

Editorial

METACOGNITION AND READING COMPREHENSION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of “learning to read” has stimulated considerable debates—theoretical, practical, and political ones— about which teaching methods and materials are the most effective. During the past 10 years, debates have become more strident as calls for school accountability have increased. The debates about teaching reading are not theoretical, since teachers are increasingly told by legislation what, how, and to whom teach reading in their classrooms.

The debates have also stimulated a greater reliance on scientific evidence by educational administrators and policymakers who want all teachers to use effective methods and materials (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Reading researchers, perhaps now more than ever before, have a responsibility to use the most relevant research to bridge theory and practice with coherent and useful models for the development of reading, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

On the other hand, recent research in second language reading has focused on “metacognition”. These studies investigate metacognitive awareness of reading strategies and the relationship among perception of strategies, strategy use, and reading comprehension.

Strategy research suggests that less competent learners may improve their skills through training in strategies evidenced by most successful learners.

Relatively, little research on metacognitive strategy training has been undertaken on second or foreign language reading.

2. LEARNING STRATEGIES

As a cover term, language learning strategies are the operations or processes that learners employ to learn the target language. Research into what learners do to learn a language has resulted in the identification of specific strategies and in attempts to classify them in some way. Most current research has been carried out either through the framework developed by Oxford (Oxford, 1990) or through the metacognitive, cognitive, socio-affective scheme used by O'Malley, Kupper, Chamot and others (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

2.1 Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognition refers to the knowledge and control that we have over our cognitive processes. With regard to reading, it is common to talk about metacognitive awareness (what we know) and metacognitive regulation or control (knowing when, where, and how to use strategies, that is, what we can do). On a general level, metacognition includes awareness and control of planning, monitoring, repairing, revising, summarizing, and evaluating. Essentially, we learn awareness of our comprehension processing. More specifically, we learn strategies that support our comprehension (our awareness of strategies) and we learn how to carry out these strategies effectively (our control of strategies) (Baker, 2002, 2008; Pressley, 2002).

One reason why metacognition is significant is that if learners are not aware of when comprehension is breaking down and what they can do about it, strategies introduced by the teacher will fail. As O'Malley et al. have pointed out: "students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to review their progress, accomplishments, and future directions" (1985: 561). Further, Pressley, Snyder and Cariglia-Bull (1987) suggest that metacognition helps students to be consciously aware of what they have learned, and to recognize situations in which it would be useful, and progress in using it.

a. Metacognitive Reading Strategies

Reading, whether in L1 or L2, is a “cognitive enterprise”, which occurs in part as a result of the interaction among the reader, the text, and the context in which reading takes place (Flavell, 1979). Furthermore, to accomplish the task of comprehending the text successfully, the reader must utilize metacognitive knowledge and must invoke conscious and deliberate strategies. The readers’ metacognitive knowledge about reading may be influenced by a number of factors, including previous experiences, beliefs, culture-specific instructional practices, and, in the case of non-native readers, proficiency in L2, and it may be triggered, consciously or unconsciously, when the reader encounters a specific reading task. The readers’ metacognitive knowledge about reading includes an awareness of a variety of reading strategies and of the fact that the cognitive enterprise of reading is influenced by this metacognitive awareness of reading strategies. It is the combination of conscious awareness of reading, strategic reading processes, and the actual utilization of reading strategies that distinguishes skilled from unskilled readers.

The research on metacognitive awareness of reading strategies —broadly defined here as the deliberate, conscious procedures used by readers to enhance text comprehension— indicates the need to increase our understanding of readers’ metacognitive knowledge about reading and reading strategies to develop them into active, constructively responsive readers.

b. Significance of Metacognitive Reading Strategies

Metacognitive reading strategies are conscious means by which students monitor their own reading processes including evaluating the effectiveness of cognitive strategies being used. Metacognitive strategies may involve, for example, planning how to approach the reading of a text, testing, and revising according to purpose and time available (Devine, 1993). These kinds of strategy might also include Sheorey and Mokhtari’s “support strategies” such as the knowledge of how to use tools for comprehension such as dictionaries, taking notes or highlighting important text (2001: 436). If cognitive reading strategies are about knowing what strategy to use and how to

apply it, then metacognitive strategic knowledge involves understanding the rationale for applying a particular strategy in a particular context, and evaluating its usefulness in terms of appropriacy and effectiveness for that context. Auerbach and Paxton (1997) argue that strategic reading can only become efficient when metacognitive strategies, such as working towards a particular goal while reading, are actively used.

As Brown, Armbruster and Baker have argued, “metacognition plays a vital role in reading” (1986: 49). The term metacognition refers to one’s understanding of any cognitive process. The context of reading is usually understood as consisting of two types of cognition: First, one’s knowledge of strategies for learning from texts, and, second, the control readers have of their own actions while reading for different purposes. Successful readers monitor their reading and the state of their learning; they use strategies, adjust effort appropriately, and evaluate the success of their ongoing efforts to understand (Brown, Armbruster & Baker, 1986).

Metacognitive control, in which the reader consciously directs the reasoning process, is a particularly important aspect of strategic reading. When readers are conscious of the reasoning involved in reading, they can access and apply that reasoning to similar reading in future situations.

