

Indicators of Reading Comprehension: Example of Narrative Text and Open Ended Question

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a mental skill that requires establishing connections between the content of the text and the individual's prior knowledge. The purpose of the current study is to examine the reading comprehension levels of primary school fourth grade students based on their answers to open-ended questions about a narrative text in relation to different variables. The current study employing the descriptive survey model was conducted with the participation of 115 primary school fourth grade students from a city in the Central Anatolian Region of Turkey. An inventory consisted of 10 open-ended questions based on a narrative text was used to collect data. The level of reading comprehension of the students participating in the study was found to be in the stage of transition from the difficulty level to the instructional level and this level can be expressed as insufficient. Although the students' reading comprehension levels do not vary significantly according to the gender variable, girls' reading comprehension levels are higher than boys. Through open-ended questions, it is easy to observe how students structure their answers, how they manage the process of constructing the meaning of the text, and what they focus on in the text. In this way, strategy teaching and activity design can progress more concretely in order to improve students' meaning construction skills. In addition, it provides the teacher with a good opportunity to get acquainted with students whose understanding skills are at the instructional level, realize their approach to text and question, and provide individual support to the student. The results of the current study provide consistent and meaningful data for new research and educational practices in schools.

Keywords: Narrative Text, Open-Ended Questions, Reading Comprehension

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INTRODUCTION

Texts are the main element of language education. Reading, telling, listening, understanding, writing and grammar studies are carried out through texts. The transfer of tradition and culture to generations along with history, literature and art and many things about life can be addressed through texts. Texts that can be composed of verbal, written, visual and imaginary elements in different forms such as writing, drawing, play, painting, sculpture, song, film can vary in their literary genres, structures, language and expression features. The texts can be grouped under two main headings: informative and narrative. Informative texts are descriptive in nature and can be found in reports, newspapers, articles, and biographies and can include technical information about the relationships between concepts. The aim of these texts, which use the words, concepts and fiction specific to the subject they contain and provide information about the subject, is to inform readers. Narrative texts on the other hand are fictional and closer to verbal narration, including a plot as in novels, poems, folk tales and epics.

Although the story, as a basic instrument of oral and written culture in human history, varies according to time and place, it is a genre whose text elements can be determined in the most concrete way and which creates common expectations in humans in terms of its structure (Şahin, 2012). In the narrative texts that describe an event or situation, there is a unique basic structure. Text elements such as subject, main idea, person, place, time, reaction, event-situation-person relationship and cause-effect connection can be presented to the reader in a spiral structure around a main plot. The purpose for writing the text, the main feeling addressed, the message to be given can be expressed as the main idea of that text. This main idea, which takes place directly or indirectly in the story, is the exemplary meaning that the reader will infer after reading the story. Since narrative texts contain the emotions, expectations and reactions of the people involved in the events they present, it may be easier for an interaction to occur between the reader and the text. This process is considered to be an important prerequisite for the reader to interpret and understand the text (Ulusoy, 2016). According to the reader-reaction theory, which defines reading as a two-way process and interaction (Rosenblatt, 1982) of the reader with the text in certain conditions and time, the text provides a useful structure for understanding the nature of this interaction. This theory focusing on subjects such as the writer's attitude towards the reader, types of readers, and the process the reader is engaged in while uncovering different meanings in the text, reading traditions, text criticism and the status of the text (Baktır, 2018) draws attention to the fact that the reader who is active during the act of reading interacts with the text to find the meaning in the text. Since the meaning is not readily available in the text or reader, it is uncovered through this interaction between the reader and the text. This can include actions such as searching for information in a textbook, following the instructions in a machine's manual, or reaching a logical conclusion in an article (Rosenblatt 1982; Rosenblatt, 1988). In order for reading comprehension that can be defined as “the ability to derive” meaning from the text to occur, the reader must identify a series of letters as a word, access the meaning of that word from his/her mental dictionary, and make sense of individual word meanings as a whole at a sentence level. Reading comprehension requires an effective coordination and integration of a range of basic processes that involve the reader's use of world knowledge and word recognition skills together (Best, Floyd and Mcnamara, 2008).

