

Effective Strategies to Improve Reading Comprehension of Expository Passages: Does Reading Proficiency Matter?

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Abstract – Proficient readers exhibit certain qualities and use certain strategies in developing proficiency. Reading strategies are essentials of efficient reading. Students at any educational level need to be instructed and empowered with these effective reading strategies. The present research investigated the type and amount of strategy use by proficient and non-proficient readers. There were 50 tertiary students attending the current research. A strategy-training program was conducted for six weeks, two sessions each week. After the intervention program was accomplished, data was analyzed in order to find out the effectiveness of the program. Results revealed that there was a strong positive relationship between students' reading proficiency and their ability to apply reading strategies. Furthermore, Results revealed a significant difference between proficient and non-proficient readers in applying strategies.

Keywords: reading comprehension, reading strategies, reading proficiency, expository texts

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading strategies are the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read. This process may involve skimming, scanning, guessing, recognizing cognates and word families, reading for meaning, predicting, activating general knowledge, making inferences, following references, and separating main ideas from supporting ideas (Barnett, 1988). Obviously, some strategies may be more useful than others with different types of reading texts and tasks and with different levels of reading abilities. In general terms, learner strategies are the cognitive steps learners use to process second/foreign language input. These cognitive procedures include retrieving and storing new input.

The current explosion of research in second/foreign language reading has begun to focus on readers' strategies. Reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension. Research in second/foreign language reading suggests that learners use a variety of strategies to assist them with the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information. Strategies are defined as learning techniques, behaviors, problem-solving or study skills which make learning more effective and efficient (Oxford & Crookall, 1989). In the context of second language learning, a distinction can be made between strategies that make learning more effective, versus strategies that improve comprehension. The former are generally

referred to as learning strategies in the second/foreign language literature. Comprehension or reading strategies on the other hand, indicate how readers conceive of a task, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand. In short, such strategies are processes used by the learner to enhance reading comprehension and overcome comprehension failures.

Since the early seventies, for the most part, research in this area has concentrated on teaching second language students to use a variety of language strategies in order to read better. These strategies consist of a whole range of strategies including skimming and scanning, contextual guessing, reading for meaning, utilizing background knowledge, recognizing text structure and so forth. Less common; however, have been empirical investigations into reading strategies used by successful and unsuccessful second language learners.

Developing literacy is the main goal of any language arts program at any educational setting. It begins at an early age and becomes a continual life long process. Throughout the process, one can see various levels of reading abilities at any age. These levels can range from illiteracy to proficiency.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have identified certain differences between skilled and less skilled reading behavior. The ability to recognize words varies between skilled and less skilled readers in both L1 and L2 reading. Compared to skilled readers, less skilled readers are slow in “word recognition and generally weak at rapid and automatic syntactic processing because they develop an overt knowledge of grammatical structures” before they achieve proficient reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p. 23). They also struggle in processing more complex ambiguous sentences in particular, due to their limited syntactic knowledge (Chen, 1998, p. 9). Skilled readers seem to have the ability to process sentences in a rapid and involuntary way because of their high reading fluency (Liu & Bever, 2002, p. 221), consciously devoting more time and attention to meaning. In contrast, less skilled readers give too much attention trying to solve the meaning of unfamiliar language forms to give adequate time to higher cognitive predictions (Smith, 1982, p. 23). It has been observed that poor language competence can strictly limit the “development of readers’ abilities in cognitive and metacognitive strategy use”, which seem to affect the less skilled readers’ comprehension (Pang, 2008, p. 4).

Yamashita (2003, p. 274) investigated how skilled and less skilled readers answered a gap-filling (i.e. cloze) test so as to check whether such tests can measure text-level processing ability. Text-level processing is a mental activity which involves the combination of meanings of words to determine the meaning of phrases and sentences. The findings indicate that both skilled and less skilled readers used text-level information more often than other forms of information, but the skilled readers used text-level information more often than the less skilled readers.

Hosenfeld (1977), one of the earliest researchers in L2 reading strategies, attempted to differentiate skilled from less skilled readers. She used think-aloud protocols to assess strategies used by skilled and less skilled readers. Her findings suggest that there are indeed differences between successful and less successful readers. Successful readers stored the meaning of the text in mind, skipped unimportant words, guessed from context the meaning of unknown words, continued if unable to decode words or phrases, had a good self-concept as readers, Less successful readers, on the other hand, translated sentences on a word-for-word basis, rarely skipped words and looked up unfamiliar words in a glossary (Hosenfeld, 1977, pp. 113-116).

