



Classroom Implications of Teaching Strategies to Improve Reading

Dinçay Köksal

Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University

Ömer Gökhan Ulum

Adana Science and Technology University

ABSTRACT

Reading is one of the four indispensable skills for EFL learners. It is the most required skill to become proficient for many learners. Having proficiency in reading provides learners with more success in other language learning domains. Reading has to be a dynamic and cogent practice that requires both the reader and text in constructing meaning. Reading strategies suggest how readers perceive a reading activity, what written clues they refer to, how they interpret the text, and what to do when there is no comprehension. Based upon a descriptive phenomenology, which is widely used in social sciences, this study aims at commenting on the implications of teaching strategies to improve reading only after interpreting the experiences of EFL students.

CLASSROOM READING INSTRUCTION

We read for different aims and we change the cognitive processes and knowledge resources that we employ in reading. So, defining one purpose of reading as the sole way to refer to what reading is makes no sense. That's to say, it is practical to mention a number of purposes with common terms like scanning, skimming, reading for general comprehension, reading to grasp meaning, reading to relate data and reading to analyze (Schmitt, 2012). One of the main features of efficient readers is flexibility. They change their reading speed, as well as their manner of reading, depending on the reading material and their reading purpose. In other words, reading flexibly means one's being competent at judging what is required to get out of a script to achieve the reading purpose. Reading can be seen as an active and productive skill that enables learners to learn critically as well. For instance, having an emergency to put out a fire, we pass the technical data about the fire extinguisher and go directly to the part that tells us how to use the fire extinguisher. However, upon making a decision on which extinguisher to purchase, we might read the technical data in detail and only skim the operating instructions. Besides, reading flexibly addresses to how much we have to read to achieve our purpose, which helps us to choose which sections of the text to disregard, which sections to skim for acquiring the core idea, and then which sections to closely study. Ignoring or skipping some parts of a reading text may seem strange for some students, but good reading, particularly the techniques of scanning and skimming, necessitates it. Through scanning we glance briskly over a text either to look for a particular piece of information (eg. a name, a place) or to have a first impression of whether the reading text is appropriate for a given purpose (eg. whether a written source on animals considers a specific mammal). On the other hand, through skimming we glance rapidly over a text to understand its gist, for instance in deciding whether a research article is about our own study (not only to

see its field, which can be found out by scanning) or to be superficially informed about issues which are not much important for us; for instance, newspaper reading refers to skimming (Nuttall, 2005).

The readers of L2 represent all disparity that can be seen in L1 readers (disparity in education, age, motivation, socio-culture, as well as individual cognition). Moreover, L2 readers usually acquire a complex cognitive ability which is in some aspects different from L1 reading. The readers of L2 do not have the same language resources of L1 readers in learning context. For instance, they cannot make the required social and cultural assumptions as L1 readers do when reading in their own language. Furthermore, L2 readers do not have all the background knowledge that is required to support the reading process (Schmitt, 2012).

A number of reading approaches may be listed such as guided reading, shared reading, reading aloud, critical reading and independent reading in education. Among them, guided reading enables teachers to supply students with practical support in literacy learning. Talking about the text before, after, and even during the reading process is seen within this approach. In guided reading activities, the role of teacher is to scaffold literacy learning (Biddulph, 2002). When it comes to independent reading, students decide to read on their own in which they choose the text personally, as well as choosing the time and a place to read. Individual reading activities are done either for getting information or for pleasure: they are not assigned and they don't necessitate a report or a comprehension check (Cullinan, 2000). Taking all the stated dimensions of EFL reading strategies into consideration, this paper both hints on the reading strategies EFL university students utilize, and comments on the related implications of teaching strategies to improve reading.

PRELIMINARY STUDY

In order to remark on the implications of teaching strategies to enhance reading comprehension, the utilized reading strategies were initially detected, and then a commentary approach was loaded into the findings. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were employed in the preliminary study, the instruments of which were: (1) a questionnaire originally structured by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) and redesigned by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), and (2) a semi-structured interview formed by the researchers. 200 EFL students were given a questionnaire while 20 EFL students were interviewed.

