to recognize how words can be related to one another in this way, apart from concentrating solely on the repetitions of words (i.e. *Christmas—Christmas*), or the vocabulary frequently mentioned by the author.

The local comprehension (or bottom-up) processes should be developed in class in order that students can learn to decode the linguistic features more efficiently. In this regard, students should be provided with activities that motivate exploring relationships between words in a text. Jullian (2002) suggests an activity which elicit from students vocabulary related to a key word like 'sea'. Students, working in pairs, are asked to write down as many words associated with 'sea' as they could think of. Particularly they are strongly encouraged to think of closest related terms to 'sea', further related terms, opposite related terms, adjectives and verbs related to 'sea'—all belong to the same lexical field. The task should be done gradually in a relaxed atmosphere. This assignment helps make word relations explicit and also contribute to students' vocabulary expansion. Another way to improve EFL students' skills in recognizing relations between or among words is by using worksheets with reading selections. Instructors may select interesting reading materials that are comprehensible for EFL readers and must also contain an adequate number of associated lexical items, so readers can learn to identify word relationships and build vocabulary. At first, students may work with teacher assistance.

Once they become familiar with the strategies, they can continue to work on their own. These exercises allow the students to practice further with vocabulary and gain a more complete picture of the ways in which text elements work together to convey meaning. Furthermore, they learn how those related vocabulary items can be used as a primary strategy to draw stronger connections between concepts and ideas across different parts of a text (Hoey, 1991; Wilawan, 2006). Once the students become sufficiently competent in the linguistic components within and beyond the sentence at the local level, they can be guided to more complex, higher level processes to construct textual meaning. At this stage of processing, the bottom-up and top-down approaches can be viewed as complementary to one another. That is, word relations can assist EFL readers in retrieving appropriate prior knowledge, or *schemata*. They will serve to confine EFL readers to the text topic they are encountering, and to focus their attention on the text content so that they can activate prior knowledge which is relevant to the concepts being discussed by the author. Consequently, EFL readers will likely be able to grasp important ideas.

4. Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring is another important factor in the reading process. It refers to a person's ability to adjust his or her reading behavior to deal with various situations. Almasi (2003) asserts that readers who are incapable of self-monitoring will not be able to focus attention on what they read, which will affect their comprehension. A variety of self-monitoring activities are considered to be metacognitive: planning for a task, checking one's actions, analyzing a problem, and monitoring or evaluating comprehension while reading and when the reading task is completed. Self-monitoring may take place at different stages of the reading process (Weir & Khalifa, 2008). In the bottom-up level, it involves checking word recognition, related vocabulary items, and syntactic parsing. In the higher-level of the top-down approach, self-monitoring concerns checking for consistency between different pieces of information and determining the success of the integration of new information with prior background knowledge.

The ability to self-monitor is particularly crucial to foreign language readers (Yang, 2002). Owing to their lower proficiency in language skills, EFL students need self-monitoring to check their understanding throughout the entire reading process. The key benefit of self-monitoring is its ability to help students pay attention while reading to what kind of reading problems they are encountering, what strategies could be used to solve them and what strategies they think will help them approach a main idea assignment. Since many EFL students with reading and learning problems fail to monitor their understanding when they read, instructors should provide them with opportunities for developing the competency of self-monitoring.

Self-monitoring is usually involved throughout all steps in the reading process. During reading for main ideas, the students should be directed to pause at appropriate points to update and revise their predictions so that they can maintain their focused attention on the incoming information. The role of instructors at this point is to facilitate reading, raise the students' awareness of their strategy use and build their confidence. Asking questions such as "*Does the text make sense to you? Any problems with the section we just read?*" provides for purposeful reading and keeps the students alert to identify words or concepts that do not make sense to them. Meanwhile, students should be guided towards observing cohesive ties between or among sentences, for example, explicit connectives, pronoun referents and related vocabulary items (word derivations, word repetitions, superordinates, synonyms and antonyms of words), to see how ideas are connected logically. With this approach, the instructor can ensure their students' understanding at the local level. Additionally, it provides EFL readers with important clues to the organization, hence the comprehension of the text. The learners themselves should raise queries in their minds like "*What is the meaning of what I have read?*," "*What is this story about?*" as they read. Asking themselves questions periodically can assist their comprehension. The students should also be reminded to adjust their reading behavior and be flexible in choosing and applying more appropriate strategies (i.e. rereading, relating text content with prior knowledge, summarizing paragraphs or sections) and resources to fix their problems and help them get the gist of the reading material.

