

Strategic Production of Predictive Inferences During Comprehension

David Allbritton
Department of Psychology
DePaul University

Although some types of inferences are mandatory for readers, predictive inferences (inferences for what will happen next) are generally considered elaborative or optional. Three experiments measuring probe word lexical decision latencies produced evidence for the online generation of predictive inferences during narrative text comprehension. Participants read passages that were designed to elicit inferences about what would happen next at a certain point in the story. Immediately following the point at which the inference was anticipated (the inference-generating sentence), a lexical decision probe word was presented that was related to the expected inference. Lexical decision latencies were shorter for probes related to the inference but only when the comprehension task encouraged prediction as a reading strategy. The results support the hypothesis that the production of predictive inferences is relatively strategy dependent.

Predictive inferences (inferences about what will happen next) allow the reader to go beyond the text and presumably construct a richer understanding of a narrative. Making predictions represents a form of active engagement with the text; therefore, predicting is encouraged as a comprehension-fostering strategy in some programs designed to improve reading abilities such as reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Palinscar, Brown, & Martin, 1987). It should be noted that the type of predictions used in reciprocal teaching (predicting the content of the upcoming text) is a much broader sense of prediction than that of predictive inferences for subsequent events in a narrative per se, but prediction is still encouraged at all levels of comprehension. Rather surprisingly, however, there is some evidence that predicting may not help comprehension (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994)