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THE EFFECT OF COMBINED STRATEGY INSTRUCTION ON READING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effectiveness of combined strategy instruction on reading comprehension, students' perceptions of combined strategy training in reading instruction, and teachers' perceptions about combined reading strategy instruction and their experiences during strategy instruction. Four upper-intermediate classes (two as control groups and two as experimental groups) participated in the study. The experimental group received four-week long combined strategy instruction while the control group followed the current reading syllabus without strategy instruction. During the four-week study, Chamot and O'Malley's (1994) strategy instruction model, Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), was followed for the most part. Prior to and after the four-week study an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) reading test was given to the students to assess their reading comprehension. Retrospective think-aloud protocols were used after the post-reading test in order to gather evidence on the use of strategies during the post-test. Following the treatment, a questionnaire was administered to the experimental group students in order to explore their perceptions of the strategy instruction program. Finally, the instructors of the experimental classes were interviewed about their experiences during the treatment period. The data analysis showed that the experimental group showed significantly greater improvement on the reading test after the four-week study. Furthermore, the retrospective think-aloud protocols demonstrated that experimental group students employed a broad range of strategies during the post-reading test. The analysis of the questionnaire and interviews revealed that combined strategy instruction had a positive impact on both teachers and students.

KEYWORDS: *Reading Strategies, Top-Down Reading Strategies, Bottom-Up Reading Strategies, Reading Strategy Instruction, Strategic Reader, Scaffolding.*

INTRODUCTION

The era in which we are living has been described as the information age. An important feature of this age is the speed with which information is created, processed, stored or retrieved. This development has made reading an essential skill to acquire wherein readers need to employ strategies to assimilate information. Studies show that reading strategies, which have been defined as plans developed by a reader to assist in comprehending texts (Koda, 2005; Urquhart & Weir, 1998), have a positive influence on reading comprehension (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Therefore, while performing their reading tasks, students should learn to work strategically (Bimmel & Schooten, 2004; Janzen, 2002; Kern, 1989). A study by Block (1992) revealed that the difference between proficient and less proficient learners is that proficient readers make use of a larger variety of strategies and they can determine which strategy to use for different tasks. In order to develop strategic readers, the main goal of strategy instruction should be to employ a wide range of strategies in combination rather than instruction in a single strategy (Anderson, 1999; Bimmel, 2001). This study sets out to explore the effects of combined strategy instruction on students' reading comprehension. It will also examine the beliefs and perceptions of students and teachers about the use of reading strategies. The findings may be of benefit to Our University, School of Foreign Languages in terms of providing new insights for the syllabus.

Reading is a complex system of deriving meaning from a text, which involves skills like inferencing, guessing and prediction. Analysis of the reading process raises awareness of the demands of different texts and the need for strategy use to meet those demands. Three reading models, the bottom-up, top-down and interactive approaches, have been described to explain how reading occurs (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). According to Anderson (1999), the bottom-up process of reading is a piece-by-piece mental decoding of the information in the text. Readers start processing information from the smallest units (e.g., letters, words, sentences), decode them to sound, recognize words, and decode meaning (Carrell, 1998a; Grabe & Stoller, 2002). In contrast to the bottom-up model, in the top-down model the reader's main aim is to comprehend the overall meaning of the text. Readers start with the whole language, such as their background knowledge and their predictions, aiming for the overall comprehension of the text (Anderson, 1999; Grabe & Stoller, 2002). The interactive model was developed by theorists as a result of criticism against the bottom-up and top-down models. The interactive model provides a compound of bottom-up and top-down models (Carrell, 1998b). It emphasizes both what is on the written page and what a reader brings to it. Several studies have shown that proficient readers employ top-down and bottom-up processing simultaneously, whereas less proficient readers depend primarily on bottom-up processing (e.g., Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Carrell, 1998b; Eskey, 1998). Schema theory is important in explaining how prior knowledge contributes in the acquisition of new knowledge. According to the theory, prior knowledge is stored in schema and later it is used to assist the reader to fill gaps in the new knowledge (Carrell, 1984). The crucial role of background knowledge on reading comprehension is highlighted by Anderson (1999) and reading problems related to the lack of schema were emphasized in Carrell's study (1987). Studies conducted with proficient and non-proficient readers revealed that proficient readers are reported to be making more use of their background knowledge and a higher frequency of reading strategies than non-proficient readers (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Janzen, 2002). According to Anderson (1991), reading strategies are conscious actions that learners take to improve their

language learning. Many reading researchers classify reading strategies into two main groups: cognitive and meta-cognitive. The results of a study conducted by Carrell, Pharis and Liberto (1989) show that metacognitive strategy instruction was effective in enhancing reading comprehension. Bimmel (2001) stated that reading comprehension instruction should aim at developing both cognitive and meta-cognitive competence. He further indicated that if students are given only separate reading strategy instruction, they will not be able to achieve reading comprehension successfully. Strategies are related to each other and therefore should be viewed as a process and not a singular isolated action (Anderson, 1999). A study conducted to find out whether poor and good readers make use of different reading strategies showed that good readers use a wider range of strategies and they determine the strategies according to their needs and interests. This suggests that students should have knowledge of a wide variety of reading strategies. Thus, they will be able to decide which strategy meets their learning styles and goals. Bimmel (2001) points out that not every strategy is equally useful and suitable for every student, so students should observe their reading processes and when an obstacle occurs they should be able to shift from one strategy to another while performing their reading tasks. Students must monitor their reading processes and choose reading strategies that are appropriate for them (Carrell et al., 1989; Casanave, 1988). In order to be able to shift from one strategy to another, students should be taught a wide set of strategies. Reading strategies can be taught explicitly by providing guidance on the use of the strategy (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). The teacher names the strategy, and explains how it is used with a specific task. It would be beneficial to instill some rationale for the necessity of strategies in trying to comprehend a text. Bimmel (2001) emphasizes that strategy instruction should provide students with a wide repertoire of strategies and that students should be asked to use strategy combinations which they find to be useful for a particular activity.

