

## **Text Type and Students' Comprehension Performance**

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### **Abstract**

The present study aims at investigating the relationship between text type and students' comprehension performance. The researcher has used four text types (namely narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative) to check for the effect of text type on students' performance in comprehension tests. The researcher found that the hypothesis that narrative texts are the easiest to understand, the argumentative being the most difficult, and the other two types being of moderate difficulty, is a correct one.

### **Introduction**

Frustration and low self-esteem is a hindering factor in language learning (or in fact any other skill) and thus ought to be avoided. One of its causes is the feeling of non-achievement due to high difficulty of the learning material. That is why syllabus designers and language teachers need to pay a great attention to the gradation of the learning material (whether in linear or cyclical syllabuses). By starting with easy learning items, one can sustain learners' motivation and enhance self-esteem needed for the forthcoming more difficult learning items.

One of the most important skills for the foreign language learners is reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is taught in the early stages

of language learning. Teaching reading comprehension, which is by no means an easy task, usually involves the teaching of reading passages of different types and content. Recently, *"psycholinguistic models of comprehension have been developed permitting a clearer insight into the difficulties encountered by a number of readers or produced by certain texts"* (Degand et al, 1998:40). So, the sequence of introducing reading passages that takes into account the difficulty level caused by different factors in the teaching-learning text (passages) is of vital importance since it affects the future learning tasks with which learners will be faced.

The factors that determine the difficulty of reading comprehension passages are many, such as: content familiarity, length, language (including the writer's style and text wording), text type and text structure. Furthermore, many studies assert that *"different types of text invite different types of processing. For example, stories invite relational processing, whereas expository texts invite individual-item processing"* (Zwaan, 1994: 920). This implies the need, on the part of the learner, to select and use the suitable comprehension strategies that best fit the text taught, and on the part of the teacher (or syllabus designer) to select the type and sequence of the texts that best fit the learners' abilities. The present study aims at uncovering the relationship between text type on one hand and reading comprehension performance on the other, with the pedagogical objective of discovering the best sequence of text types to use in teaching reading comprehension.

A text can be classified according its content into different types (scientific, literary, political, historical, religious, etc.) ; or according to the purpose it is tended to achieve - since *"different kinds of writing [texts] achieve different purposes"* (Kane and Peters,1980:3)- into expository, narrative, argumentative, and descriptive). The present research attempts an investigation of the

relationship between text type and learners' reading comprehension performance by taking the purpose-based classification of texts. The four text types that are taken into consideration are not the only ones, however, they are the commonest types learners will need to deal with in their academic career as language learners first, and as language teachers in the future.

A narrative text is one that " *tells a story*" ( Alexandr,1971:68), a descriptive is that which " *describes scenes, objects, people or even a person's feeling in such a way that we can imagine them vividly*", an argumentative text is about ideas"(Ibid), whereas an expository text" *consists of a thesis or assertion, and some evidence or examples to support it*"(Nobuhiko,1998:1), It is" *the type of writing that is intended chiefly to explain and give answers to questions beginning with 'how' and 'why'*".(Kane and Peters, 1980: 3).

The research is based on the hypothesis that argumentative texts are the most difficult text type to comprehend , the narrative being the easiest, whereas the other two types ( expository and descriptive) being relatively of the same moderate difficulty somewhere in between the first two.

### Literature Review

The study of comprehension is by no means a new area of research, however, many of the findings of studies in this field tend to be culture or even sample- specific. This implies a need for more local studies that give insight to specialists in every learning situation since adopting inappropriate or displaced generalizations can sometimes cause more harm than benefit.

