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Comparison of Reading Comprehension with respect to Text Type, Grade Level and Test Type

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ABSTRACT

It was aimed in this study to compare students' reading comprehension levels with respect to the variables of text type, grade level and test type. To this aim, the research was carried out in the scanning model. A total of 1028 4th and 5th grade students participated in the research. In assessing reading comprehension skills; open-ended, multiple choice and cloze tests, which were developed based on narrative and informative texts found in course books for students' respective grade levels, were used. T-tests and variance analysis were employed in analyzing the data. It was observed at the end of the research that students' reading comprehension skills did not statistically differ. On the other hand, reading comprehension skills did differ significantly with respect to text type in the favor of narrative texts. That is, students are more successful in comprehending narrative texts compared to informative ones. Another finding is that students' reading comprehension skills significantly differed with respect to test type in the favor of multiple-choice tests. That is, students scored higher in multiple-choice tests than in open-ended and cloze tests. The research findings were discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

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Keywords:
Reading Comprehension, Text, Test, Grade

Introduction

Development of reading and comprehension skills is of importance both in educational and everyday lives. It is believed that the functional use of these skills should be the main focus of educators (Paris, Carpenter, Paris, & Hamilton, 2005). Reading comprehension is addressed together with the reading skill and it mostly constitutes the critical points of definitions of reading (Akyol, 2011a; Güneş, 2013). Pointing to the role of comprehension in accomplishing the objective of reading and knowledge gathering, it is often emphasized that the act of reading will be insufficient without comprehension. Primor, Pierce, and Katzir (2011, p. 242) suggest that "the ultimate aim of reading development is the development of effective reading comprehension". Every effort for the development of the reading skill also contributes to the development of the comprehension skill.

Reading comprehension was found to be correlated with reading, academic achievement, reading amount, reading attitude, reading motivation and reading habit (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Dolan et al., 2006; Ilustre, 2011; Kaniuka, 2010; L.Schofield, 1980; Naeghel, Keer, Vansteenkiste, & Rosseel, 2012; Rashid, Morris, & Sevcik, 2005; Taboada, Townsend, & Boynton, 2013; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990;), and these studies pointed out to its importance. This also shows that the reading comprehension skill can be correlated with many notions related to reading. Studies demonstrate that reading and comprehension are

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affected by the difficulty level of texts (Hedin & Conderman, 2010), level of grade (Baştuğ, 2012) and types of texts Şahin (2013). In accordance with the scope of this study, below are mentioned text types, level of grade and question types used in the assessment process of reading comprehension.

Text type

Texts used in the processes of reading and comprehension are divided into two categories: informative and narrative (Weaver & Kintsch, 1991). This distinction is made according to texts' structures, contents and language features (Primor et al., 2011). While narrative texts mostly involve elements such as characters, problems and environments within a context, informative texts involve structures of explanation, enumeration, cause-effect, comparison, contrast and problem-solving for the purpose of informing (Tompkins, 2006). Studies in the relevant literature show that reading and comprehending narrative texts are easier and comprehension success is higher for these texts (Grasser, Golding, & Long, 1991; Lehto & Anttila, 2003; Rasool & Royer, 1986; Saenz & Fuchs, 2002). Children frequently encounter stories beginning from early ages. Besides, stories usually show similarities with children's everyday experiences (Graesser, McNamara, & Louwerse, 2002; Graesser & Singer, 1994). This fact is shown as an indicator of children's easier comprehension of narrative texts and making inferences out of these texts (Primor et al., 2011).

Grade Level

Grade level is considered as a factor in reading comprehension studies (Baştug, 2012; Berninger et al., 2010; Keenan, Betjemann, & Olson, 2008; Kolić-Vehovec & Bajšanski, 2006; Şahin, 2013). Grade level is sometimes substituted with age in studies. Age seems to be important in the development of reading skills. Readers' skills of recognizing and comprehending a text may differ with respect to age (J. R. M. Alexander & Martin, 2004; P. A. Alexander & Fox, 2011). As age and grade level go up, students encounter more reading content and acquire more background.

