Strategy Instruction and Reading Comprehension: A Theoretical Review of Integrated Approach to Language Learning.

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Abstract

In the area of language learning and teaching, instructional approaches are witnessing noticeable changes with the advent of strategy research. Over the years, scholars and researchers have engaged in the exploration and identification of strategies that assist in the successful acquisition of a language. One dominant area of research within this field has been reading research and its relationship to strategy instruction. Reading is an important component skill that enables the reader to interpret the meaning of a text. A substantial body of research has been fixated on discerning how readers manage and monitor their learning and what strategies they employ to enhance their reading performance The purpose of this paper is to document different reading strategies and practices that enhance learner proficiency. This paper discusses reading comprehension and its different models that help the reader gain a deeper understanding of the processes that occur during reading tasks. More specifically, this paper explicates the skill of reading with respect to language learning strategies, particularly metacognitive strategies. The role played by different language strategies, such as cognitive, metacognitive, and general strategies has also been discussed in great detail. In addition, this paper also gives suggestions for future research ventures.

Keywords: Reading, Reading Research, Language Learning Strategies, Metacognition.

1. Introduction

The field of reading comprehension, reading research, and reading instruction has been of paramount interest for researchers and educators in the recent years. Researchers have paved the way for various methodological and instructional approaches to teaching reading skills. Comprehension instruction has been advocated primarily through two approaches, namely strategy approach and content approach. The domain of strategy instruction and the employment of strategies for language learning has emerged as an important area of research across disciplines and continues to provide insights on how language learners produce and sustain a verbal and written discourse. With an ever-increasing applicability of strategy instruction to education, it has become imperative to explore and analyze how learners engage with and respond to language learning strategies.

Given the complex nature of reading and comprehension instruction, reading research has attempted to explore newer ways of enhancing reader proficiency and oral outcomes simultaneously identifying the developmental differences among good and poor readers. A common notion that runs throughout the domain of strategy instruction is a learner's degree of self-awareness in the sense that more successful learners take control of their reading, manage their reading process, generate task-relevant

strategies, and implement strategies in an appropriate manner. The evolving and diversifying nature of the field stipulates sustained research to examine the ways in which learners select and use strategies for effective reading skills. Various factors such as "optimising or extending learner choice, focusing on the needs of individual learners, not the interests of a teacher or an institution, and the diffusion of decision-making to learners" (White, 2008, p. 3) have proven integral to strategy instruction.

Reading research and practice have been aimed at ascertaining the fundamental nature of reading, its different processes, and relation of reading vis-à-vis other skills. Prominent reading researchers range from "reading specialists to psycholinguists, from literature researchers to cognitive scientists, and from special educators to generative grammarians" (Alexander & Fox, 2004, p. 56). Years of reading research demonstrates that the approach to the acquisition of reading skills has witnessed a shifting emphasis from the precepts of "Skinnerian behaviourism" (Alexander & Fox, 2004, p. 5), the view of "reading as a natural process" (Alexander & Fox, 2004, p. 10), a tendency towards "cognition-based constructs" (Alexander & Fox, 2004, p.13) with a focus on individualistic learning to the view of reading as "a sociocultural, collaborative experience" (Alexander & Fox, 2004, p.16). Although the philosophical writings of Skinner, Chomsky, Kant, and Vygotsky have provided the guiding principles for reading research in the prior years, it is the notion of reader engagement and Dewey's notion of "experiential learning and interest" (Alexander & Fox, 2004, p. 22) that channels the research in the field of reading skills in the recent years. This view of the active engagement of the learner has further rekindled an interest in the area of strategic processes and training. In response to the engaged view of the learner, the body of literature on learning strategies, particularly reading comprehension strategies has significantly grown with an undeniable emphasis on the effective strategy selection and use. This engaged learner has incorporated both the individualistic and the collective elements.

2. Reading

Reading comprehension is one of the important skills for successful acquisition of a language. It has been defined as a complex, a multi-dimensional skill which is both "perceptual" and "cognitive" (Rumelhart, 2013, p. 719). The skill of reading has historically received somewhat little attention and has often been assumed to be "an individual responsibility- a task conducted outside of class" (Swaffar et al., 1991, p. 117). It was during the late twentieth century that the factors unique to particular social, political, educational groups converged and their unification resulted in the emergence of reading as a recognized field with its evident educational implications. Reading is regarded as an interaction between the reader and the text where different components interact with each other to form and communicate a meaning. A reader attempts to interpret the meaning of a text by taking into account the linguistic as well as social factors. A skilled reader is expected to possess and employ "sensory, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic information" to accomplish a successful explanation of a task (Rumelhart, 2013, p. 719). Reading can be construed as the coordinated performance of a number of processes such as "word encoding, lexical access, assigning semantic roles, and relating the information in a given sentence to previous sentences and previous knowledge" (Rumelhart, 2013, p. 750).