After reading, the students should formulate questions like "*What does the author mainly discuss?*," "*What is the most important point the author is trying to make in his writing?*" or "*What does he mention most often?*" The questions and answers are to improve students' knowledge, comprehension, and memory of what was read; they will assist in guiding students as they complete their main idea assignment. Instructors may also remind them to review key ideas by making use of explicit connectives or word relationships which have been previously observed. These words can help them construct the overall meaning of text (Hoey, 1991; Wilawan, 2011). The approach, however, must be conducted in conjunction with other processes (e.g. summarizing, drawing inferences). To make the students feel relaxed and not limited by their English proficiency, students should be allowed to verbalize in their native language the most important point as a way of making sure they have understood what they have read. Afterwards they can be encouraged to try re-stating the most important idea in English, using their own words. At the end, students should be encouraged to talk about their reading difficulties, what strategies they actually used to deal with the main idea task and the effectiveness of those strategies based on a particular outcome. Discussion on what they experienced provides the instructor with valuable information about the students' strategy use for main idea comprehension as well as their level of understanding.

5. Instructional Models for Main Idea Comprehension

Main idea comprehension, as noted earlier, is a difficult task which involves the simultaneous application of bottom-up, top-down and metacognitive strategies. Instructional approaches which appear to be possible methods of teaching these combined strategies are, for example, the Reciprocal Teaching Approach (RTA), Self-Regulated Reading Approach (SQ3R), and Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR).

Reciprocal teaching, developed by Palincsar and Brown (1984), has been used by a great number of researchers and found to be effective in developing students' reading comprehension (Spiak, 1999; Salataci and Akyel, 2002; Fung et al., 2003). The instruction is generally carried out in the form of a dialogue between the teacher and students. The teacher, as an expert, first models the steps of the instructional processes; students are trained to improve and monitor their own comprehension, and apply their linguistic knowledge as well as background knowledge by using four metacognitive strategies: *questioning, predicting, clarifying, and summarizing*. *Questioning* concerns students' ability to ask themselves questions while reading. Good questioning enables the readers to incorporate information and concentrate on the text content.

For *predicting*, students, before reading, use their prior knowledge to guess the probable content of the new text or what the next paragraph will be about. *Clarifying* is useful when there are confusions in the text (e.g. unclear portions, or difficult concepts). It provides readers with opportunity to reread, use background knowledge, or ask a friend for help. The *summarizing* strategy helps readers select relevant information, as opposed to irrelevant details, and recognize how ideas are related and what is most important in a text. The four strategies encourage students to be consistent in keeping in mind the purpose of the task, to be flexible in reading, to relate ideas by exploiting background knowledge, to check their own comprehension, and to monitor problems.

Artis (2008) applied the *self-regulated reading approach* (SQ3R), developed by Francis Robinson, to improve students' reading comprehension. The SQ3R has five steps which can help students to become effective metacognitive readers: *survey, question, read, recite, and review*. The surveying step allows students to skim over the reading selection, read the title and section headings in order to set a purpose to read and get an overview of the material. Formulating questions helps them understand the purpose of the reading more clearly as well as enhancing their critical thinking skills. The reading stage requires students to read actively. At this point, they need to comprehend the author's idea, the purpose and every part of the text. With specific questions from the previous step in mind, students should also read to find answers to those questions. This also keeps them alert and focused on the assignment. Making short notes or brief summaries while reading enables students to process the text information more deeply and understand the main concepts. The next step is to recite the answers to questions. Without looking at the text or notes, students write the answers in their own words or share information with their classmates. This phase allows students to retain key concepts of the reading material and check their understanding. Through review, students reflect on how well they have understood the author's message. This step requires students to reorganize important information from the text in a way that is meaningful to them.

