

Role of Home Language(s) in Facilitating Learner Recall While Reading Academic Texts in English

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Abstract

This study explored the effects of post-reading group discussions on the reading comprehension of twenty university students of intermediate-level English. Each group read a text and produced individual written recalls. Group 1 responded in writing without discussion; group 2 discussed the text in their L2 (English); the members of group 3 discussed the text in a shared home language; group 4 was a mixed group with mutually unintelligible language varieties while group 5 comprised of speakers of mutually intelligible language varieties. It was observed that the written recalls of the groups that engaged in post reading discussions were more detailed. Furthermore, participants who discussed the text using their home language(s) and other languages in their repertoire had better recalls than the ones that used only English in their discussions. The authors recommend the strategic use of learners' home language(s) in the English classroom.

Keywords: Home language, translanguaging, collaborative learning, group discussion, reading comprehension, recall

Introduction

Reading comprehension plays a pivotal role in understanding the content area in all subjects and therefore it is considered as crucial for academic success (Smith et al., 2021). An important sub-skill of reading is being able to infer 'meaning from text' and it is considered as an important factor of 'sophisticated reading ability' (Oakhill & Cain, 2007 as cited in Smith et al., 2021).

However, studies have shown that from the primary to the tertiary level of education, the focus of teaching and testing of reading has been mostly on the content rather than reading as a skill (Srinivas, 2024). As a result, even at the tertiary level, where learners are expected to have developed some proficiency, serious problems related to grammar, vocabulary, understanding, and personal experience are observed (Suwanaroa, 2021).

In a country like India, where comprehension of complex academic texts in English is considered as a desideratum for academic success in higher studies, students lack the desired reading proficiency (Megala and Premraj, 2020). Tertiary level students are required to read dense academic texts in English authored mostly by foreign writers. The present study determines whether the use of learners' home language(s) and translanguaging facilitates reading comprehension of academic texts in English. For this study, learner recall was considered as the indicator of successful reading comprehension. Learner recall is defined as the ability of the learner to interpret and remember the information in the text (Pino et al., 2013). The participants in the present study spoke different language varieties with different levels of mutual intelligibility. The following research questions were formulated to determine the efficacy of learners' home language(s) in facilitating reading comprehension in English.

1. In what ways do group discussions facilitate reading comprehension in English?
2. In what ways do group discussions in learners' home language(s) facilitate reading comprehension in English?
3. In what ways do group discussions using different language varieties at the learners' disposal facilitate reading comprehension in English?

Literature Review

Translanguaging and the Use of Learners' Home Language(s) in L2 Reading Comprehension

Translanguaging refers to use of languages by multilingual students for both receptive and productive uses (García & Lin, 2016). It offers better opportunity for learners to make use of their home language(s) in collaborative interactions (Lämsä-Schmidt, 2024). Ocampo's (2023)

study corroborated that there was a high degree of correlation between reading comprehension and translanguaging. According to Hungwe (2019), the home language(s) of the learners help them to understand the meaning of the texts and also enable them to understand the concepts better.

In Almalki and Alzahrani's (2024) study that is quite similar to the present one, it was found that the use of L1 in collaborative discussions better facilitated the comprehension of L2 texts. In another longitudinal study involving two native Arabic speakers, it was observed that the use of home language better facilitated collaboration in interactive tasks (Lämsä-Schmidt, 2024). Studies as far back as Lee's (1986) have shown that better reading comprehension takes place when it is done in the reader's home language(s).

The present study has been influenced to a great extent by Turnbull and Evans' (2017) research that determined the role of learners' L1 in facilitating greater text recall in L2. There are a few points of divergences from that study in order to accommodate the differences between the linguistic contexts of the two studies.

Collaborative Reading

Collaborative reading has its roots in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theories of learning (Salas & Larrain, 2024). In studies such as Pasaribu & Iswandari's (2019), it was found that collaborative reading practices fostered the learners' critical thinking skills along with enhanced reading comprehension. Goodmacher and Kajjura (2010) put forward arguments in favour of collaborative reading and even advised and provided examples on how teachers can facilitate a collaborative reading environment in the classroom. Zoghi et al., (2010) have advocated the use of collaborative reading combined with strategic reading. Vaughn and Edmonds (2006) found that more efficient reading and better comprehension strategies can take place if learners work in small groups.