Among the many studies that dealt with factors affecting text comprehension is Al-Shumaimeri's(2006).He tried to investigate the impact text content familiarity and language ability on the comprehension performance of high and low-ability Saudi EFL learners. He came to the conclusion that these two factors affect comprehension performance significantly saying that "*content*

*familiarity facilitated reading comprehension, and that language ability had a significant effect on the comprehension performance of students at different levels" ( see also Chiesi, Spilich, & Voss,1979;Fincher-Kiefer,1992; Spilich, Vesonder, Chiesi, & Voss, 1979 ).*In another study, Kattiyapirak (2006) attempted to reveal the effect of text structure, defined by Bartlett(1978) as the "*writing plan behind the ideas in the text which an author uses to present the most significant information ( the main idea) of a passage organized in relation to its supporting details and specific details"*( Kattiyapirak,2006:5), on first-year Kasem Bundit University ( a Thai private university in Bangkok) students' reading comprehension. This researcher found out that applying text structure technique helped enhance students' comprehension of English texts. On the same track, Ayatollahi (2003) attempted to find out whether text type and test format affect learners' performance on summary writing tests. He contends that "*the results obtained confirmed the effect of text type and test format on learners' performance on a summary writing test (Ayatollahi,2003:abstract).* This, he adds verifies Kobayashi's (2000), who found that "*text organization and test format had a significant impact on the students' performance"*, and Bachman's (1990), assertions about "*the effect of text structure and test method on learners' test performance"*(*Ibid*). Yali and Jiliang (2007) studied the effect of text type and test type on L2 reading comprehension test performance and they found that freshmen students "*perform significantly better in summary writing task for the narrative text than the expository one of the same difficulty level while in multiple-choice task the difference between performances for the two text types is not significant"*( Yali & Jiliang, 2007). Another study is Mehrpour and Riazi's (2004) who studied the effect of text length on text comprehension and arrived at the conclusion that this feature of the text does not significantly affect reading comprehension. These aforementioned studies are only examples of the huge body of the research in this field.

**Procedure**

In order to check for the study hypothesis 20 randomly chosen third year students in the department of English, college of Education, University of Basrah were subjected to four comprehension 30 minute tests. Each of these tests dealt with one of the text types under study (narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative). The texts were approximately of the same length. They were taken from Kane and Peters' (1980) **Writing prose: Techniques and purposes** (a textbook which was taught to first year students some years ago). The participants were supposed to answer four questions: the first three are wh-questions, while the last is a summary one. The answer sheets were then collected and scored by the researcher himself -being a teacher of comprehension for more than six years and another teaching staff member of the department of English and the two mean of the two scores were taken. The results then were submitted to statistical analysis to determine whether the performance differences are significant or not.

**Results and Discussion**

Table 1 shows the participants' performance on the four comprehension tests. Since mere mean of scores, though quite suggestive, are not enough to tell whether the performance differences are significant or not. The data were submitted to statistical test in which the covariance values of all the four groups were calculated.

Table 1: The Students' Performance on the Four Text Types

Text Type Test	Narrative		Descriptive		Expository		Argumentative	
	Scores (xi)	$(xi - \bar{x})^2$	Scores (xi)	$(xi - \bar{x})^2$	Scores (xi)	$(xi - \bar{x})^2$	Scores (xi)	$(xi - \bar{x})^2$
1	5.5	0.8556 25	7	6.8906 25	6	3.8025	5.5	3.70562 5
2	4	0.3306 25	4	0.1406 25	3	1.1025	2	2.48062 5
3	5	0.1806 25	4.5	0.0156 25	3	1.1025	4	0.18062 5
4	4.5	0.0056 25	5.5	1.2656 25	5	0.9025	4.5	0.85562 5
5	2	6.6306 25	3	1.8906 25	2	4.2025	3	0.33062 5
6	3.5	1.1556 25	4.5	0.0156 25	4	0.0025	5	2.03062 5
7	5	0.1806 25	5	0.3906 25	3	1.1025	2.5	1.15563 25
8	5.5	0.8556 25	3	1.8906 25	4	0.0025	3	0.33062 5
9	6	2.0306 25	7	6.8906 25	4	0.0025	6	5.88062 5