3. Models of Reading Comprehension

The nature and understanding of the process of reading comprehension has undergone evident changes in the traditional classroom settings as well as autonomous settings. Reading theory and research in the field of cognitive sciences, first-language acquisition, and second language learning has led to the development of different models for reading comprehension. These models have assisted educators in getting an informed and extensive understanding of the reading processes by integrating research findings. Their studies have made overt contributions to advancements in instructional practices and approaches. Typically, these models have been classified as a) bottom-up model, b) top-down model, and c) interactive model.

The proponents of bottom-down model place emphasis on the process of textual decoding and view text as "chain of isolated words, each of which is to be deciphered individually" (Martinez-Lage, 1995, p. 70). The process of reading comprehension is text-driven and occurs by focusing on several text-based factors such as word identification, phonemic/graphemic decoding, and syntactic feature recognition. Reading takes place in a linear fashion with each word being decoded at every step. The meaning is deciphered and determined through the structure of a text, its word order, vocabulary and remains static in multiple interpretations. The second model in which reading has been modelled, top-down, takes an opposite stance and emphasizes the reader and his / her role of a creator rather than a translator in the determination of the meaning. "concentrates on what the reader brings to the reading task in terms of world knowledge, experience, interests and expectations" (Gascoigne, 2008, p. 70). The reading process and comprehension is dependent on a reader's interpretation of a text and incorporates factors such as intratextual perception, metacognition, and background knowledge. Every reading varies from reader to reader and generates a different meaning. These top-down variables play a significant role in developing the ability to understand a written text. The integral role that a reader plays in meaning interpretation can be explicated by schema theory. This theory postulates that the "understanding and remembering of events is shaped by expectations or prior knowledge and that these expectations are presented mentally in some sort of schematic fashion" (Ajideh, 2003, p. 4). In other words, these are mental representations that enable the reader to interpret the meaning of a text. However, both the bottom-up and top-down approaches have proven inadequate in explaining the reading process as they have proven unsuccessful in explaining the existing data.

A combination of these two models, i.e., interactive model is different in the sense that the flow of information, unlike the above models is not "unidirectional" and "information is provided simultaneously rather than serially" (Garner, 1987, p. 3). Inherent to the interactive model is an incorporation and interdependency of both the bottom-up and top-down processes for the interpretation of a text. Reading is viewed as an interaction between the reader and the text and readers "comprehend a text when they construct a mental representation for incoming pieces of information" (Swaffar, et al., 1991, p. 22). The reader's prior knowledge and mental processes as well as the textual variables help in the appropriate comprehension of a text. Since this model is a blend of the interactions between bottom-up and top-down approaches, Swaffer et al. (1991, p. 48) groups these interactions under the following headings:

A. **Top-down factors: Reader**
    Reader Background (semantic knowledge)

Reader perspective (reading strategies)

Cultural knowledge

B. Top-down factors: Text

Text schema (topic)

Text structure (organizational pattern of information)

Episodic sequence (scripts or story grammar)

C. Bottom-up factors: Text and Reader

Illustrate detail (micropropositions)

Surface language features of the text in letters, words, and individual sentences

Reader language proficiency.

4. Language Learning Strategies and Reading Skills

Language learning and teaching through strategy instruction has stimulated a step towards learner-oriented settings whereby the learners are given the autonomy and control over their learning preferences. Sustained research into the area of language learning and teaching has encouraged learners to improve their learning ability in order to succeed in learning tasks. Growing concerns about the constricted ability of students to read adequately has led to an extensive exploration of the relationship between reading skills and strategy deployment by several researchers over the years with both novices and skilled readers engaging in a myriad of strategies.

Through observation and interviews, researchers have gained insights into the reading process and identified various strategies employed by the learners for language learning. Typically, three broad categories of strategies have been employed for improvements in reading comprehension: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and general comprehension strategies. Cognitive strategies, referred to as "direct strategies" can either be text-driven, reader-driven, or interactive in nature. Reading strategies that have been identified by numerous researchers through observation and interviews are "skimming, scanning, identifying cognates or word families, guessing, reading for meaning, predicting, questioning, rereading words, sentences or entire passages, activating general or background knowledge, making inferences, following references, separating main ideas from detail, and summarizing" (Barnett, 1989, p. 3; Brantmeier, 2005, p. 5; Gascoigne, 2008, p. 72) which successfully optimised their reading skills. Similarly, successful learners with advance reading skills have been found to engage in different metacognitive strategies as well, for example planning (setting goals, directed attention, activating background knowledge, predicting, organizational planning), monitoring (asking if it makes sense, selectively attend, deduction / induction, personalize / contextualize, taking notes, using imagery, manipulate / act out, self-talk / talking yourself through it, cooperate), problem-solving (inference, substitute, asking questions to clarify, using resources), and evaluating (verifying prediction and guesses, summarizing, checking goals, evaluating oneself, evaluating ones use of strategies) (Chamot, et al., 1999, p. 22-36).

