Tekstbegrip van Turkse en Nederlandse leerlingen in het voortgezet onderwijs.

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
1989

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

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In the Netherlands, as well as in other Western European countries, most minority children attend the lowest types of secondary schools. Especially Turkish and Moroccan children from working class immigrant families are underrepresented in schooltypes that allow admission to higher education and university. At the moment most of them are born in Holland and after six years of primary schooling they have achieved a certain level of L2 proficiency which in educational settings is called 'aanspreekbaarheid' ('addressability') for which Cummins' concept of 'Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills' may fit. Their lack of school success is probably due to a language problem that is beyond the superficial aspects of communicative verbal behaviour. This language problem is most probably related to literacy, especially the type of literacy that is required in the 'academic' domain of the school on which learning and school success are dependent (chapter 1 and 2).

The process of discourse comprehension, especially the comprehension of expository texts has been subjected to a theoretical consideration (chapter 3). The difficulty of assessing such a complex and higher-level process which is still developing at the ages of twelve to fifteen - in L1 as well as in L2 - has been discussed. It appeared that the most attractive model of text comprehension is the so-called 'strategic, complexity oriented' model which has been described by Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) and which has been characterized as 'interactive'. Their model takes the 'text basis' as a starting point of information processing by a reader who is continually involved in textual discourse, not in a 'level-by-level' way but interactively, that is in a mutual exchange of information on higher and lower levels at the same time.

In the literature at least two at first sight conflicting hypotheses about reading in a second language are attested. The first holds that reading for comprehension in L2 is frustrated as a result of a lack of L2 word recognition and syntactic processing ability. In L1 readers overcome this text barrier easily so that especially the good ones climb to the top of better reading. The second hypothesis holds
that L2 readers tend towards a top-down way of reading which implies a stronger reliance on conceptual guidance than they do in L1. Within an interactive framework both hypotheses need not necessarily be in conflict. If for example in a L2 text a reader encounters an unknown word he may at the same time shift his attention to a higher textual level in an effort to grasp the meaning of that word. Conversely the reader can grasp the meaning of a paragraph or even the whole text by relating words and making inferences.

The study which is outlined in chapter 4 and 5, concerns Turkish and Dutch pupils of the lowest types of the Dutch secondary schoolsystem, referred to as 'lbo' and 'mavo'. Their achievements are assessed with respect to variables such as text comprehension in Dutch, knowledge of Dutch words and grammar (assessed away from the context of a text), common knowledge about some topics, that are the subjects of six texts used in the same text comprehension test and nonverbal IQ. The Turkish pupils were submitted to a Turkish test of text comprehension as well. It appeared that in all schooltypes and in all levels of education the Turkish pupils performed worse than their Dutch schoolmates with respect to all variables except for nonverbal IQ. With respect to text comprehension in Dutch the results of the Turkish pupils were not as low as could be predicted from their scores on the test for word knowledge, which were indeed very low in comparison with the results of the Dutch pupils as well as with respect to the standard of word knowledge we may expect in order to understand their schoolbooks. We came to the conclusion that the Turkish pupils make use of top-down reading strategies to compensate for their lack of word knowledge. These top-down strategies used by the Turkish pupils cannot be transferred from their L1 reading competence since their results on the test for Turkish text comprehension were also very poor and deteriorate as their stay in the Netherlands gets longer (chapter 6).

In a longitudinal perspective (chapter 7) there is no progression in the scores for Dutch text comprehension; this is the case for all subjects involved, the Turkish as well as the Dutch pupils in both types of schools who were followed during three school years. This longitudinal analysis is validated by a cross-sectional analysis among different cohorts in different grades at the same schools. In the meantime the scores for word knowledge and nonverbal IQ have increased significantly, especially those of the Turkish pupils in the higher schooltype, the 'mavo'. We came to the conclusion that text comprehension is affected by more factors than word knowledge and nonverbal IQ as such. Because of the complex nature of the process of text comprehension it is not correct to assume a one and only
factor such as word knowledge to be a sufficient condition for progress in reading. It is a very important and indeed necessary condition. However, the proof of the pudding of text comprehension is more than the simple addition of individual ingredients.

In an attempt to gain a perspective on the reading process that underlies the product of text comprehension measured by a global test, an analysis of the test results into different subtypes of comprehension has been made. Three subtypes have been distinguished, each referring to a certain textual level, that is the micro-level of words and clauses, the meso-level of sentence relations and paragraph structure and the macro-level of the overall text structure among which belong the main idea, text function and the author’s intent. We assume that each textual level corresponds to the reader’s mind, be it not in a one-to-one relationship. It appeared that the Turkish pupils performed the worst at the micro-level of text comprehension both in comparison with the Dutch pupils and in comparison with their results on the macro-subtests. On the latter there were no significant differences found between the Turkish and the Dutch pupils, whereas on the micro-subtests the Turkish performed significantly worse. At the meso-level comprehension problems appear to arise in both nationality groups, especially in the lower schooltype, the ’lbo’. We came to the conclusion that the L2 readers compensate for their problem in word-processing by a relatively strong emphasis on the comprehension of the macro-structure, which indicates a top-down processing style which in a L1 setting is reached only by the good and elderly readers. Paradoxically this style is also characteristic of weak readers, be it that they use it to make up for a deficit. The difference between the weak mothertongue reader and the L2 reader may be the eagerness of the latter, who is probably more conscious and efficient in dealing with his scarce proficiency resources especially at the micro and meso-level, whereas the former may be a lazy reader who automatically processes the linguistic base without monitoring any lack of comprehension at any level (chapter 8).