Assessment of Comprehension

One of the important stages of the reading comprehension process is the assessment of reading comprehension, which is of importance both to practitioners and to researchers (Caine & Oakhill, 2006). Diagnosis, treatment and conclusion are types of classification which are frequently used in reading comprehension assessments. The need for determining students' reading and comprehension levels, monitoring the process and learning about the advances in reading and comprehension problems require the utilization of these types of classification.

Assessment of reading comprehension is seen as the most important dimension of reading (Akyol, 2011a, p. 230; Temizkan & Sallabaş, 2011). It is underlined that reading comprehension is a complex process (van den Broek & Espin, 2012) and that assessment of this skill is a difficult task (Paris et al., 2005), because it is impossible to assess and directly monitor reading comprehension through scales and standardized tests used in schools and curricula. Comprehension is monitored, examined and assessed indirectly (Pearson & Hamm, 2005). However, using brain scanning techniques such as FMRI (Functional magnetic resonance imaging), some inferences can be made as to what happens in the brain in the process of comprehension (Hruby & Goswami, 2012). It is difficult to say that this method is useful, given its conditions of use and cost. Therefore, it is an obligation to assess reading comprehension using measurement and evaluation techniques, as specified in curricula and the relevant literature.

Various techniques are employed to assess reading comprehension, which can be juxtaposed as; multiple-choice, open-ended, gap filling, sentence verification, correct/incorrect, pairing, narration, summarizing, and so forth. In this study, multiple-choice tests, open-ended questions and cloze task are used; so, in what follows, these techniques will be explained.

Multiple-Choice Tests

This is a technique in which the reader responds to the question by choosing one of 3, 4 or 5 choices given below the question. In short, it is the marking of the response that needs to be found among the choices given. Knowledge and mental skills are measured through this technique, whereas physical and

artistic skills cannot (Keskinkılıç & KeskinKılıç, 2007). These tests, which are suitable generally for group assessments (Caine & Oakhill, 2006), are used in a very widespread manner (Alderson, 2000). The ease of administering these tests underlies their rapid spread in the field of education. Since the respondent does only marking, the responding duration is short. On the other hand, since responses are graded by means of optical readers, the assessment process is also short (Güneş, 2013). Therefore, multiple-choice tests make it easier to ask more questions simultaneously to more people in a shorter period of time.

In multiple-choice tests, the respondent has to select one of the available options. Therefore, "these tests do not enable students to narrate, verbally or in written form, what they listen to, think, imagine, read or examine in an appropriate manner" (Temizkan & Sallabaş, 2011, p. 217). This style, which contradicts with the philosophy and the content of the curriculum, is often criticized, and it is argued that it should not be used at the elementary level due to its limitations (Güneş, 2013).

Open-Ended Questions

This is a very old and frequently used test technique, in which the reader is asked to give responses based on what she recalls and understands what she just read. It is possible to speak of many advantages of this technique. First of all, the reader is expected in this technique to express what she understood and recalls. Assessment of reading comprehension in this way helps make inferences about the problems in the reader's expressive language skills (Caine & Oakhill, 2006). Moreover, it could be argued that assessing readers' comprehension using this method contributes to their expressive language skills. In other words, it is the proper test type for improving language and mental skills (Güneş, 2013). Spooner, Baddeley, and Gathercole (2004) pointed to the aptness of open-ended questions in assessing reading comprehension, and found that such questions are more useful than multiple-choice tests in monitoring skilled and unskilled readers. Caine and Oakhill (2006) suggest that insight may be obtained, through the responses given by readers to open-ended questions, into the sources of readers' mistakes and fine factors pertaining to language comprehension can be revealed. In this respect, using open-ended questions is shown as advantageous in the literature.

This technique, however, has certain disadvantages. It is difficult to assess reading comprehension in overcrowded classes or groups with more readers. The number of questions should be low, when considered the durations of responding the test and of assessment. Low number of questions, on the other hand, makes it impossible to assess the entire text that the readers have read. In other words, only certain parts of texts can be covered in questions (Güneş, 2013; Turgut & Baykul, 2011). Besides, certain objectivity problems may arise in the scoring of open-ended questions. According to Turgut and Baykul (2011), it is difficult to fully ensure the reliability of open-ended questions, as it is difficult to objectively grade them. It is suggested in the literature that this problem may be eliminated or remedied by using grading key (Özçelik, 2010) and pair graders (Turgut & Baykul, 2011).