Even if the narrative texts contain unknown information, many children have the necessary equipment to grasp the meaning in narrative texts with their own attitudes and experiences about the emotion, place, subject or event referred to in the story, and their mental schemes about actions and events. Many narrative texts actually have a simple structure: Cause-effect relationships between events. It is known that elementary school students who follow and understand this simple structure of the text are more advantageous (Best, Floyd and McNamara, 2008). The first problem after learning to read begins in the process of choosing a text. Texts play an important role both in developing reading skills and measuring the development in reading comprehension (Çelik, Demirgüneş and Fidan, 2015). Highly different methods can be used in this process. Multiple choice or correct-false questions, gap filling activities, explaining and summarizing what has been read are some of them. The purpose of the questions added to the texts is to positively influence construction of meaning from this text (Akyol, 1997). It is necessary to know that reading is an interactive process in which the reader creates

meaning with text and students should be helped to do so. This means going beyond understanding a text and allowing students to use their own knowledge at the time of reading. When the questions go beyond real understanding, students' answers should be guided by the information in the text. Answers that include guesses, evaluations, and personal experiences primarily rely on students' reactions to the text they read. Evaluative and personal responses not only rely on students' reactions to what they read, but should also reflect a broad understanding of the text (Day and Park, 2005). If a teacher tests his/her students' construction of meaning from the text with short-answer questions rather than open-ended, multi-dimensional and student-centred questions, then he/she limits learning (Hynds, 1990; cited in Akyol, 2010). When the evaluation criteria for reading comprehension are considered, the first question to be asked is "What is best question form?". Existing research shows that a single type of question cannot be relied on as the measurement of reading comprehension (Akyol, 1997; Akyol, 2010; Başaran, 2019; Best, Floyd, Mcnamara, 2008; Collins, 2015; Day and Park, 2005). Different types of questions can present different pictures in relation to the understanding of a student's competence in reading comprehension. Therefore, it may be advisable to use multiple types of tests to ensure a comprehensive assessment of people's reading comprehension skills rather than presenting a single type of test as the best test (Keenan and Meenan 2014). One of these tools or question types is "open-ended questions". Open-ended questions are very old type of questions. The reader is expected to respond based on what he/she remembers and what he/she understands from reading. This type of questions can reveal details of the characteristics of the used language during the explanation of the answer and facilitate the analysis of the source of errors (Caine & Oakhill, 2006). Open-ended questions can improve children's ability to reflect on the story they have read and to express their thoughts on the structure of this story. Open-ended questions that can also provide specific tips about the reader (Applegate, Quinn and Applegate, 2002) are type of questions suitable for measuring higher order skills such as problem solving, organizing problems, generating original ideas, evaluating ideas, applying information in different situations, establishing cause-effect relationships, generating assumptions and alternatives and reaching a judgment through comparisons (Tan and Erdoğan, 2004). If the fact that "meaning is based on the social, political, cultural and historical contexts of the act of reading" is taken into consideration, then the respondent's freedom of constructing the answer to open-ended questions is seen to be remarkable (Serafini, 2003; cited in McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004). These questions require that the person answering the question combine his/her own experience and background knowledge with the information in the text to produce inferential answers. Open-ended questions that allow the respondent to control his/her state of text comprehension can also provide good guidance in dealing with lower order thinking skills (Lusianti, 2019). This view implies that any interaction that occurs when the reader answers a question will have a direct impact on the reader's understanding and learning of the text. This effect is determined by the nature of the interaction that occurs as a result of answering the question (Wixson, 1983). An effective way to broaden children's curiosity, reasoning ability and creativity is to ask open-ended questions that do not have a single right or wrong answer, and such questions can give rise to new ideas. In order to truly solve the complex nature of reading comprehension, it is necessary to accept the impact of assessment dimensions such as the form and type of response and the contribution of children's other skills to the assessment outcomes (Collins, 2015). Writing exercises with carefully selected questions about texts allow students to present their ideas and also help teachers understand their students' way of thinking (Ulusoy, 2016). The open-ended question can be defined as a test item that helps the person to whom the test is applied to design his/her own answer compared to multiple choice and other questions with limited possibilities (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). Such questions; though not the only possible tool to diagnose the general state of the reader, support the creation of new meanings as they allow the reader to predict the development of the character in the text or the course of the event. What is important here is to ask questions that can help students understand well rather than asking questions that evaluate students' understanding of the text (Fordham, 2006). A study evaluating the ability of reading comprehension with multiple-choice and open-ended questions showed that the performance in open-ended questions was related to the quality of self-expression, and the performance in multiple-choice questions was related to prior knowledge about the text. These results show that open-ended and multiple choice format questions measure different aspects of understanding processes (Ozuru, Briner, Kurby and McNamara, 2013).