Statement of the Problem Researchers continually attempt to understand the factors affecting success in reading comprehension. Studies conducted on reading comprehension have indicated that reading strategy instruction is an effective way of enhancing reading comprehension (e.g., Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Bimmel, 2001; Bimmel & Schooten, 2004; Block, 1992; Goodman, 1998). Within the literature a variety of studies that examined strategy use can be found (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Grellet, 1981; Koda, 2005). As no one strategy can fit the needs of students and as different types of texts require different strategies (Bernhardt, 1998; Eskey, 1998; Janzen, 2002; Masuhara, 2003), a combined set of reading strategies should be given to the students. Thus, students will develop the ability to decide which strategies are appropriate with different text types. Although evidence from empirical research for the effectiveness of reading strategies and combined strategy instruction in L1 exists, there is a lack of research conducted on the effectiveness of combined strategy instruction in the L2 setting (Grabe, 2004). Because the research on combined strategy instruction is limited in L2 settings, information is mainly obtained from the studies conducted on L1 reading. This study intends to investigate the effectiveness of combined reading strategies in the L2 setting. At our University, School of Foreign Languages, students are required to take reading courses in order to be prepared for the academic reading they will encounter in their future university courses. It is crucial for the students to develop reading strategies and techniques which will aid in learning, understanding and retaining concepts. However, in spite of their participation in reading courses, students still

perform badly on reading comprehension activities and their results on reading comprehension tests are unsatisfactory.

The literature would suggest that there is a need to train the students to use reading strategies effectively in order to improve efficiency in reading courses. Reading strategies should be incorporated into the curriculum so that the students will be well equipped to deal with the language demands of their continuing academic study.

The purpose of this study will be to investigate the effectiveness of combined reading strategy instruction and then to explore our University, School of Foreign Languages teachers' and students' perceptions about reading strategies and strategy instruction.

Significance of the Study

Although there has been much research conducted on combined strategy instruction, little research has focused on combined strategy instruction in an L2 setting (e.g., Carrell et al., 1989; Kern, 1989) and none of the research has explored the effects of combined strategy instruction in an EFL setting. The data obtained from this study will provide empirical evidence as to the effects of combined reading strategy instruction in an EFL setting. This study may also contribute to the literature by revealing tutors' and students' perceptions of how combined reading strategies are effective in promoting reading skills. Since the use of combined reading strategies in L2 is not only a local issue, it is hoped that the findings of this study will be of guidance to other educational institutions. This study may provide data for the reconsideration of the approach applied in reading courses at our University. It may provide additional insights on reading skills, and data that will lead to the reconsideration of the curriculum objectives related to reading courses. Moreover, it may assist the school in planning ways to incorporate combined reading strategies into the curriculum. This study also sets out to reveal teachers' perceptions about reading strategies, and determine to what extent they encourage reading strategies.

The results of the study may be valuable for my institution, as it may raise awareness for the teachers in understanding that they have a role in promoting learners' use of reading strategies.

Reading Strategies Research

There is a general agreement that strategy training in reading strategies improves comprehension of readers. Silberstein (1994) emphasizes that in order to promote successful reading teachers should present reading strategies not only at high level English classes but also at beginning proficiency level classes. There are many studies in the literature that have concentrated on reading strategies and their effects on overall reading comprehension. Carrell et al. (1989), for example, examined the effects of meta-cognitive strategy instruction on reading comprehension. Intermediate level ESL students from varied native language backgrounds were the participants in the study. Participants were trained in either semantic mapping or the experience-text-relationship method. In semantic mapping training, students were asked to think of ideas related to the topic. This brainstorming made the students use their prior knowledge. As the students read the text, they altered their semantic maps accordingly. Thus, new information was integrated with prior knowledge. In the experience-text-relation method, the teacher first asked questions and guided the students to activate their background knowledge and make predictions about the text. While reading the text, students stopped at appropriate points to discuss the text and determine whether their predictions were confirmed.

A study by Palincsar & Brown (1984) also provided students with a set of strategies. They taught students four reading strategies: summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting. The study reported that strategy training was effective in enhancing the reading ability of the students. However, this study was conducted with native speakers of English, not in an L2 setting. There has been a gap in the literature about the effects of combined reading strategy instruction in the EFL setting. Therefore, the current study will be a unique one in this respect. By providing EFL readers with a set of specific strategies this study examines the effectiveness of combined strategy instruction in fostering students' reading comprehension.

Finally, when the students finished reading, the teacher guided the students to relate ideas from the text to their own experiences.

Both groups showed enhanced reading comprehension, in comparison to a control group. In other words, the results of this study showed that metacognitive strategy instruction was effective in enhancing reading comprehension.

CONCLUSION

In this research, the background of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, and significance of the problem have been discussed. The next chapter reviews the literature on reading, reading strategies, good reader strategy use, teaching reading strategies, strategic learners, and research on reading strategies. In the third chapter, the research methodology, including the participants, instruments, data collection and data analysis procedures, is presented. In the fourth chapter, data analysis procedures and findings are presented. The fifth chapter is the conclusion chapter which discusses the findings, pedagogical implications, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

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