Recall as a Means of Assessing Reading Comprehension

Though recall as an assessment procedure for reading comprehension has limitations, it is one of the most reliable and valid means as compared to several other popular modes of assessment (Mermelstein, 2023). In Diakidoy et al. (2017) study, the ability to recall the main claim and

the amount of text information recalled and inferences made were the determining factors for measuring the level of comprehension of the participants.

Another significant work in this area is by Wiley (2005) who found that prior knowledge about a topic helped readers to retrieve information more effectively. This is relevant for the present study because some of the participants were made to discuss the content of the text among themselves that allowed them to gain access to a common pool of knowledge shared by the group.

According to Cao and Kim (2021), though retell is widely used to assess reading comprehension, it should not be the only measure of reading comprehension as research in retell as a measure of reading comprehension is quite limited. They also recommended knowing about more 'systematic approaches' to assess retell as a measure of reading comprehension. Moreover, they emphasized that retell assessments can vary in different ways. In fact, it was found that written retell helped in literal recall whereas oral retell enabled young learners to draw inferences and make generalizations (Vieiro & García-Madruga, 1997 as cited in Cao & Kim, 2021). In the present study, the participants engaged in both written and oral retell with the latter carried out in learners' home language(s) in case of three groups.

Methodology

Twenty university students of intermediate-level English studying English Language Teaching at a university in the north-eastern part of India were selected for the study through convenience sampling. All agreed to participate in the project voluntarily. A seven-paragraph and 1,500 (approx) word-length text was chosen as a sample text that students in a postgraduate programme were supposed to be able to read without much difficulty. The text was an excerpt from the book *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* by Ronald Wardhaugh (2014) that is used as a course book in the ELT programme. It is an expository text discussing the use of sexist language from a sociolinguistic perspective. The text that was selected for this study was an unseen passage that was not taught in the class.

Five groups of four participants each were created as small groups of three or four members work best (Burke, 2011). The participants in

group 1 were made to read the text individually and write individual written recalls. Group 2 was instructed to read the text and discuss only in English before writing individual recalls. All the participants in group 3 shared Assamese as their home language. Group 4 had participants who spoke different language varieties such as Sumi, Ao, Assamese and Bodo which were mutually unintelligible. Participants in this group were allowed to discuss the text in whichever language(s) they were comfortable in, which resulted in all of them using mostly English. In group 5, though all the participants spoke different language varieties, they were mutually intelligible.

All five groups represented different types of classroom interactions. Group 1 represented the traditional mode of making students read and write in the language classroom. Group 2 adopted the monolingual type of interaction that follows the immersion model where students are encouraged to speak and write only in the target language in class. Group 3 represented homogeneous groups that are allowed to use a shared home language while group 4 represented one type of multilingualism where students speak different language varieties that are mutually unintelligible. This type of multilingualism makes it challenging to interact in linguistically diverse contexts. Finally, group 5 represented a different type of multilingualism where though students speak different language varieties, they are mutually intelligible. In this type of multilingualism, students can access their own and their peers' linguistic repertoire in order to communicate with each other.

The language varieties spoken by each member of groups 4 and 5 are presented below.

Group 4

Student	Home Language	L2	L3	L4
S4.1	Sumi	Nagamese	English	Hindi
S4.2	Bodo	Assamese	English	Hindi
S4.3	Assamese	Hindi	English	-----
S4.4	Ao	Nagamese	English	Hindi

In group 5, the researchers included group members who understood one another's home languages as well as shared other common languages apart from English.

Group 5

Student	Home Language	L2	L3	L4
S5.1	Rajbanshi	Assamese	Hindi	English
S5.2	Maithili	Hindi	English	Bengali
S5.3	Bengali	Assamese	Hindi	English
S5.4	Assamese	English	Hindi	-----

All the group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed.

The participants in group 1 wrote their text recalls without any discussion while all the other groups discussed the content of the text followed by individual text recalls in writing.