Existing research shows that open-ended questions can be analyzed to confirm the ultimate differences in the forms and appearances of the answers in the applications conducted on the meaning (Tobia, Ciancaleoni and Bonifacci, 2017), that text type is an important factor affecting comprehension and that primary and middle school students better understand narrative texts (Brandão and Oakhill, 2005; Sidekli and Buluç, 2006; Temizyürek, 2008; Yıldırım, Yıldız, Ateş and Rasinski, 2010). In general, reading stories develops the reading skill. The comprehension level of the children who learn and realize the unique structure of the story, increases. In language classes, after reading narrative texts, teachers ask oral or written questions to check whether the text has been understood by students, to make students interact with the text and to find the main idea of the story. In this way, the development of reading comprehension skills is checked and supported. In the reading process, questions are the main element to clarify a reader's reading style, level of understanding, speed of reading, and factors affecting understanding. The reading purpose of the reader affects what he/she reads and how he/she reads it. This brings the role of questions to an important point in learning and teaching activities. The questions used in the reading process and the purpose for asking these questions have the power to determine the course of students' mental processes and their thinking styles.

The purpose of the current study is to examine primary school students' reading comprehension levels on the basis of the responses they have given to open-ended questions about a narrative text in relation to different variables. To this end, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What are the reading comprehension levels of primary school students measured on the basis of the responses they have given to open-ended questions about a narrative text?
2. Do the reading comprehension levels of primary school students measured on the basis of the responses they have given to open-ended questions about a narrative text vary significantly by gender?
3. Do the reading comprehension levels of primary school students measured on the basis of the responses they have given to open-ended questions about a narrative text vary significantly depending on whether having taken pre-school education?

METHOD

Research Paradigm

The current study employed the quantitative research paradigm and descriptive survey model. Typically, survey research is conducted to describe the nature of the existing conditions at a given time or when systematic and comparable data are needed from relatively huge number of people or to determine the relationship between specific events (Scott and Morrison, 2006). In the current study, the descriptive survey model was preferred as it was aimed to determine primary school students' reading comprehension levels using narrative texts and as it was aimed to determine the level of reading comprehension skills in ordinary conditions without any influence on the study group or intervention in reading processes.

Participants

Criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used to select the participants of the study. In the criterion sampling method, all units meeting a set of criteria determined by the researcher or a set of predetermined criteria are included in the sampling (Patton, 2001). The criteria used in the current study are (a) being a primary school fourth grade student, (b) not having problem in reading and writing, (c) being at the age of 9-10. Primary school students meeting these criteria were included in the current study. In this regard, a total of 115 primary school fourth grade students attending six different primary schools of middle socio-economic level in a city

located in the Central Anatolia of Turkey participated in the study. The teachers of the students were informed about the purpose of the research; the scope and subject of the study were explained to the students. Of the students participating in the current study on a volunteer basis, 74 are girls (64.35%) and 41 are boys (35.65%). The participating students' book reading and writing preferences are presented in Figure 1 to give some insights about the approach adopted by the study group towards book reading.