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10	3.5	1.1556 25	2.5	3.5156 25	5	0.9025	3.5	0.00562 5
11	4	0.3306 25	2	5.6406 25	6	3.8025	1	6.63062 5
12	4.5	0.0056 25	2	5.6406 25	2	4.2025	5	2.03062 5
13	6	2.0306 25	1	11.390 625	5	.9025	3.5	0.00562 5
14	3	2.4806 25	4.5	0.0156 25	5	.9025	2	2.48062 5
15	5	0.1806 25	4	0.1406 25	3	1.1025	3	0.33062 5
16	4	0.3306 25	6.5	4.5156 25	4.5	.2025	5	2.03062 5
17	6.5	3.7056 25	5	0.3906 25	4	0.0025	5	2.03062 5
18	3.5	1.1556 25	4.5	0.0156 25	3	1.1025	0	12.7806 25
19	4	0.3306 25	5.5	1.2656 25	4	0.0025	3	0.33062 5
20	6.5	3.7056 25	6.5	4.5156 25	5.5	2.1025	5	2.03062 5
<b>Total</b>	<b>91.5</b>	<b>27.667 5</b>	<b>87.5</b>	<b>56.438 0</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>27.45</b>	<b>71.5</b>	<b>47.6375</b>
<b>Standard</b>	<b>1.2067245</b>		<b>1.7234833</b>		<b>1.202</b>		<b>1.5834</b>	

deviation				
Co- variance	0.2637	0.3959	0.2968	0.4429

By comparing the covariance of the groups one can tell which text type group performance is better; the less the covariance value, the better the performance of the group. Having a glance at table 1 above makes it clear that the first part of the hypothesis regarding the argumentative text type being the most difficult and the narrative being the easiest is quite obvious if we notice that the covariance value of the argumentative text type is (0.4429), which is almost double that of the narrative (0.2637). The second part of the hypothesis concerning the moderate difficulty of the other two text types ( descriptive and expository) is also verified ,however, it seems that the expository text type tends to be much easier than the descriptive since the covariance value of this text type group is (0.2968)- a value closer to that of the narrative text type group (0.2637) than to that of the descriptive text type group (0.3959).

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

In the light of the aforementioned findings, it became obvious that in our academic situation, i.e. EFL learning in the department of English, college of Education, university of Basrah, our EFL learners face considerably greater difficulty with some text types, especially the argumentative text type. This undesirable situation would require some sort of remedy which can be stated briefly in the following points:

- 1- Reading comprehension teachers should take the relative difficulty caused by the type of the text into their consideration by starting with narrative text types being the easiest followed by the expository and the descriptive, and ending with the argumentative text type, being the most difficult.

- 2- Composition teachers may ask their students to first write narrative paragraphs and short compositions before they move on to the more difficult other types.
- 3- teachers of essay writing in addition to the above- mentioned courses may need to focus on the argumentative text type by presenting more examples ,and by urging his/her students to do more extensive argumentative texts reading ,such as critical essays especially those related to the other literary courses.

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**Appendix**

**The passages used for the comprehension test**

**1- The Narrative Text**

**From Shooting an Elephant**

The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all. The rifle was a beautiful German thing with cross-hair sights. I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one would shoot to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole. I ought, therefore, as the elephant was sideways on, to have aimed straight at his ear-hole; actually I aimed several inches in front of this thinking the brain would be further forward.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick – one never does when a shot goes home – but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time – it might have been five seconds, I dare say – he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did it for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise,

for as his legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skywards like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay. (Kane and Peters,1980:396-7)

## 2- The Descriptive Text

### William Joyce

The strong electrical light was merciless to William Joyce, whose appearance was a surprise to all of us who had not seen him before. His voice had suggested a large and flashy handsome. But he was a tiny little creature and , though not very ugly, was exhaustively so. His hair was mouse-coloured and grew thinly, particularly above his ears.