Also, comprehension strategies such as "anticipating content, recognizing text structure, integrating information, questioning information, distinguishing main ideas from detail, monitoring comprehension, correcting behavior, focusing on textual meaning as a whole and reacting to the text"

have been observed to be employed by good readers (Block, 1986, p. 473). Research findings have demonstrated that active and successful readers engaged in a range of global strategies, i.e., cognitive, metacognitive, and compensatory strategies, whereas poor readers were concerned mostly with local strategies which paid attention to individual words rather than the whole text. Thus, research studies aimed at determining the effects of strategy use and practice have concluded that the employment of the afore-mentioned strategies have proved instrumental in boosting the performance and comprehension ability of the learners.

5. Metacognition and Reading

Examining the strategic differences among learners from a metacognitive viewpoint has been a leading paradigm in the recent years in the field of reading research. Reading strategies that have been commonly attributed to successful comprehension of a text by good or skilled readers have been metacognitive strategies whether deployed in an independent setting or a regular classroom. It has been noted that readers with poor comprehension skills seldom engage in strategy use which again is not a strategic and active participation while the more proficient learners actively participate in strategy employment which eventually accounts for their better reading skills. Increasing amount of research on metacognition and reading comprehension has revealed the considerable influence on how students march towards acquiring proficient reading skills and yielded novel insights into the process of reading comprehension. Hacker et al. defines metacognition as "awareness of how they learn, an evaluation of their learning needs, generating strategies to meet these needs and then implementing the strategies (2009, p. 1). The significance of metacognition in successful learning and its ability in examining performance differences among learners has been described extensively. Research studies have revealed that highly proficient readers engage and correlate relatively more with metacognitive strategies as compared to the less proficient readers. The metacognitive processes that the readers engage in include metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive control. Reading researchers and educators have attempted to investigate the knowledge and awareness of a reader's reading process, the ability to monitor or control their comprehension while spontaneously teaching them metacognitive strategies to augment their comprehending skills.

Metacognition helps the reader gain a better understanding of their reading abilities and their weaknesses in comprehending the meaning of a text. Readers have been found to use metacognitive strategies before, during, and after reading. Several descriptive studies, for example, O'Malley and Chamot demonstrate that numerous different metacognitive strategies are used by readers and appear to be important to the advancement of reading comprehension. These are "advance organization, directed attention, selective attention, functional planning, self-management, self-monitoring, and delayed production" (1990, p. 119). With respect to reading skills, there is considerable evidence that shows that the proficient learners tend to exhibit better metacognitive control which plays an integral role in improving learners' reading proficiency (Block, 1986, p. 438). Studies examining developmental differences between good and poor readers also indicated that the combined use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies improves the reading performance of learners and makes them active, strategic readers (Tang and Moore, 1992, p. 320). Another study by Baker and Brown also revealed that good

readers employed multiple metacognitive strategies which assisted them in comprehending the text; also, poor readers tended to focus on reading as a "decoding process, rather than as a meaning-getting process" (1984, p. 358). In addition, poor readers have been found to engage more in local or text-driven approaches contrary to successful readers, who are engaged more in reader-driven or interactive approaches (Gascoigne, 2008, p. 72). Thus, strategy instruction, particularly metacognitive instruction plays a major role in advancing a learner's reading proficiency as these strategies helps the readers to "make intelligent guesses about what might come next in the text [and then] samples only enough of the text to confirm or reject those guesses" (Barnett, 1989, p. 3).

6. Future Implications

Although research on language learning strategies, specifically metacognitive strategies, and the relationship between metacognition and reading comprehension has established the idea that metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive monitoring play a pivotal role in enhancing a reader's reading proficiency, there still remain areas that need to be investigated. Metacognitive strategies need to be integrated with classroom teaching practices in order to produce better reading performances. The effect of strategy instruction needs to be examined when comprehension-specific strategies are embedded into regular classrooms with specific curricula. Readers need to be taught these strategies and teachers need to assist learners in developing their strategy repertoire and probe the effect of strategy training as a distinct course. Research needs to explore different metacognitive and comprehension strategies employed by learners and examine which yield favorable outcomes and in what combinations. Reading research also needs to take into account different social, cultural, linguistic, economic factors that promote or hinder a reader's proficiency. To recapitulate, the appropriate selection and employment of different learning strategies may be extremely valuable for language learners and enhance their language proficiency.

7. Conclusion

This paper explores and elaborates the role of language learning strategies, particularly metacognitive strategies in the improvement of reading performance. What can be understood and gained from the area of reading research is that an active, constructive reader deploys learning strategies and uses them in different combinations to yield better outcomes. The notion of learner autonomy can also be reinforced through the successful use and implementation of different sets of reading strategies. Further, strategy instruction may also prove beneficial for the successful facilitation of a self-regulated and self-direct approach to reading, thereby boosting self-efficacy among learners. An optimal approach for teaching reading skills can be developed by incorporating strategy instruction into regular classroom settings which may assist learners in improving their reading fluency.

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