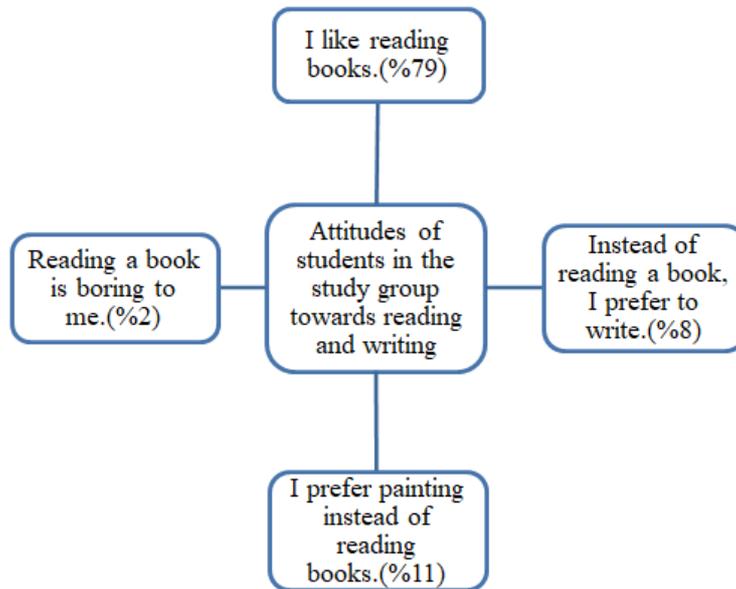


Figure 1. Study group's approach to reading

Data Collection Tools

In order to collect data in the current study, a total of 10 open-ended questions constructed on a narrative text were used. These questions were taken from the Informal Reading Inventory prepared and published by Karasu, Girgin and Uzuner (2013). The open-ended questions are about a narrative text "Sel" consisted of 287 words. The questions in the data collection tool about the narrative text "Sel" were evaluated over 100 points as textually open, textually closed and information-experience questions. Each question is 10 points. The rubric used in the grading of the responses given to the questions is presented below (Karasu, Girgin & Uzuner, 2013):

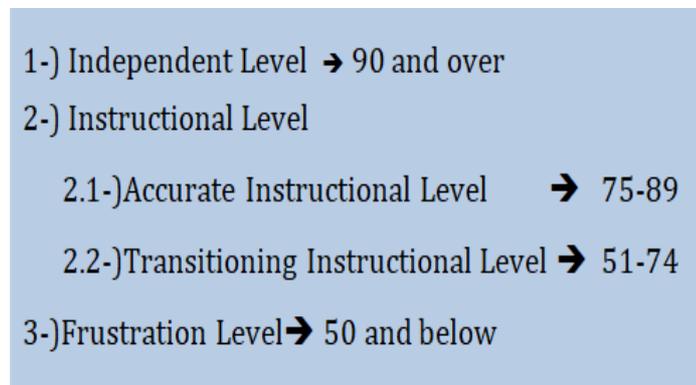


Figure 2. Evaluation principles

Data Collection Procedures

In the data collection process, appointments were made with the teachers of the students for suitable days and hours. In the pre-determined days and hours, the schools were visited and the data collection tool was administered by the researcher in one session. The participating students were explained how to answer the questions. First worksheets including the narrative text “Sel” were distributed to the students and the students were asked to read it few times silently. After the students had read the text few times, the worksheets including the text were collected from the students. Then the forms including the open-ended questions about the narrative text “Sel” were distributed to the students. It took 25-35 minutes for the students to answer the questions.

Data Analysis

The data collected in the study were first classified. The answers written by each student on the answer sheet were scored according to rubric prepared by Karasu, Girgin and Uzuner (2013). These scores constitute research data. The data were recorded in a statistical program in the computer and then analyzed. First, in order to determine whether the data showed a normal distribution, both skewness and kurtosis values were calculated and also as the number of participants was higher than 50, the significance level of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was checked (Büyüköztürk et al., 2012). As a result of the normality tests conducted, the skewness and kurtosis values were found to be between -1.5 and +1.5 and the significance level of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was found to be higher than 0.05 ($p>.05$); thus, it was concluded that the students’ reading comprehension scores showed a normal distribution (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2013). As the data showed a normal distribution, independent samples t-test was used. In order to find answers to the research questions, it was also tested whether the students’ reading comprehension scores vary significantly depending on gender and whether having taken pre-school education.