Another strategy that differentiates skilled from less skilled readers is background knowledge. Skilled readers apply their background knowledge while reading for better comprehension, while less skilled readers tend to focus on reading as a decoding process (Devine, 1984, p. 99). Compared to skilled readers, less skilled readers do not activate “deeper background knowledge necessary for understanding at sentence-level thematic relation” (Cantor & Engle, 1993, p. 1106) when lexical links are not available in the text. The skilled readers “activate a rich network of knowledge, even when they try to understand anomalous-unassociated sentences” (McNamara, O’Reilly, & de Vega, 2007, p. 242).

Inference making is another strategy that distinguishes skilled from less skilled readers. Skilled readers tend to make inferences that repair conceptual gaps between clauses, sentences and paragraphs (Magliano & Millis, 2003, p. 268). In contrast, less skilled readers tend to disregard gaps and “fail to make the inferences necessary to fill in the gaps” (Oakhill, Yuill, & Donaldson, 1990, p. 407). In other words, skilled readers perform better on inference questions. Yang (2004) reported on a study which investigated the correlation between metacognition, EFL reading comprehension and EFL proficiency using L2 third year Chinese college students. The study findings revealed that skilled readers exhibit more monitoring ability than less skilled readers while reading. In addition, compared to less skilled readers, skilled readers tend to be more responsive to inconsistencies in the text and responded to them appropriately.

In sum, some of the characteristics that distinguish skilled from less skilled readers include: the ability to recognize words quickly and automatically, steady eye movement, (an indication of rapid automatized processing), ability to activate background knowledge, make inferences, and monitor their comprehension. It is necessary to mention here that much of this early research on differences between skilled and weak readers led to strategy instruction research. Researchers wanted to find out what difference it would make if weak readers were taught the kinds of skills good readers showed - hence it opened up space for reading strategy instruction.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

The present research investigated the effectiveness of the reading strategy training on students having different levels of reading proficiency. The following research question was formulated: Do proficient readers demonstrate a better performance in their reading

comprehension performance and their strategy use compared to students with low proficiency level?

IV. METHODOLOGY

The present research was a quantitative research. Quantitative research focuses on measurements of the characteristics displayed by people and events. In the current research, the researcher was interested in the measurement of the students' reading proficiency and their academic reading performance to investigate the relationship between the two variables. Quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design was applied in the present research.

A. Participants

A sample of 50 students at tertiary level was selected. They were between 20-22 years old and mostly female; however, age and gender were not variables of interest in the present research. After the reading proficiency test was administered, students were categorized into two levels of students having high and low reading proficiency. There were 23 low-proficiency students while 27 students were ranked as high proficiency readers.

B. Instruments

The instruments used for the present research were reading proficiency test, reading strategy-use questionnaire, and some expository passages along with some comprehension questions.

1. Reading proficiency test. In addition to expository reading passages that were designed to measure the test takers' academic reading ability in pre- and post-test, there was a standardized reading proficiency test administered at the beginning of the intervention in order to know about the students' level of proficiency while they are manifesting strategy use during and after intervention. The students' academic reading ability was measured through TOEFL, reading comprehension section (complete test 3) from TOEFL preparation Book. A complete reading comprehension section in TOEFL comprises five different reading passages, each of them followed by ten multiple-choice questions (50 MCQs in all) measuring students' reading ability in different genres and structures.

2. Reading strategy questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this study was a 30-item strategy questionnaire developed by Mokhtari and Reichard (in Mokhtari&Reichard, 2002, p.253). This particular strategy questionnaire was used because it has been used in many studies to assess and improve students' strategy use and has proven to be valid and reliable, (the original reliability score was .89). The original questionnaire contains thirty positive items. However, if items are always phrased as positive statements (e.g. *I identify the topic sentence of each paragraph*) then respondents may perceive them as desirable behaviors and respond accordingly. Some of the items in this study were thus rephrased and

expressed in negative statements (e.g. *I consider it a waste of time writing a summary of what I read*), in order to track inconsistency in participants' responses.

C. Procedure

At the beginning of the research, a reading proficiency test was administered to determine the level of reading proficiency for the participants; therefore, the students ranked into two groups of low-achiever and high-achiever in case of their academic reading ability. At the next stage, the researcher let them assess their own reading strategy use through a strategy questionnaire. This strategy use self-assessment was compared to their strategy use in the real context in reading class; therefore, the researcher was able to compare students' estimation about their reading strategy use with their true strategy use in the real context. Then, the researcher trained the students for six weeks and two sessions each week on reading strategies. Type and amount of reading strategies used by the low- and high-achievers were recorded by the researcher for further analysis.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some statistical procedures using SPSS software were applied to analyze the data for the present research. An independent sample t-test was applied to determine the difference in reading comprehension and strategy use by the low- and high-achievers. Then, a Pearson Product-Moment correlation was applied to identify the relationship between students' academic reading proficiency and their strategy use in the reading classes. The results of the analyses are presented in the following Tables.

