



Reading comprehension competence from a pragmatic perspective

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is not merely the reception of encoded information in a text, but also a process in which the reader mobilizes knowledge, selects relevant information, and performs reasoning to form, verify, and adjust their understanding. This article clarifies reading comprehension competence from a pragmatic perspective, focusing on the dimension of meaning interpretation. Based on the analysis, synthesis, and comparison of reading comprehension studies with certain tenets of pragmatics, the article proposes three interacting functional dimensions: mobilizing and selecting information to support interpretation; performing pragmatic inference; and forming and justifying interpretations. Among these, verification and adjustment serve as the overarching control mechanism. Analysis of Vietnamese literary and journalistic corpora shows that these dimensions can be identified from expressions and utterances to the entire text. The findings of this paper offer implications for application in research, instruction, and assessment of reading comprehension competence.

Keywords: Reading comprehension competence, meaning construction, meaning interpretation, context, pragmatic inference

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive activity in which readers not only identify and process information explicitly expressed through language but also integrate textual information with relevant prior knowledge to construct a coherent representation. Research on reading comprehension has gradually moved beyond viewing reading primarily as decoding and has increasingly emphasized the reader's active role in meaning construction. The RAND Reading Study Group defines reading comprehension as the simultaneous extraction and construction of meaning through interaction with written language (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002^[7], p. 11).

Nevertheless, conceptualizing reading comprehension as meaning construction does not fully explain how readers arrive at a particular interpretation. Textual meaning is not always exhaustively encoded in linguistic form. Readers may need to establish reference, connect information distributed across a text, draw on contextual information, infer content that is not explicitly stated, and reassess their understanding as new information becomes available. Meaning interpretation therefore warrants closer examination as the process through which readers move from linguistic evidence and relevant information to a well-supported understanding.

Pragmatics provides an appropriate theoretical framework for examining this interpretive dimension. Ariel (2010^[1], pp. 97-103) regards the distinction between code and inference as an important criterion for delimiting the scope of pragmatics. This distinction makes it possible to examine reading comprehension not only in terms of what readers understand, but also in terms of the evidence they use and the operations through which they arrive at that understanding.

Context and inference have received varying degrees of attention in reading comprehension research. The gap addressed in this article, therefore, is not their absence from previous scholarship, but the need to clarify how linguistic evidence, co-textual information, context, and inference

interact as an interpretive mechanism. Such clarification enables the corresponding reader capabilities to be described more precisely within a competence-based framework.

Accordingly, this article clarifies the theoretical foundations of meaning construction and interpretation by comparing selected concepts in reading comprehension research with key arguments in pragmatics. On this basis, it proposes a set of interactive functional dimensions of reading comprehension competence at the interpretive level and considers their implications for research, instruction, and assessment.

Methodology

This theoretical study primarily employs analysis, synthesis, and comparative review of the literature. The literature examined includes foundational works on models of reading comprehension, studies that clarify the relationship among code, context, and inference in pragmatics, and research directly concerned with inference and interpretation in reading. Through analysis and comparison, the article identifies intersections between reading comprehension theory and pragmatics and uses them to propose several functional dimensions of reading comprehension competence at the interpretive level. The theoretical synthesis is not intended to replace existing models of reading comprehension competence; rather, it seeks to clarify the mechanisms involved in meaning interpretation during reading.

In addition to theoretical analysis, the article examines a purposively selected set of Vietnamese literary and journalistic texts. The texts were selected according to the following criteria: they have verifiable sources; their interpretation clearly requires co-textual information, contextual information, and/or inference; they allow relationships among linguistic evidence, relevant information, and interpretive outcomes to be identified; and they represent different levels of processing, ranging from expressions and utterances in interaction to the text as a whole. The textual analyses are intended to illustrate and

clarify the applicability of the theoretical arguments, rather than to support statistical generalization.

Theoretical foundations of meaning construction and interpretation in reading comprehension

1. Reading comprehension as a process of meaning construction

Conceptualizing reading comprehension as meaning construction represents a shift from treating meaning as content that already exists in the text to viewing comprehension as the outcome of the reader's processing and integration of information. According to the Construction-Integration Model, comprehension involves constructing representations from linguistic information and relevant knowledge and then integrating compatible elements into a coherent representational structure (Kintsch, 1988^[3], pp. 163-165). Within this tradition, comprehension entails not only constructing a textbase but also developing a representation of the situation to which the text refers, in which textual information is integrated with the reader's relevant knowledge (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983^[11], pp. 336-338).

From this perspective, reading comprehension cannot be reduced to reproducing content presumed to be pre-encoded in the text. Readers must select, connect, and organize information and mobilize relevant knowledge to construct a coherent representation of the situation described. Inference is one of the processes involved in forming this representation.

