

Exploring Inferencing Ability of ESL Readers¹

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A study was conducted to investigate the performance on different types of inference questions of two groups of Zambian secondary school students, at Grade 10 and Grade 8. The texts used were 'familiar' (Zambian-focused) or 'unfamiliar' (British-focused). Results showed that Grade 10 students performed significantly better than Grade 8 students. Also, in most cases, students of both grades performed better on familiar texts than on unfamiliar texts. Causes and implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Inferencing is increasingly recognized as an essential component of the process of reading comprehension according to the psycholinguistic models of reading comprehension (e.g. schema-theoretic view of reading) which postulate that reading involves an interaction between textual information and prior knowledge of the reader. According to such models, inferences are important in integrating the text with the knowledge base (Spiro, 1980; Sanford et al., 1981). Some scholars (Trabasso, 1981; McIntosh, 1985; Farr et al., 1986; Johnston, 1983) posit that inferencing is central to comprehension since, as Johnston (1983) points out, it is involved in almost all reading tasks: interpretation of words with context-related meanings, identification of story context, filling in missing information etc. As a result, Johnston, (1983:6) further states that "the status of inference has shifted over the few years from a simple process, almost an optional extra, to a selection of fairly-well differentiated types of inferences upon which virtually all comprehension is predicted".

Writing about the assessment of reading comprehension, Johnston (1983) and Warren et al. (1979) contend that inferences are acts of comprehension and their measurement therefore is an alternative assessment of the understanding one has of a text. Oakhill et al (1988), too, believe that inference questions are more important for assessing reading comprehension. The instructional implication of all this is that reading teachers should spend more of their instructional time developing inferential comprehension. Allied to this is the implication that teachers should assess the inferential abilities of students from time to time in order to identify their relative strengths and weaknesses in this important area of reading comprehension. For the purpose of this article, 'inference' is defined as the cognitive or mental

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