Data Analysis

Comprehension of the text was examined on the basis of written text recalls and responses and transcripts of group discussions were scrutinized. The written recalls for all the individual group members were analysed using a set of criteria based on Kintsch's (1988) construction-integration Model and on Meyer's (1979) Structural Analysis: a hierarchical organization model that organizes the summary of the text and the main ideas or 'macro-propositions' into top level and supporting ideas or 'micro-propositions' and the order of ideas presented in the text into the bottom level.

Participants' written recalls were scored on a scale of 8 with 1 point given for each of these criteria: text summary; macro-proposition; micro-proposition; Top-down processing such as ability to make connections beyond the surface level; autobiographical links; speculation about meaning in the form of questions; illustrating important ideas with appropriate examples; Bottom-up processing such as recalling the wording of the text.

The transcripts of the audio recordings were checked for the following features:

- Level of participation of the group members
- Language varieties used
- Discussion on main and sub-points
- Examples and autobiographical connections
- Displaying overall understanding

Findings and Discussion

Observations Made During Group Discussions

Table 1: Approximate Duration of Group Discussions

<i>Group</i>	<i>Duration of Discussion (in minutes)</i>	<i>Language(s) Used During Group Discussion</i>
1 (No Discussion)	No Discussion	No Discussion
2 (Only English)	12.33	Only English
3 (Same home language)	17	Assamese
4 (Mixed group with mutually unintelligible language varieties)	18	Mostly English with a bit of Hindi
5 (Mixed group with mutually intelligible language varieties)	28:50	Assamese, Hindi, English

Table 1 indicates that the group that discussed in a shared home language and the groups which were allowed to discuss in language(s) that they were comfortable in were found to be engaged in longer discussions as compared to the group using only English for discussion. This may be because the participants could talk more freely in their home language or in languages that they had easy access to. This finding aligns with Turnbull and Evan's (2017) study. It seems that there is not much difference between groups 3 and 4 as far as the duration of group discussion is concerned. The duration of discussion was the longest in group 5. The reason for this may be attributed to the fact that all the participants in group 5 spoke different language varieties that were mutually intelligible and they used all these different varieties while speaking to the other group members. Since they were allowed to discuss in any language(s) they were comfortable in, they could access the different varieties without any restrictions indicating that discussion in languages that they were comfortable in facilitated reading comprehension. An analysis of the transcription of group 5 indicated that participants often resorted to another language they frequently used when they were looking for an appropriate expression that they did not know in their own home language.

To support this observation, a comment made by a participant in group 5 has been presented below.

Matlab 'kajer log'... Meaning home help

In the above comment, the speaker who is Bengali uses a Hindi word 'matlab' to give the meaning of 'a home help'.

The participants in group 3 and 5 were the only groups that dealt with a part of the text that was avoided by the participants in groups 1, 2 and 4. This part of the text dealt with the counter argument that devising a paired term like 'waitress' or 'actress' for the female counterpart is what should be considered as sexist. This finding aligns with the Turnbull and Evan's (2017) study that led the researchers to comment that when participants can communicate without any restriction of 'limited L2 proficiency', they are encouraged to discuss 'relatively complex topics'.

The use of one's own home language(s) facilitates making connections with one's experience. Groups 3 and 5 which discussed mainly in their own home language(s) or shared language varieties that they were comfortable in showed signs of cognitive processing such as making connections with their own experience. During the reading process, the reader retrieves what has been 'experienced, learned, and stored' (White, 1991, p. 173). In groups 3 and 5 there were also signs of reflective reading (Nourdad & Asghar, 2017). This strategy guides students to connect the information that they find in the text with themselves, the other texts, and the world, so they can interact and involve actively with the text (Wahyuni & Jufri, 2016). The following comments made by participants in groups 3 and 5 represent the type of connections that are possible. The original comments were in Assamese. The verbatim translations have been provided below.

Group 3

Recently an incident happened with me..you know I had a Flipkart delivery and usually delivery boys come but my delivery was made by a delivery girl!

Group 5

S1: One more thing that is becoming common is that there are more and more female bus conductors.