In Vietnamese scholarship on reading comprehension, Pham Thi Thu Huong (2023, p. 43) likewise conceptualizes reading comprehension as the reader's construction of meaning from a text. Her account of meaning construction identifies three levels of processing: "locating information," "comprehension," and "evaluation and response." At the comprehension level, "integration and inference" is distinguished from "literal comprehension." This account indicates that comprehension involves not only recognizing explicit content but also integrating information and drawing inferences.

From a competence-based perspective, Pham Thi Thu Huong (2023, pp. 50-51) defines reading comprehension competence as the capacity to mobilize and integrate the reader's resources, including knowledge, prior experience, skills, strategies, and personal attributes, in order to perform reading comprehension activities in a specific context. This definition enables reading comprehension competence to be understood not only in terms of the resulting understanding, but also in terms of the reader's capacity to mobilize and coordinate resources during reading.

For the purposes of this article, a distinction is drawn between meaning construction and meaning interpretation. Meaning construction refers to the broader process through which readers process and integrate information and knowledge to form a representation of the text. Meaning interpretation emphasizes the establishment and justification of a particular understanding on the basis of linguistic evidence, co-textual information, and context. Meaning interpretation is thus treated as a dimension of meaning construction rather than as an entirely separate process.

2. Context and inference in meaning interpretation

A fundamental premise of pragmatics is that communicative content is not always identical to the content encoded in

linguistic forms. In many cases, linguistic form provides only partial evidence, and recipients must combine this evidence with relevant information to determine an appropriate interpretation.

In his account of Vietnamese pragmatics, Do Huu Chau defines context as "factors present in communication but external to discourse" (Do Huu Chau, 2001, p. 15). This definition provides a basis for distinguishing contextual information from information contained within the discourse itself.

When this distinction is applied to reading, three domains should be differentiated: co-textual information, interpretive context, and reading context. Co-textual information comprises linguistic information in the preceding or following parts of a text that may be connected to the unit currently being processed. Interpretive context comprises information and assumptions outside the discourse that readers draw on to determine meaning. Reading context refers to the broader conditions under which reading takes place, including its purpose, task, and environment. Although all three domains may influence comprehension, they should remain conceptually distinct.

Ariel (2010^[1], pp. 97-103) regards the distinction between code and inference as an important criterion for delimiting the scope of pragmatics. According to Relevance Theory, linguistic communication involves not only coding and decoding but also inferential processing by the recipient (Wilson & Sperber, 2004^[13], pp. 607-608). Within this framework, context consists of assumptions that recipients can access and use in interpretation (Sperber & Wilson, 1995^[9], p. 15).

The relevant question, therefore, is not simply whether readers possess contextual knowledge, but which information they draw on, how they select it, and how it contributes to interpretation. This distinction is particularly important when reading comprehension is conceptualized as competence in performing a reading activity rather than merely as the outcome of answering a question correctly.

3. Pragmatic inference in reading

Whereas decoding provides access to content encoded through linguistic means, inference enables readers to move beyond that content to determine what a text or utterance conveys in a particular context. Pragmatic inference should therefore not be reduced to the identification of a fixed "implied meaning." It may involve reference assignment, content enrichment, the identification of attitudes and communicative intentions, or a choice among competing interpretive hypotheses.

Not every act of connecting information during reading, however, constitutes pragmatic inference. In this article, pragmatic inference refers to cases in which understanding depends substantially on the integration of linguistic evidence with contextual information, enabling readers to move from encoded content to an interpretation better suited to the communicative situation or the text as a whole.

Experimental research also distinguishes among different inferential demands during reading. Rai *et al.* (2011^[6], p. 200), for example, differentiated no-inference conditions from bridging-inference and pragmatic-inference conditions. This distinction supports the treatment of pragmatic inference as a specific process in reading rather than as a label for every form of information integration.

Pragmatic inference in reading comprehension has two notable characteristics. First, it must be evidence-based: an interpretation is not reasonable merely because a reader can imagine it; it must be compatible with linguistic evidence and relevant information that can be justified. Second, inference is dynamic: a hypothesis formed at one point may be retained, revised, or rejected as additional information becomes available. Sato (2023^[8], p. 59) shows that readers may formulate multiple interpretations, test their compatibility with the available evidence, and revise their understanding when incompatible information emerges.

In this article, linguistic evidence refers to cues identifiable in the formal expression of a text and in the relationships among its constituent units. The interpretive process may therefore be broadly represented as an interaction among linguistic evidence, co-textual and relevant contextual information, and inference, which together yield an interpretive hypothesis. This hypothesis is then evaluated against evidence encountered during reading. Comprehension may thus involve recurring cycles of verification and adjustment rather than a strictly linear progression from word to meaning. Here, verification and adjustment are used in a restricted sense to denote the comparison of an interpretive hypothesis with existing or newly available evidence in order to retain, revise, or reject that hypothesis. They are not treated as equivalent to metacognition as a whole.