The overall results showed that the participants used support strategies more than the other two strategies. Reading aloud, underlining important information and translation were among the most frequently specific strategies. When asked, the participants noted that without using support strategies, they have difficulty processing and comprehending sentences, paragraphs and passages. Thus, it can be interpreted that support strategies enabled the participants to develop a more confident way of understanding the text. One of the most difficult strategies that the learners had was that they could not guess the meaning of the words, collocations, metaphors, metonyms, colligations and idioms even if they knew the literal meaning of the words. Another hard problem for the participants was that they preferred not to perpetuate reading when texts were difficult. In addition, the participants hardly reflected on the difficult sentences or texts that they read. Since these two items entailed problem solving, avoidance behavior was observed. The possible explanation of these problems is that the level of the participants ranged from A2 to B1. None of the participants re-read the text when they thought that text was formidable. In the interview, they reported that difficult texts hindered them from acquiring habits. In the category of global strategies, the participants reported that they had a specific purpose in their minds, which shows that they approached texts a conscious decision. However, there is an opposite relationship

between what they chose and what they found in the texts because the pacing of the texts increased their difficulties. The participants reported that the difficulty of the texts in their main textbooks soared unpredictably. In addition, the strategies used in the classrooms hardly helped them develop their own strategies while reading by themselves. This finding is important because foreign language learners may find it hard to improve their own strategies without learning from in-classroom tasks given and shown by the teachers. Another problem that the participants experienced was that they did not visualize information that they learned from the texts. The possible reason for this is that the participants may not have this experience in their background because Turkish translation of English words may have prevented them from developing visualizing words. Most of the participants stated that they strove to read slowly and carefully in the classrooms. However, when their friends outstripped them in the pacing, they gave up continuing to read the passage and felt frustrated. However, when they were by themselves, they read in their own pacing because they reported that they had more time to check their own understanding. Only half of the participants noted that they used reference materials, generally dictionaries. They also stated that although they desired to translate from English to Turkish, their vocabulary and grammar level seemed to be insufficient for them. The participants opted to go over the text before they started to read the main text carefully because they said that they wanted to be sure whether it was worth reading or not. Thus, based on the findings, it can be said that taking notes, reading slowly and carefully, having a purpose in mind, pre-reading, underlining information and noting the characteristics of the texts are among the most frequently used strategies in favor of the participants, while guessing, translating, re-reading, checking understanding, visualizing information and thinking about the information are among the least used strategies. The participants insistently reported that they did not know how to develop reading strategies because they have never received that kind of training. They also stated that the strategies that they used were habitual in that they developed by themselves.

DISCUSSION

Song (1998) focused on EFL reading strategies utilized within university context. Although her study is based on EFL reading strategies in general, she investigates the use of strategy training for university level EFL students more. This is actually the only dimension that differs from our study. In a similar vein, Ikeda and Takeuchi (2006) suggested the differences in the process of learning reading strategies of EFL learners through portfolios prepared by 10 Japanese college students. Just like our study which revealed the differences and similarities in EFL reading strategies among EFL students, they also hinted on the same issue. Further, Phakiti (2003) diagnosed the foreign language reading strategies of university students by specifically focusing on EFL reading test performance. Moreover, we detected specific EFL reading strategies related to vocabulary usage, just like Hunt and Beglar (2005) who systematically reviewed and criticized second language (L2) reading vocabulary research and proposed suggestions accordingly. Though pinpointing online reading texts, Huang, Chern, and Lin (2009) inspected EFL students' reading strategies and the influences of strategy use on EFL reading comprehension. Similarly, Alsamadani (2008) conducted his PhD study to conceive Saudi college students' perceived use of reading strategies and comprehension levels just like Shang (2010) who also examined the same aspect within Taiwanese context. In brief, we encounter a number of studies investigating the employed EFL reading strategies of learners from diverse contexts (Bensoussan & Laufer, 1984; Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1996; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; Zhang, 2010; Li & Wang 2010; Chen, C. & Chen, L., 2015; Mistar, Zuhairi, & Yanti, 2016), in line with our study which explicitly probes the issue within the Turkish context. Although reading is often emphasized in national exams and EFL curriculum in Turkey, the productive features of