Findings and Interpretation

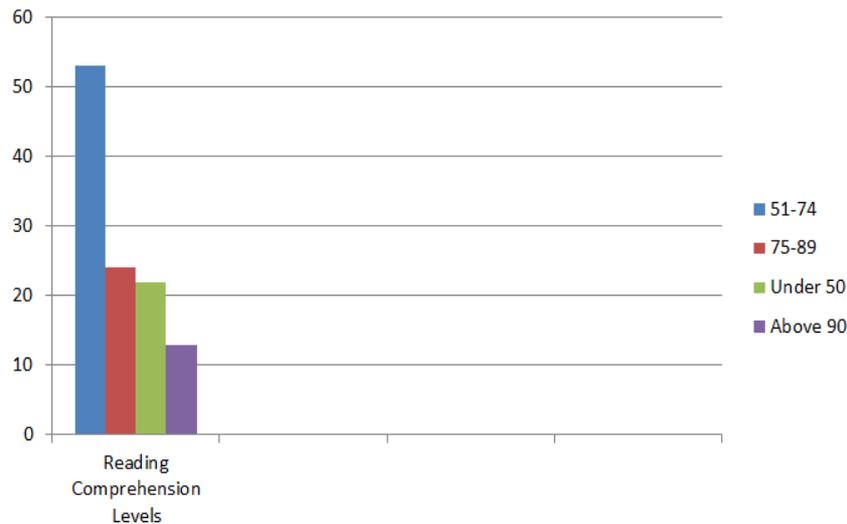
In this section, the findings obtained from the analysis of the collected data are listed in tables and comparatively explained.

The students’ reading levels determined on the basis of the responses they gave to the open-ended questions are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of the Students’ Reading Comprehension Scores

Reading Comprehension Score	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	115	22.00	96.00	64.33	17.80378

As can be seen in Table 1, the arithmetic mean of the students’ reading comprehension scores is $\bar{X} = 64.33$. This finding indicates that the reading comprehension skill of the primary school students is in the stage of transition from the level of having difficulty to the instructional level. Of the participating students, 22% had scores lower than 50; 53% had scores in the range of 51-74 points and 24% had scores in the range of 75-89 points and 13% had scores higher than 90 points. The distribution of these scores is presented in Graph 1.



Graphic 1. Distribution of reading comprehension scores

When the findings presented in Table 1 and Graph 1 are compared, it is seen that the great majority of the students had scores in the range of 51-74 points, which indicates that the students are in the stage of transition from the level of having difficulty to the instructional level. Of the participating students, 24% had scores in the range of 75-89 points. This finding shows that the reading comprehension level of only 21 of the 115 students is at the absolute instructional level. Students at the instructional reading level read more slowly compared to students at the independent reading level and need to get support from an experienced reader (Karasu, Girgin and Uzuner, 2013). Twenty five students were found to have a score lower than 50 points; thus, these students are at the difficulty level of reading comprehension skill.

Independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether the primary school fourth grade students' levels of reading comprehension vary depending on gender. The obtained findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of the reading comprehension scores by gender

	Gender	n	\bar{x}	ss	sd	t	p
Reading comprehension level	Girl	74	66.00	18.12	113	1.363	.176
	Boy	41	61.29	17.01			

$p < .05$

As can be seen in Table 2, the mean reading comprehension score of the girls is $\bar{X}=66$ while that of the boys is $\bar{X}=61.29$. The fact that p value is higher than .05 shows that the students' reading comprehension levels do not vary by gender [$t(113) = 1.363$; $p > .05$]. The mean reading comprehension score of the girls is higher than that of the boys.

Independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether the primary school fourth grade students' levels of reading comprehension vary depending on whether having taken pre-school education and the findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of the reading comprehension scores by whether having taken pre-school education

		n	\bar{x}	ss	sd	t	p
Reading comprehension level	Students having taken pre-school education	86	64.95	17.67	113	.654	.515
	Students not having taken pre-school education	29	62.44	18.37			

$p < .05$

As can be seen in Table 3, the mean reading comprehension score of the students having taken pre-school education is $\bar{X}=64.95$ while that of the students not having taken pre-school education is $\bar{X}=62.44$. The reading comprehension level of both groups of students is at the instructional level showing transformation. Though the mean reading comprehension score of the students having taken pre-school education is higher than that of the students not having taken, the difference is not statistically significant [$t(113) = .654; p > .05$]. This might be because of the large difference between the number of the students having taken pre-school education (n: 86) and the number of the students not having taken pre-school education (n: 29).

RESULTS

According to the results of the analyses, the students' level of reading comprehension is at the stage of transition from the level of having difficulty to the instructional level. According to this result, it can be stated that the students are not successful enough in reading comprehension. The students whose reading comprehension level is at the instructional level should be supported individually to develop their reading comprehension skill. In the study conducted by Karaarslan (2015), the primary school fourth grade students' level of reading comprehension was found to be at the level of "worry" and in the study conducted by Ergen and Batmaz (2019) on 503 primary school fourth grade students, the students' level of reading comprehension was found to be at the "medium" level. In the study carried out by Baştuğ and Keskin (2014), the primary school fourth and fifth grade students were found to be more successful in comprehending narrative texts than informative texts. In another study, the primary school students' success in determining the problem in narrative texts was found to be highly low (Baştuğ and Keskin, 2013). Determination of the problem in the story is also included in the comprehension process. When the results of the current study are compared with the results of other studies, it can be said that primary school students cannot demonstrate the basic competences expected in the comprehension process and cannot understand the text they read.

Gender and whether having taken pre-school education were taken as the variables of the study. A total of 74 girls and 41 boys participated in the current study and the data collected from them were analyzed in relation to gender. Though the students' reading comprehension level was found to be not varying significantly depending on gender, the mean reading comprehension score of the girls was found to be higher than that of the boys. In order to understand how reading skill develops in children, psychological, sociological and physiological factors have always attracted the attention of researchers. When the effect of gender on reading in the literature is examined, it is seen that the research findings vary. According to the PIRLS (The Project of International Reading Language Skills) measurements conducted on 50 countries in 2016, primary school fourth grade girls were found to have a higher mean in narrative texts than that of the boys. In addition, in 48 countries, girls were found to be more successful in understanding skills such as interpretation, integration and evaluation than boys (Eivers, 2017). In 2018, PISA was carried out with more than half a million students from 79 countries. Turkey, which has participated in PISA exams since 2003, took part in the 2018 PISA exams with 6890 students. Among these students, the reading skills competence level of the female students was found to be higher than that of the male students (www.pisa.meb.gov.tr). While the mean reading skills score of the male students is 453, that of the female students is 478. When the results taken from the PISA exams from 2009 to 2018 for the reading performance were compared, it was found that the reading skills performances of the male and female students did not show a significant change during this nine-year period. In the study conducted by Çetin (2017) on 387 primary school fourth grade students in Muğla, the mean reading comprehension score of the girls was found to be higher than that of the boys. In studies conducted in different times at different grade levels (Bayraktar, 2017; Ceran, Oğuzgiray Yıldız & Özdemir, 2015; Deveci, 2019; Ergen & Batmaz, 2019; Özdemir, Özdemir & Parmaksız, 2016; Palavuzlar, 2009; Çiftçi & Temizyürek, 2008), the mean reading comprehension level of the female students was found to be higher than that of the male students. In general, the results of the current study are thought to be in compliance with the results reported by PIRLS, PISA and other national research. This can be seen important as this finding supports the literature.