Functional dimensions of reading comprehension from a pragmatic perspective

On the basis of the preceding theoretical framework, this article focuses on the interpretive dimension of reading comprehension and proposes three interactive functional dimensions: mobilizing and selecting information to support interpretation; performing pragmatic inference; and forming and justifying interpretations. The first two primarily concern processes involved in interpretation, whereas the third concerns the integrated outcome of those processes. Verification and adjustment serve as overarching regulatory mechanisms through which readers retain, revise, or reject interpretive hypotheses as additional evidence becomes available.

These dimensions do not constitute a mandatory linear sequence. During reading, they may interact recursively and influence one another.

1. Mobilizing and selecting information to support interpretation

Determining meaning may require readers to connect information across a text, draw on contextual information outside the discourse, and activate relevant knowledge. This dimension therefore depends not simply on how much information or knowledge readers possess, but more importantly on their capacity to identify, select, and integrate sources of information that are pertinent to the issue being interpreted.

This can be seen in the opening of the short story *Chí Phèo*. After Chí Phèo successively curses the heavens, curses life, and then "curses the entire Vũ Đại village," the villagers "each mutter to themselves: 'Surely he's excluding me!'" (Nam Cao, 2002^[4], p. 11). Separated from the co-text, the expressions "he," "myself," and "excluding me" are insufficient to fully define the referent and the scope of the exclusion. The reader must connect the utterance with the

preceding information to determine that "he" refers to Chí Phèo, while "myself" changes its referent depending on each individual villager in Vũ Đại; "excluding me" is only fully understood in relation to the scope of "all of Vũ Đại village." The following sentence, "No one spoke up" (Nam Cao, 2002^[4], p. 11), provides further evidence to verify the understanding that each person interprets the curse as not being directly targeted at them.

In this case, co-text provides the information most directly relevant to interpretation. The example is not intended to suggest that every act of interpretation requires information from outside the discourse. Rather, it demonstrates that readers must identify which sources of information are relevant to the interpretive problem and connect those sources appropriately.

2. Performing pragmatic inference

The second dimension is the capacity to move from explicitly expressed content to communicative content, attitudes, or intentions that are not fully encoded in linguistic form. This process requires readers to combine linguistic evidence with relevant information in order to formulate and test hypotheses about what is being conveyed. In *Số Đò* (Dumb Luck), when the elderly lady tells Mr. Hong about inviting the doctor, Mr. Hong "frowns" and "slightly snaps": "I know! I know! It's so annoying! Stop repeating it!" (Vu Trong Phung, 1998, p. 382). If only relying on the direct meaning of "I know," the reader can determine that the speaker already has the information being referred to. However, the expressions "it's so annoying," "stop repeating it," the manner of speaking described by the narrator, and the context of the conversation allow us to infer a broader meaning: Mr. Hong is not only conveying his state of awareness but also expressing his annoyance and a communicative orientation towards requesting or suggesting that the interlocutor stop repeating it. This formula is repeated when the elderly lady moves on to other topics (Vu Trong Phung, 1998, pp. 382–383). The new information forces the reader to examine and adjust the initial hypothesis: "I already know" is not simply an announcement that Mr. Hong already knows specific details, but in this conversation, it has become a formulaic communicative response from the character.

This example demonstrates that pragmatic inference in reading is not simply a matter of identifying a fixed implied meaning. Readers formulate hypotheses on the basis of available evidence and test those hypotheses as the text supplies additional information.

3. Forming and justifying interpretations

The preceding dimensions lead to a more integrated requirement: readers must not only formulate an interpretation but also justify it with appropriate evidence. A text may support multiple interpretive hypotheses, but not all interpretations are equally plausible. A well-supported interpretation must be compatible with linguistic evidence, co-textual information, and relevant contextual information. Tran The Cong's (2024) article *Tiền nào mua văn hóa?* (Can Money Buy Culture?) illustrates this process. The title brings "money," "buying," and "culture" into relation, but the author's position can be determined only by integrating information from the text as a whole. A conclusion based solely on the title or on isolated statements, such as the claim that the author rejects the role of financial resources in

cultural development, would be incompatible with passages acknowledging the necessity and significance of investment in culture. The argument instead concerns the limits of money as a means of creating cultural values, norms, and forms of conduct (Tran The Cong, 2024). The purpose of this analysis is not to judge whether the author's position is correct, but to determine the position conveyed through the relationship among the title, individual statements, and the text's overall line of argument.