Cloze Test

Cloze technique has been used for long years in assessing reading comprehension. In general, in this technique, the word that comes right after each fifth or sixth word is deleted, except for the first sentence. The reader here is asked to fill in the blank with the same word or a different word with the same meaning (Akyol, 2011b; Alderson, 2000; Ulusoy, 2009). At least 30 words should be deleted in this test (Raymond, 1988).

This technique's advantage lies in the fact that it allows for assessing reading comprehension of a group rather than separate individuals. Besides, the reader has the opportunity to make use of structural and/or semantic hints present in the reading environment (Akyol, 2011b). This way, the reader makes an effort in her mind to be able to complete the sentence in a meaningful manner. Her level of success at the end of this effort indicates her level of comprehension and advanced thinking. However, cloze test has certain downsides such as the fact that it ignores vocalization (Akyol, 2011b) and its failure in assessing children with general text processing difficulties (Caine & Oakhill, 2006).

A successful application of cloze requires meticulousness in the practical process. It is an effective technique to be used in developing reading and comprehension, when texts and cloze tests are prepared carefully (Raymond, 1988). Studies have shown that the cloze procedure is a reliable and valid technique for assessing students' reading level and texts' readability (Bormuth, 1969; Greene Jr, 2001; Sampson, Valmont, & Allen, 1982; Ulusoy, 2008, 2009). Bormuth (1969) argued that cloze test scores are highly correlated with scores in standard tests aimed at measuring reading comprehension skill. Bachman (1982) suggested that cloze tests can be used in assessing advanced skills such as coherence and consistence.

In conclusion, the techniques used to assess reading comprehension have certain advantages and disadvantages over one another. It is still unclear that what technique is the best for assessing reading comprehension. When selecting the appropriate technique; the size of the group to be assessed, the aim of assessment and the skills to be targeted should be taken into consideration as the factors.

In this study, the aim was to compare fourth- and fifth-grade students' reading comprehension skills with respect to text type, grade level and test type. To this aim, answers were sought to the following questions:

1. Do students' reading comprehension skills differ with respect to grade level?
2. Do students' reading comprehension skills differ with respect to text type?
3. Do students' reading comprehension skills differ with respect to test type?

Method

This research was carried out in the descriptive scanning model. Descriptive scanning is used in a highly widespread manner in the field of education; because it helps researchers summarize the characteristics (skills, preferences, behaviors, attitudes etc.) of individuals, groups or physical settings (e.g. schools) (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2010).

Participants

The population of the study was comprised of a total of 1028 fourth grade (n=487) and fifth grade (n=541) students who studied at four state-run schools in the city center of Nigde, Turkey. In terms of the gender of the participants, 253 of the 4th grade students are female and 234 of them are male while 258 of the 5th grade students are female and 283 of them are male. Total number of female and male participants consists of 511 and 517 students respectively. Nigde is situated in the central part of Turkey and has a population of 120.000 people. The students were generally from families with a middle or high socio-economic status. In addition, the schools they attended had higher academic achievement than others in the area. Inclusive students, those students that came from other countries and those who could not fully read and write in Turkish were excluded from the sample.

Procedure

After the study was designed, the measurement tools were devised. Informed consent was obtained from the Provincial Directorate for National Education in Nigde. Afterward, the headmasters and teachers working for the schools in the sample were informed about the purpose and process of the study and the schedule was specified collaboratively. The teachers of the classrooms included in the sample provided support for the administration of the measurement tools. They were informed as to how to carry out the measuring process. Finally, the following measurement tools were administered as scheduled.

Measurement Tools

Reading texts. A total of four texts- one narrative and one informative- were used for each grade level (fourth and fifth grades). The texts were extracted from Turkish language textbooks. Nevertheless, great care was taken to pick up the ones that were covered in different regions so as to make sure that they were new to the participants. Since the texts included in Turkish language textbooks were approved by the Board of Education and Discipline, a department of the Ministry of National Education, they were not tested for

legibility. It was assumed that they were already satisfactorily legible. For the fourth grade students, the narrative text was on the Battle of Sakarya (NAR 1) whereas the informative one was about communication tools (INF 1). As for the fifth grade students, the narrative text was on two fictional heroes called Karagoz and Hacivat (NAR 2) while the informative one was as to Safe Life (INF 2). The texts contained 350 words on average.