Of the students participating in the current study, 86 were found to have taken pre-school education while 29 had not. Though no significant difference was found between the mean narrative text reading comprehension score of the students having taken pre-school education and that of the students not having taken pre-school education, their reading comprehension level was found to be at the instructional level showing transition. There are studies determining (Güleçol, 2017; Okur, 2017; Sabak Kaldan, 2007) that there is a significant relationship between primary school fourth grade students' reading comprehension levels and pre-school education level. In other studies (Akçay, 2016; Ulutaş Avcu & Aksoy, 2016;), the reading and comprehension skills of the primary school first grade students having taken pre-school education were found to be more advanced than the other students. Preschool education, which covers the period from birth to primary school, aims to help the child become compatible and successful by gaining the basic knowledge, skills and behaviours when he/she has started primary school (Özkesemen, 2008). In this period, which represents a process in which children's language and mind development is fast, reading-writing preparation activities have an important place (Tuğluk, Kök, Koçyiğit, Kaya & Gençdoğan, 2008). For example, reading speed and reading comprehension of primary school first grade students differ significantly in favor of pre-school education students (Kayıran and Ağaçkırın). When the results of the current study are evaluated within the framework of all these findings reported in the literature, the role of preschool education in reading success cannot be denied. Meyer (2003) suggests that texts should be appropriate for the student so that comprehension and the student's integration with the text can be facilitated. Texts that are appropriate for the language, emotion and mind development of the student and appeal to his/her world will serve to the development of reading and understanding more. Teaching the structure of the narrative text as of the first grade of primary school to students will form a basis for them to understand more complex narrative texts to be encountered in middle and high school (Dymock, 2007). Readers who know and use the text structure can examine the ideas in the text mentally by using relationships such as ranking, comparison, cause-effect, problem-solution (Meyer & Ray, 2017). It should be noted that questions encourage readers to give more time and attention to selected pieces of information. If teachers believe any idea is important and want their students to remember it, they can ask questions about it (Wixson, 1983).

Reading comprehension, which is the basic concept of the current study, was evaluated over the open-ended questions about a narrative text. It provides the teacher with a good opportunity to get acquainted with students whose understanding skills are at the instructional level, realize their approach to text and question, and provide individual support to the student. The results of the current study provide consistent and meaningful data for new research and educational practices in schools. Based on the results obtained in the research, some suggestions about reading comprehension have been developed. In different studies, reading comprehension levels can be determined by using open-ended questions about different types of texts. The process of students answering open-ended questions, their approach to questions can be examined in depth through observations and interviews. The number of students participating in the current study is 115, and it can be seen as a limitation in terms of generalizing the results obtained. In future research, different research methods can be used, and the effect of different question types on reading comprehension can be investigated with a wider participant. The importance of using story should be taken into account in the development of students' reading comprehension skills; current status indicators should be evaluated first. Using the text structure to grasp the relationship between the important ideas of a text improves the comprehension skill of the reader. Individuals with advanced reading comprehension can both recognize and comprehend the structure of the story and find the main idea given in the story. While some children can discover the narrative text structure on their own, there are also those who are not so lucky. Longitudinal studies on question types and text structure should be conducted to investigate the contribution of questions to the learning process rather than questioning.

Particular attention should be paid to creating questions to relate the experiences that can improve higher-order thinking skills to the text. The essence of reading is the ability to relate experiences to the text. In addition, it is necessary to use the question as a means of learning, thinking and understanding rather than seeing it only as an assessment and scoring tool. The importance of using story should be taken into account in the development of students' reading comprehension skills; current status indicators should be evaluated first. Individual differences and past life experiences

should be determined in reading comprehension development, and learning activities should be designed in accordance with the affective and language characteristics of the student. While evaluating the reading comprehension process, different question types should be used through different texts without relying on a single question type. Through open-ended questions, it is easy to observe how students structure their answers, how they manage the process of understanding the text and what they focus on in the text. In this way, strategy teaching and activity design can progress more concretely in order to improve students' meaning construction skills. In reading and comprehension education, only aloud and silent reading activities are not enough. Different methods should be used for the development and monitoring of students' comprehension skills.

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