Table 1: Independent Samples Test

Group	N	t	df	sig.	Mean
High-achiever	27				81.23
Low-achiever	23				69.45
Total	50	3.87	48	.035	
$\alpha=0.05$ 95% confidence interval					

The results of independent sample t-test (Table 1) revealed that mean of the performance by high- and low-achievers are significantly different in applying reading strategies. Mean score for the high-achievers is remarkably higher (Mean=81.23) than that of low-achievers (Mean=69.45). Moreover, the results of the t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the two groups, $t(48)= 3.87$, $p=.035$. Toput it another way,

students who are good readers with higher reading proficiency appeared as magnificent strategy users compared with their peers who are poor readers having low reading proficiency. Reading strategy instruction revealed to be a useful technique for students reading expository passages but high-achievers are always at great advantage in learning and applying those strategies in the real context.

Furthermore, the relationship between reading proficiency and strategy use was investigated through Pearson Product-Moment correlation. Results of the analysis are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlations

Reading proficiency		Strategy use	
Reading proficiency	Pearson correlation	1	.756*
	Sig. (two-tailed)		.000
	N		50
Strategy use	Pearson correlation	.756*	1
	Sig. (two-tailed)	.000	
	N	50	

There was a strong, positive relationship between students' reading proficiency and their strategy use in reading comprehension passages, which was statistically significant ($r = .756, n = 50, p < .05$). There was almost 76% correlation between background knowledge and reading comprehension achievement. It is revealed that the higher the reading proficiency the better strategy users they are.

VI. CONCLUSION

The higher-proficiency learners were found to be better than their low-proficiency peers at learning to use reading strategies in various aspects of the learning process. This supports the conclusion that learners' language proficiency level determines the effectiveness of strategy instruction (Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2006), and reinforces the findings of previous studies (Bruen, 2001; Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Goh, 2002; Green & Oxford, 1995; Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2006; Oxford et al., 2004; Phakiti, 2003b; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Takeuchi, 2003; Wharton, 2000; Zhang & Wu, 2009). For instance, Ikeda and Takeuchi (2006) found that students in the higher proficiency group were better at the first six aspects of the process of learning reading strategies than were those in the lower proficiency group. In studies conducted by Ikeda and Takeuchi (2006), Vandergrift (2003), and Vann and Abraham (1990)

outperformed their less able counterparts in their abilities to use more than one strategy in combination. These researchers recommended explicit instruction of the combined use of strategies in the classroom. The present study also revealed that the higher reading proficiency learners outperformed their lower reading proficiency peers. This may indicate that the learners' level of language proficiency influences the efficacy of instruction, irrespective of which instructional approach is implemented. Monteiro (1992) examined the reading strategy use of L2 readers and found that the better readers used strategies significantly more frequently than did the poor readers.

The findings of the present study is in line with that of Zhang and Wu (2009) whom found that the high-proficiency group outperformed the intermediate- and low-proficiency groups in overall strategy use, demonstrating the most frequent use of the strategies. The authors explained that their good reader subjects differed from their lower-proficiency peers in strategic knowledge. They were better at planning and monitoring their comprehension, and at selecting appropriate strategies. Findings from other studies also indicate that more proficient second-language readers tend to select and apply a greater variety of metacognitive strategies, and also to use them more frequently (Anderson, 1991; Brown, 1978; Markman, 1977). However, Katib (1997) and Oranpattanachai (2004) found that EFL students with poor comprehension skills used strategies more frequently than did students with good comprehension skills. It is possible that the characteristics of good and poor readers vary, depending on a particular context. Katib and Oranpattanachai explained that the poor readers in their studies had less language knowledge than did the good readers, but made a considerable effort to understand the texts in the Think-Aloud protocols. This led to those students apparently using strategies more frequently than the good readers, who had fewer difficulties in comprehending the text. It is possible; however, that the poorer readers simply verbalized their strategy use more than the better readers did, or that they used different types of strategies or that they engaged in more comprehension monitoring because they experienced more problems in trying to understand the text. On the other hand, the poor readers in the present study and Monteiro's (1992) study did not attempt to resolve their problems in reading comprehension. Although the good readers had higher levels of proficiency in reading English than the poor readers did, they still faced reading difficulties and used reading strategies to comprehend the text.

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