Multiple-choice tests. A total of 10 multiple-choice questions were composed for each text used in the study. The questions were checked for their contents and appropriateness by experts, Turkish language teachers, classroom teachers and academicians that worked on reading. Certain amendments were made to the questions in accordance with their learned opinion. Afterward, they were administered to some groups of students as a pilot scheme. Each correct answer was assigned 1 point whereas each wrong answer was given 0 point. The KR 20 reliability coefficients were calculated accordingly. The coefficients were 0.764 for NAR 1, 0.720 for INF 1, 0.739 for NAR 2, and for INF 2, suggesting that the test could be used reliably (Turgut & Baykul, 2011).

Open-ended questions. The open-ended exam questions were at the level of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis. They were designed to test the extent to which students could comprehend what they were reading. Learned opinion was received for content validity. The group asked to comment on the content validity of the questions contained a total of 10 members- five academicians involved in reading research, three classroom teachers and two Turkish language teachers. Their opinions were analyzed using Lawshe's technique. The technique requires that the content validity should be tested by a group of specialists that contain at least 5 and at most 40 members; it is assumed that the content validity index should be 62% or higher when the group of specialists is comprised of 10 individuals (Yurdagül, 2005). The open-ended questions for the texts used in the study had content validity values ranging from 80% and 100%, suggesting that the scale had a sufficient content validity.

The Mistake Analysis Inventory was used for grading the open-ended questions (Akyol, 2011b). One of the disadvantages of open-ended questions is impartiality in grading. Research has suggested the use of co-raters and rubrics (Turgut & Baykul, 2011) to overcome the problem. In this respect, a rubric was devised for the present study and submitted to another expert to be analyzed. Afterward, the answers of randomly selected 98 participants to the open-ended questions were graded by two different raters according to the rubric. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to test the consistency between the two ratings. The correlation coefficients between the two raters were r=0.942 for NAR 1, r=0.926 for INF 1, r=0.935 for NAR 2 and r=0.974 for INF 2. The figures suggest a high-level consistency and indicate that the ratings are reliable (Turgut & Baykul, 2011).

Cloze tests. A total of four cloze tests- two narrative and two informative- were composed for the study. The words following each fifth word in the sentences, expect for the first and last sentences, were deleted. If the sixth word happened to be a proper name, the next word was deleted (Ulusoy, 2009). Ulusoy (2009) found that deleting the sixth word could produce better results than deleting the fifth one.

Analysis of Data

The data collected were arranged with respect to the research questions, before proceeding to the analysis. Students' comprehension levels were obtained based on the mean score of all comprehension tests. On the other hand, the informative text comprehension scores were obtained by averaging the scores that students received from the multiple-choice, open-ended and cloze tests, which were prepared on the basis of informative texts at all grade levels. The same operation was performed on narrative texts. On the other hand, in order to compare students' comprehension skills with respect to test type, comprehension mean scores for Open-Ended, Multiple-Choice and Cloze tests were obtained from comprehension scores at all grade levels and for all text types. Before analyzing the data, normalities were checked through skewness and Kurtosis values in order to determine the test types to be employed. Table 1 shows relevant data:

Table.1. Skewness and Kurtosis values for data

	Skewness	Kurtosis
4th grade comprehension	-,328	-,464
5th grade comprehension	-,389	-,210
Informative comprehension	-,092	-,480
Narrative comprehension	-,441	-,182
Multiple-choice test	-,993	,531
Open-ended test	,209	-,315
Cloze test	,125	-,655

It is seen that the values are between -1.96 and +1.96. It means that they are normally distributed. In the analysis of data, the parametric tests of paired and independent t-tests were used.