Readers must therefore evaluate proposed interpretations against evidence distributed throughout the text and select the interpretation most consistent with the overall argument. Interpretation in reading comprehension is not equivalent to offering a subjective response; readers must be able to identify the evidence that makes one interpretation more plausible than another.

4. Verification and adjustment during interpretation

Verification and adjustment do not constitute a fourth functional dimension equivalent to the three outlined above. Instead, they operate throughout text interpretation as regulatory mechanisms. Readers may formulate a hypothesis on the basis of available evidence, compare it with newly encountered information, and then retain, revise, or reject it according to its compatibility with the text. This mechanism can be observed in all three cases analyzed. In *Chí Phèo*, the phrase "No one spoke up" helps to verify the understanding of the scope of the curse; in *Số Đò*, the repetitions of "I know! I know! It's so annoying! Stop repeating it!" update the reader's understanding of the communicative function of utterances; and in *Tiền nào mua văn hóa?* (*Can Money Buy Culture?*), line of argument of the entire text allows the reader to examine and reject the simplistic understanding that the author denies the role of material resources in cultural development.

The functional structure of interpretation may be summarized as follows: mobilizing and selecting information to support interpretation ↔ performing pragmatic inference ↔ forming and justifying interpretations, with verification and adjustment operating throughout. This representation describes functional and interactive relationships rather than a rigid sequence of processing stages. In actual reading, an inference may prompt the search for further information; new information may alter an existing hypothesis; and an emerging interpretation may lead readers to reconsider which information is relevant.

Implications for reading comprehension research and instruction

This approach suggests that reading comprehension research can extend its focus from comprehension outcomes to the processes through which readers arrive at an understanding. If analysis is limited to whether readers select a correct answer, it is difficult to determine whether they have mobilized appropriate information, drawn relevant inferences, and verified their understanding, or whether their response is based on intuition or superficial cues. Research may therefore also examine process evidence, including the information readers select, the relationships they establish, the inferences they draw, and the ways in which they revise their understanding when new information becomes available.

For instruction, this approach suggests that, in addition to helping learners identify textual content, teachers should attend to learners' capacity to explain the basis of their understanding. Reading activities may ask learners to identify relevant information, explain the relationship between an expression and its context, articulate the inferential steps from what is said to what is conveyed, compare alternative interpretations, and use evidence to accept or reject an interpretation. Teachers need not impose a single interpretation; however, reading comprehension should not be equated with arbitrary interpretation. The plausibility of an interpretation must be evaluated against textual and contextual evidence.

Assessment tasks may likewise be designed to reveal not only what learners understand, but also the evidence and processes through which they arrive at that understanding. A task based on *Chí Phèo* could require learners to identify the referent of an expression and cite the relevant textual evidence. A task based on *Số đò* could require them to explain the attitude or communicative intention inferred beyond literal meaning. A task based on a journalistic text such as *Tiền nào mua văn hóa?* (*Can Money Buy Culture?*) could require learners to choose among alternative interpretations of the author's position and justify that choice using evidence from the text as a whole.

These proposals, however, are implications derived from theoretical analysis rather than empirically validated instructional interventions or assessment instruments. Translating the proposed functional dimensions into indicators of competence, assessment tasks, and evaluation criteria will require further empirical research.

Conclusion

Reading comprehension is a process of meaning construction, but an account of this process remains incomplete unless it explains how readers move from linguistic cues to an appropriate interpretation under particular conditions. A pragmatic perspective draws attention to the interpretive dimension, specifically the relationships among linguistic evidence, co-textual information, context, reader-generated inferences, and the resulting interpretation.

By comparing reading comprehension theory with selected principles of pragmatics, this article proposes three interactive functional dimensions of reading comprehension competence at the interpretive level: mobilizing and selecting information to support interpretation; performing pragmatic inference; and forming and justifying interpretations. The first two primarily represent processes involved in interpretation, whereas the third represents the integrated outcome of those processes. Verification and adjustment operate as overarching regulatory mechanisms, enabling readers to retain, revise, or reject hypotheses that are no longer compatible with the available evidence.

The analysis of selected Vietnamese texts illustrates how this functional structure operates at different levels of processing: establishing the referent and scope of expressions, inferring attitudes and communicative intentions from utterances, and determining an author's position by integrating information across a text. A pragmatic perspective therefore shifts attention from the question "What does the reader understand?" to the additional questions "On what basis?" and "Through what processes does the reader arrive at that understanding?"

The proposed dimensions are derived from theoretical analysis and illustrated through selected Vietnamese texts; they do not yet constitute an empirically validated model of reading comprehension competence. Further research should operationalize these dimensions as observable indicators, develop appropriate tasks, and examine the relationships among them across different reader groups, text types, and reading contexts.

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