Collaborative strategic reading (CSR), according to Abidin and Riswanto (2012), is presented to students through modeling and whole-class instruction. Students, working in small cooperative groups, apply four reading strategies: *preview, click & clunk, get the gist and wrap up*. *Preview* allows students to generate questions and activate background knowledge in order to predict what they will learn. *Click and clunk* involves self-monitoring strategies which students use to check their understanding while reading about portions of the text that make or do not make sense to them. This phase teaches students to pay attention to when they are understanding or failing to understand. *Get the gist* is aimed at developing students' comprehension and memory of what they have learned. Students learn to identify the most important idea in the paragraph and to confirm their understanding. *Wrap Up* teaches students to generate questions and answers about what they have learned and to review key ideas. It helps improve students' knowledge, understanding, and memory of textual information.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, although these teaching models are claimed to integrate all the necessary components of reading (bottom-up, top-down and metacognitive processes), they seem to devote less attention to the linguistic aspects (Dhie-Henia, 2003). The approaches, consequently, must be appropriately tailored to suit an EFL context and EFL learners' ability and learning behaviours. In other words, the teaching practices must be adjusted to include more use of local comprehension processing as it is necessary for the construction of the central theme. The *clarifying* phase of the RTA, the *reading* part of the SQ3R and the *click and clunk* stage of the CSR, in particular, require some modifications. Clarifying, for example, entails the identification and clarification of unfamiliar vocabulary, unclear reference words, or difficult concepts. The technique focuses on training students to take the necessary steps (i.e. rereading, looking up difficult words or asking for help) to restore meaning. These clarifying processes are necessary, but they may not be adequate for EFL readers to operate at a higher level in order to derive text meaning. The strategy then should be supplemented with such local strategies as using connectives and recognizing word relationships (e.g. word repetitions, synonyms andonyms). These cohesive devices lay foundations for the understanding of relations among concepts and ideas across individual elements in the text, thereby facilitating main idea comprehension processing (Hoey, 1991; Wilawan, 2011).

6. Conclusion

Determining a main idea of a text is one of the most difficult tasks in reading comprehension. It is a complex process which concerns the application of various reading strategies (Afflerbach, 1990; Pressley, 1998; Grabe, 2009, Wilawan 2011). Based on current theories of reading, it is necessary that the main idea instructional method for EFL learners incorporate three necessary processing components: *global comprehension, local comprehension* and *self-monitoring*.

Although specific strategy training models such as the RTA, the SQ3R, or the CSR are grounded on the three crucial components for main idea processing, the implementation of the models requires modifications. The local strategies of the teaching approaches need to be supplemented with another aspect of local processes; that is, guiding EFL readers to make sense of textual relations through the recognition of connectives and word relationships (e.g. repetitions, synonyms and antonyms) as a means of increasing text understanding at the local level. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the strategies mentioned are not the only ones used to improve the students' knowledge and skills in the foundational elements of text comprehension. There are many more language aspects which should be taught to EFL readers, which are not discussed in this article. As mentioned previously, in order to enhance EFL readers' main idea comprehension, local strategies must be performed in conjunction with global and metacognitive processes. Teaching all these reading components, accordingly, tends to be too time consuming for instructors to implement. EFL learners may also find these combined processes too laborious at first. It is, however, unnecessary for them to perform all these main idea strategies simultaneously in one reading task. With self-monitoring, the students should be able to learn how to use reading strategies that they find effective or appropriate for the types of text they need to accomplish. It is essential that EFL readers be provided with a sufficient amount of time for practice and development of these vital strategies until they are able to apply them naturally and get into the habit of always utilizing the processes when encountering English texts.

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