Findings

Table 2. Results of independent t-test on students' reading comprehension scores with respect to grade level

Grade Level	n	$\bar{x}$	s	df	t	p
4	487	43.85	14.35	1026	1.66	.097*
5	541	45.30	13.69			

*p>0.05

In Table 2, the participant fourth- and fifth-grade students' reading comprehension levels are compared with respect to the variable of grade level. It is seen that fifth-grade students scored higher than fourth-graders. However, this difference is not statistically significant ($t_{(1026)}$=1.66; p>0.05).

Table 3. Results of t-test on students' reading comprehension scores with respect to text type

Grade Level	Text type	n	$\bar{x}$	s	df	t	p
Grade 4	Informative	81	39,20	15,91	480	16.857	.000*
	Narrative		48,51	15,24			
Grade 5	Informative	47	37,88	13,79	546	32.357	.000*
	Narrative		52,74	15,58			

*p<.05

Table 3 shows that 4th grade students' mean reading comprehension score in informative texts ($\bar{x}$=39,20; SS=15.91) is lower than their score in narrative texts ($\bar{x}$=48.51;SS=15,24). As a result of the t-test, which was performed in order to determine whether this difference was statistically significant, it is seen that the reading comprehension success of the students at 4th grade differs significantly with respect to text type ($t_{(480)}$=16.857; p<.050), in the favor of narrative texts.

The same table also shows that 5th-grade students' mean reading comprehension score in informative texts ($\bar{x}$=37,88; s=13,79) is lower than their score in narrative texts ($\bar{x}$=52.74;SS=15,58). Results of the t-test, which was performed in order to determine whether this difference was statistically significant, indicate that the reading comprehension success of the students at 5th grade differs significantly with respect to text type ($t_{(546)}$=32,357; p<.050), in the favor of narrative texts.

Table 4 demonstrates The results of relevant statistics yielded the following mean scores and standard deviations: multiple-choice tests ($\bar{x}$=72,08;s=21,34 and df= 1027); open-ended tests ($\bar{x}$=35.33;s=16,88 and df= 1027); Cloze tests ($\bar{x}$=26.47;s=13,17 and df= 13,17). The paired t-test results related to the significance of the difference between the means indicate that there is significant difference among the students' reading comprehension successes in terms of three question types ($t_{(1027)}$=75,650; p<.050; $t_{(1027)}$=20,501; p<.050; $t_{(1027)}$==58,261; p<.050). These findings show that students' got the highest reading comprehension score in multiple-choice tests, whereas they got the lowest in cloze tests.

Table 4. Results of paired t-test on the comparison of students' reading comprehension skills by test type

Test Type	n	$\bar{x}$	s	df	t	p
Cloze	1028	26,48	13,17	1027	75,650	.000*
Multiple-Choice		72,08	21,34			
Cloze	1028	26,48	13,17	1027	20,501	.000*
Open-End		35,33	16,88			
Multiple-Choice	1028	72,08	21,34	1027	58,261	.000*
Open-End		35,33	16,88			

*p<0.05.

Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

This study was carried out with the purpose of comparing 4th and 5th grade students' reading comprehension skills with respect to the variables of text type, grade level and test type. It was found that students' reading comprehension skills did not differ significantly with respect to grade level, although there was a statistically insignificant difference in the favor of 5th grade students. Baştuğ (2012) obtained similar findings: reading comprehension achievements were found to be higher, although not statistically significant, among 5th grade students. In the same research, on the other hand, a significant difference was found between 5th and 2nd grade students, in the favor of the former. When combined together, it could be concluded that 4th and 5th grade students exhibit mental development levels which are close to one another. In addition, it is observed that the acquisitions in the 4th and 5th grade curricula related to reading comprehension overlap (MEB, 2005). In many studies, comprehension achievements were found to be higher among upper graders (Berninger et al., 2010; Keenan et al., 2008; Kolić-Vehovec & Bajšanski, 2006; Sahin, 2013). Keenan et al. (2008) found that younger students score lower in different reading comprehension tests. Berninger et al. (2010) determined that mean reading comprehension scores of 6th grades are higher than those of 4th and 2nd grades; and of 4th grades are higher than those of 2nd grades. Şahin (2013), on the other hand, found that 5th grade students are more successful in both informative and narrative texts in terms of reading comprehension than 4th grade students. Kolić-Vehovec and Bajšanski (2006) observed that students' reading comprehension success goes up from the 5th to the 8th grade. These studies, in short, indicate that students at higher grade levels are better in reading comprehension. As readers graduate to higher grade levels, their experiences and reading areas expand. Therefore, in parallel with this, readers' mental, biological and social developments also go up (J. R. M. Alexander & Martin, 2004; P. A. Alexander & Fox, 2011). In this study, 4th and 5th grade students were compared. If we had compared more distant grade levels (3-5;4-6;4-7 etc.), we might have obtained more statistically significant differences.