According to Carrell, Gajdusek and Wise (1998), examples of specific metacognitive strategies in reading may include: a) establishing objectives in reading, b) evaluating reading materials, c) repairing miscomprehension, d) evaluating the ongoing understanding of the text, e) analyzing the text and paragraph structure to clarify the author’s intention, f) adjusting reading speed and selective cognitive strategies accordingly, and g) engaging in self-questioning to determine if the objectives have been reached. Thus, reading is a metacognitive, as well as a cognitive process. While cognitive strategies refer to deliberate actions that readers take in their efforts to understand texts, metacognitive strategies emphasize the monitoring and regulative mechanisms that readers consciously use to enhance comprehension.

Finally, a major contribution of reading strategies to fluent reading is their increasing automaticity as a reader becomes more proficient (Anderson,

2009; Block & Pressley, 2007; Sinata, Brown and Reynolds, 2002). The overall developmental goal to routinize strategic processing still allows a learner to reflect consciously on a strategy when asked to do so, or when being taught the strategy. However, the real goal for comprehension strategies is the use of effective strategies without continuously needing to move to a level of conscious problem-solving.

3. STRATEGY TRAINING

Strategy training is defined as the explicit teaching of how, when, and why students should employ language-learning strategies to enhance their efforts at reading language program goals (Cohen, 1998; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). Since the 1970s, researchers have addressed the need for strategy training in response to the lack of students' awareness about the cognitive tools and strategies available to them. For example, Dansereau (1978) reports that a large proportion of the participants in his study, including proficient college-level students, have little knowledge of alternative learning techniques. This lack of awareness is likely to limit the learners' ability to develop new strategies when encountering new learning contexts.

Willing (1987) and Vogely (1995) echo Dansereau's view. Willing (1987) attributes students' learning problems particularly to the use of inadequate or inappropriate learning strategies, in addition to other learning factors. Oxford (2001) also cites growing evidence that strategy instruction can be valuable to many language learners.

Assessing the need for strategy training, Cohen points out that "the ultimate goal of strategy training is to empower students by allowing them to take control of the language-learning process" (1998: 70). He thus outlines three major objectives for strategy training: to develop the learners' own individualized strategy systems, to promote the learner's autonomy, self-direction, and self-evaluation, and to encourage learners to take more responsibility for their own language learning. Since these objectives pay more attention to the process than to the end product of learning, foreign and second language educators need effective, process-oriented, qualitative measures for examining the success of strategy training.

4. JUSTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In order to perform the task and process the new input in language classroom, learners make use of different mechanisms and language learning strategies. Among good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the language learning process there is language learning of different types because it gives us valuable clues about how students assess the situation, as well as how they plan and select appropriate skills in a better way. For example, cognitive strategies play a problem-solving role by linking previous information with new one. Socio-affective strategies are useful as far as the development of communicative competence is concerned.

According to Lessard-Clouston, language learning strategies give rise to students' development of the communicative competence (1997: 3). Therefore, a language teacher aiming at developing students' communicative competence should be acquainted with these strategies. Furthermore, Oxford states that language learning strategies "are especially important for language learning because they are tools for activities, and self-directed movement, which is essential for developing communicative competence" (1990: 1).

On the other hand, reading strategies indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand (Block, 1986). Research into reading strategies of native speakers has concentrated on describing those strategies involved in understanding. A vast amount of research in first language reading and reading strategies has found that good readers are better at monitoring their comprehension, that they are more aware of the strategies they use, and that they use strategies more flexibly and effectively than poor readers (Garner, 1987; Pressley et al., 1992).

In recent years, a great deal of research in the fields of L1 and ESL has been conducted on reading strategy training. Strategy training comes from the assumption that success in learning mainly depends on appropriate strate-

gy use and that unsuccessful learners can improve their reading by being trained to use effective strategies (Dansereau, 1985; Weinstein and Underwood, 1985). Many studies have shown that reading strategies can be taught to students, and when taught, strategies help improve student's performance in comprehension and recall tests. However, very little data about the suitability and the applicability of English reading skills with regard to training strategies in an EFL and ESL reading classroom context has been collected.

As far as teaching English in EFL and ESL is concerned, it should be mentioned that English instruction devotes to grammar lessons, vocabulary, sentence-level exercises, while the development of communicative competence is totally neglected. Students rarely have exposure to English outside the classroom. Additionally, passing entrance exams is another pressure for learners. Due to the pressure of entrance exams, the attitude of both EFL and ESL students toward learning English is also test-oriented.

All of the aforementioned situations suggest that there is a need for an English reading program that can train students to become effective readers of English in the countries considered as EFL and ESL contexts with respect to teaching or learning English. In the environment of EFL and ESL, researchers propose that the development of strategy training courses in a variety of English programs is required for learners to become efficient.

Hence, it is important to understand the phenomenon specific to the non-proficient EFL and ESL learners and to seek pedagogical remedy to both contexts by adopting the reading strategy and teaching materials intended for the general EFL and ESL learners. The result of this study can be a clue and example for teachers to refine their teaching methodology in English reading courses and to create an optimum language learning environment in order to achieve educational excellence.

Finally, research evidence may not be useful in education if findings are not applied in classroom settings. Even though metacognitive strategies are considered to be of value for adequate text comprehension, classroom teachers often fail to teach this process. While some teachers used these strategies more often, most of the teachers did not consider it necessary to see

that the students were aware of the use of such strategies. Another issue that adds to the peculiarity of this problem is that most teachers are not able to teach these strategies to students because they are not aware of them.

5. CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the findings of research on metacognitive strategies training in both EFL and ESL contexts will shed some light on blurred issues in metacognitive reading strategies training and its impact on enhancing reading comprehension performance. Therefore, the main reason behind writing this short introduction is to call Ikala's reader and authors' attention on the possible topics to be investigated and the proposals to be sent to this journal.

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