His nose was joined to his face at an odd angle, and its bridge and its point and its nostrils were all separately misshapen. Above his small dark-blue eyes, which were hard and shiny, like pebbles, his eyebrows were thick and pale and irregular. His neck was long and his shoulders were narrow and sloping. His arms were very short and very thick, so that his sleeves were like little bolsters. His body looked flimsy yet coarse. There was nothing individual about him except a deep scar running across his right cheek from his ear to the corner of his mouth. But this did not create the savage and marred distinction that might suggest, for it gave a mincing immobility to his mouth, which was extremely small. His smile was pinched and governessy. He was dressed with an intent and ambitious spruceness which did not succeed in giving any impression of well-being, but rather recalled some Eastern European peasant, newly driven off the land by poverty into a factory town and wearing his first suit of Western clothes. He moved with a jerky formality which would have been thought strange in any society. When he bowed to the Judge, his bow seemed sincerely respectful but entirely inappropriate to the occasion, and it was difficult to think of

any occasion to which it would have been appropriate.  
(Kane and Peters,1980:358-9)

### 3-The Expository Text

#### **Technological Revolution**

...we are now living in the second great epoch of discovery and invention. Since the seventeenth century, the discovery of steam power, gas, electricity, and radiation have made possible those innumerable tools and appliances, those complicated and powerful machines, and those delicate instruments of precision which elicit our wonder and our admiration. The result has been that the new technology, by giving mere unprecedented control over material things, has transformed the relatively simple agricultural communities of the eighteenth century into societies far more complex and impersonal than anything the prophets of liberal- democracy could have imagined- mechanized Leviathans which Thomas Jefferson at least would have regarded as unreal and fantastic and altogether unsuited to the principles of liberty and equality as he understood them.

I need not say that the influence of the technological revolution has not been confined to any particular aspect of the social life. On the contrary, it has exerted and still exerts a decisive influence in modifying all the habitual patterns of thought and conduct. But I am here concerned with the influence of the technological revolution in accelerating and intensifying that concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few which the principles of individual freedom in the economic realm would in any case have tended to bring about.

The first and most obvious result of the technological revolution has been to increase the amount of wealth in the form of material things which can be produced in a given population. For example, in 1913 there was produced in Great Britain seven billion yards of cotton cloth for export alone. In 1970 the total population of Great Britain, working with the appliances then available, could have produced only a small fraction

He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief .certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men, which both in affection and means have mar - and endows the public . Yet it were great reason that those that have children should have greatest care of future times, unto which they know they must transmit their dearest pledges. Some there are who though they lead a single life, yet their thoughts do end with themselves, and account future times impertinences. Nay , there are some other that account wife and children but as bills of charges. Nay more, there are some foolish, rich, covetous men that take pride in having no children, because they may be thought so much the richer. For perhaps they have heard some talk, *Such an one is a great rich man.* and another except to it , *Yea, but he hath a great charge of children,* as if it were an abatement to his riches. But the most ordinary cause of a single life is liberty, especially in certain self-pleasing and humorous minds, which are so sensible of every restraint, as they will go near to think their girdles and garters to be bonds and shackles .Unmarried men are best friends, best masters, best servants, but not always best subjects, for they are light to run away; and almost all fugitives are of that condition. A single life doth well with churchmen, for charity will hardly water the ground where it must first fill a pool. It is indifferent for judges and magistrates, for if they be facile and corrupt, you shall have a servant five times worse than a wife.

## نوع النص وأداء الطلبة في الاستيعاب

الخلاصة :

يتناول البحث تأثير نوع النص المستخدم في تدريس مادة استيعاب القراءة على أداء الطلبة في اختبارات الاستيعاب. استخدم الباحث أربعة أنواع من النصوص وهي النص السردي والوصفي والتقديمي والجدلي ليقدر مدى تأثير أداء الطلبة في اختبارات الاستيعاب بنوع النص المستخدم في الاختبار وقد وجد أن الفرضية التي بني عليها البحث ( وهي أن النص الجدلي هو أكثر الأنواع صعوبة وأن النص السردي أسهلها خلافاً للنوعين الآخرين اللذين يتسمان بمستوى متوسط من الصعوبة ) هي فرضية صحيحة.