In addition, the reading comprehension skills were compared in this study with respect to text type (informative and narrative). Students' comprehension achievements differed with respect to text type: they are better in narrative texts in terms of comprehension. It is frequently suggested in the literature that reading and comprehending narrative texts is easier than informative ones. In studies (Coşkun, 2003; Rasool & Royer, 1986; Saenz & Fuchs, 2002; Şahin, 2013; Temizyürek, 2008), students' comprehension achievements were found to be higher in narrative texts when compared to informative ones. Şahin (2013) found 4th and 5th grade students to be more successful in narrative texts, compared to informative ones, in terms of reading comprehension. These results have also been supported by studies on different grade levels. Coşkun (2003) has found out in his study which he conducted with high school students that the students' reading comprehension and reading rates are lower in informative texts than they are in literature texts and news in newspapers. Text types have their own unique schematic structures. The type and structure of the text give certain clues to the reader in the process of reading, and thus the reader develops certain expectations. Coşkun (2007) maintains that the expectations that the reader forms while reading a news text are different from the expectations that she forms while reading a narrative text on the same subject. On the other hand, the text type informs the reader in the process of reading as to how the ideas embedded in the text are

organized (Weaver & Kintsch, 1991). It could then be argued that students' reading comprehension differs with respect to text type, since structures and contents of narrative texts are easier than those of informative texts and since individuals encounter narrative texts more frequently beginning from early ages.

Narrative texts are recommended especially in the process of learning how to read at early grade levels of elementary education (Cohen, 2011; Faver, 2008). However, as the grade level goes up, students face the obligation to read texts in different types, because while they do readings aimed at learning how to read at earlier grade levels, they read for the purpose of learning at subsequent grade levels (Vacca et al., 2006).

For children who usually deal with multiple-choice tests throughout their education, these tests might require a simpler and easier mental process. In these tests, the student reads the question and tries to find the correct one out of the available answers. Choices might give some hints to students or help them recall knowledge. Moreover, there is also the chance factor (Turgut & Baykul, 2011). On the other hand, responding to open-ended questions requires not only reading and comprehension but also expression skills (Güneş, 2013; Temizyürek, 2008). It requires the student to comprehend the text and then to express, in a written form, what she understood without making use of any source such as choices. Similarly, in cloze tests, the student has to understand the sentence and the context. Therefore, responding to these tests are more difficult (Ulusoy, 2009). Ulusoy (2009) argues that students' failure to make use of linguistic and structural hints and to make sense of the text underlies their incompetence in cloze tests. Both open-ended and cloze tests demand the utilization of much more mental resources from the reader, compared to multiple-choice tests.

Assessing reading comprehension only through multiple-choice tests is inadequate, because students' mean success in this type is higher than the sum of the means of their success in the other two types. Therefore, students may seem to be highly successful in comprehending what they read, according to results of multiple-choice tests. The same students, however, scored much lower in open-ended and cloze tests, which were prepared based on the same texts. This fact complicates the attempt to account for students' reading comprehension. In conclusion, more than one technique should be employed in assessing students' reading comprehension.

Reading is key for much of the learning in a school setting. Those students who make the best use of written resources are the ones who do quality reading and comprehend what they read. In this respect, it is not possible for a student, who cannot read well and make sense of her reading, to construct meaning (Temizkan & Sallabaş, 2011). Development of students' reading and comprehension skills should be attached importance beginning from early grade levels. In reading education, it should be targeted to enable students not only to vocalize written texts but also to become functional readers and to comprehend what they read.

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