S2: And also, there are more female employees in petrol pumps.

S3: We also assume that if it is a driver than it has to be a male.

Another important observation was that even quieter students were seen to be contributing to the group discussions in groups 3 and 5. Though group work has been found to allow students to work in a 'less threatening environment' (Harmer, 1991, as cited in Alfares, 2017)

and brings down the anxiety level of the learners (Foster, 1998 as cited in Alfares, 2017), the freedom to use the language variety(ies) that students are familiar with or more comfortable with enables students to share their thoughts and opinions about what they have read about more freely without feeling restricted by one language. It was observed that though groups 2 and 4 were allowed to discuss the text content, they were limited by the use of only English (in case of group 2) and use of English again in case of group 4 to accommodate the mutually unintelligible language varieties of the group members.

Findings from Written Recalls

Table 2: Total Amount of Written Recall Words Per Group

<i>Group</i>	<i>Average Number of Written Recall Words</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1	213	4	Recalls in English
2	165	4	Recalls in English
3	217	4	Recalls in English
4	195	4	$\frac{3}{4}$ opted to write in English; however, at the time of discussion they opted to use a mix of Hindi and English as there was a Sumi speaker
5	351	4	Recalls in English

Table 3: Average Scores Obtained by Each Group for Written Recalls

<i>Group</i>	<i>Scores (on a scale of 32)</i>
1	8
2	10
3	24
4	15
5	24

The data in Table 2 indicate that there is not much difference in the average word count in the written recalls for groups 1, 3 and 4. However, as shown in Table 3, the average scores obtained for the written recalls do not align with the average number of words. This clearly indicates the importance of using learners' home language(s) or mutually intelligible languages during collaborative reading. Group 1 recalls were limited

to comments about the surface structure and showed fewer signs of comprehension. Group 2 recorded in greater detail, but suggested partial understanding thus indicating the effectiveness of collaborative reading. When we look at the data in Table 3, it becomes evident that notwithstanding the duration of the talk in the groups, there were major differences with respect to signs of cognitive processing such as making autobiographical connections and reflective observations during the discussions.

The average score in groups 3 and 5 written recalls was significantly higher as compared to the other groups. It was observed that the written recalls had the same basic information, but it was in far greater detail. Similar to the group discussions, there were signs of cognitive processing such as making autobiographical connections and reflective observations. The written recalls of the participants in groups 3 and 5, moreover, show that they dealt with topics not touched upon by the other groups. For example, some of them made references to the Whorfian hypotheses of linguistic relativity and determinism while making comments on the connection of the use of sexist language and general gender perception or biases. Moreover, they could argue in their recalls as to whether the problem of sexism lies in the language or if it had to do something with the society that uses it.

Group 4 (mixed group with mutually unintelligible language varieties) recalls were not as detailed and a few important points and original examples were missing. On the other hand, group 5 (mixed group with mutually intelligible language varieties) recalls were very detailed and included all the relevant points and examples along with examples of their own.

Overall, written recalls were mostly in English (barring one in Sumi in group 4) though participants were given the option to write their recalls in whichever language they wanted to. This may be attributed to the lack of training in writing in their own home language(s).

Conclusion

The present study provides further evidence that participants who discussed the texts in their home language(s) recalled the most textual elements and features, produced recalls with the most words, discussed the broadest range of topics and displayed signs of higher order cognitive

processing. In the case of the mixed language group where participants spoke different language varieties that were not mutually intelligible, they were seen to be using mostly English. Though they recalled better than the 'only English' and the no discussion groups, their recalls were not as effective as the group that shared the same home language. In the case of group 5 that spoke mutually intelligible language varieties, they were seen to be accessing all the languages in their linguistic repertoire including English. Their recalls strongly indicated a sound understanding of the text.

The sample size can be considered as a limitation of the study as there were just 20 participants. A larger sample size could have facilitated the drawing of broader generalizations.

A recommendation that can be made in the light of the present study is that though collaborative reading using learners' home language can be useful in facilitating greater engagement with the text, care should be taken while grouping students for such work. Grouping can be done on the basis of mutual intelligibility among the learners.

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