reading have been often ignored because integrated productive tasks have been hardly fostered. However, international exams such as TOEFL and PTE consistently drive learners to think in an integrated and critical way. Learners are often asked to integrate reading with speaking or writing. Turkish EFL teachers should also guide learners to use integrated tasks to develop reading strategies and go beyond what is taken for granted in Turkey.

CONCLUSION

The present article firstly aimed to identify general patterns in students' conceptions on the EFL reading strategies they use while reading, then to comment on the related implications. For the preliminary study, it inquired students' use of three sets of EFL reading strategies — Global Strategies, Support Strategies, and Problem Solving Strategies. The most conspicuous finding was the extensive use of reference materials (e.g. a dictionary) to help learners understand what they read. Overall, the data for Global Strategies suggested that students are aware of the reason why they read. They also evaluate what they know in order to support their cognition of the reading material. Another conspicuous finding is that students slightly approve the use of typographical features. Further, a notable finding is that the students support their reading through utilizing reference materials and translating from English into their native language. However, the analysis unveiled that students hardly read aloud. It was also affirmed that students slow down their reading speed and become more careful when their reading comprehension declines. Moreover, when losing concentration, the students try to move in the text again. The data also revealed that students try to anticipate the meaning of unknown vocabulary from the context. On the other hand, they do not much change their reading speed according to the text type. These questionnaire findings grant a brighter portray of university students' conceptions on their EFL reading strategies in general. Although the students were previously not taught EFL reading strategies, they represented a number of useful reading strategies.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications from the findings of this study imply that teachers and ELT departments should be more concrete while teaching reading strategies. ELT and EFL practitioners should avoid developing dichotomy between receptive and productive nature of skills. Before learners are told to read a text, they should be taught reading strategies. Otherwise, learners tend to give up reading hard texts. In addition, textbooks should increase levels gradually instead of increasing difficulties abruptly because when pacing goes harder, some learners tend to avoid developing new and facilitating strategies. Another issue that needs to be considered is that from the beginning level, learners should be taught how to guess from the text because the participants insistently complained that they could not develop guessing strategies. Although some researchers claim that guessing develops at a later stage in reading, it is possible that guessing can be improved at elementary levels as well. Another strategy that should be developed is that reflection on what is read should be fostered because using only cognitive strategies may be insufficient to develop other related skills in reading because reading is not passive activity. Rather, it is one of the hardest language learning skills that is developed. Therefore, results obtained from cognitive neuroscience should be introduced to ESL and EFL teachers and learners in order to boost efficiency in reading strategies. Unless tangible findings and interdisciplinary studies are taken into consideration, reading may continue to be a serious problem in the field of ELT. Reading lessons should not be seen as a receptive skill but rather its scope should be expanded. In addition, critical reading should be developed so as to help learners improve their problem solving skills.

Dinçay Köksal is a professor of ELT and Applied Linguistics at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart

University. He was also the Dean of the Faculty for years. He taught English at different institutions and supervised several MA and doctoral theses. Dinçay Köksal founded Educational Research Association and coordinated one EU lingua project (EU+I and Redinter). He also organizes several international conferences in education and language teaching in particular annually and biannually. Dinçay Köksal also published many articles in journals and papers presented at international conferences and congresses. He wrote and edited many books on teaching translation and Intercultural Communication. In addition, he translated two books.

Email: koksal.dincay@gmail.com

Ömer Gökhan Ulum has attained his Ph.D. in Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University in 2018. His research interests cover EFL reading, listening, discourse analysis, pragmatics, culture, ideology, marginal groups, and epistemology.

Email: omergokhanulum@gmail.com

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