

Metacognition in the Language Classroom: Students Explore the Impact of Explicit Reading Strategy Instruction

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METACOGNITION IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: STUDENTS EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF EXPLICIT READING STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2007 JALT Conference, a panel of experts was assembled for a question and answer session. In response to one teacher's query about how time should be spent during a reading class, both Rod Ellis and J.D. Brown agreed that students should in fact be reading for the majority of the lesson. This statement prompted a significant amount of discussion among teachers when the Q & A session finished. Several teachers wondered how they could get their students to enjoy reading in English when they did not like reading in their mother tongue. Others complained they could not keep their students awake when they assigned reading to be done during class time. Their comments, as well as those of Ellis and Brown, caused me to reflect on my own reading classes. I did not spend most of the lesson time monitoring my students as they read. Instead, students approached their intensive reading assignments co-operatively; there was more negotiation and discussion than reading.

A similar program is in place in the International Communication (IC) Department at Kanda University. Classes meet twice weekly, once for an intensive reading lesson from a textbook and once for a book discussion on a graded reader. In student surveys, the majority of freshmen in the IC Department report that they enjoy this

course and say they are familiar with the style of the intensive reading lessons from their high school studies. However, although our class text requires students to employ strategies, I could not help but notice that they approach the textbook offerings as most language students do, reading word by word (see Robb & Susser, 1990, for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon in the Japanese context).

The majority of inquiries into ESL / EFL reading demonstrate that efficient readers have a variety of strategies at their disposal, are metacognitively aware of these strategies, and know how to apply them to various text types (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Carrell, 1985; Carrell, 1989; Carrell, 1991; Bernhardt, 1986; Barnett, 1988; Chamot et al, 1989; Anderson, 1991; Block, 1992). Rather than revisit the question of whether or not to teach strategies explicitly, I decided to apply the findings of the previous research to my classroom practice for two reasons. First, IC students are explicitly taught oral communication strategies in the Basic Freshman class, are given clear instruction on how to participate in group work, and are taught strategies for improving pronunciation and learning new vocabulary. Because it seems students benefit from this kind of instruction, I wanted to experiment with offering the same type of explicit teaching in the reading class. Second, I wanted to bring students directly into the research project by giving them the opportunity to become metacognitively aware of their reading process while I collected my data, and to have their voices inform any potential future adjustment I would make to the course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before embarking on this project, several studies were consulted which helped shape the details of this inquiry. First, since the results of most research advocated students' metacognitive awareness of their reading process, it is important to define the term precisely. The construct of metacognition has been well developed over the

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past four decades through the efforts of several prominent researchers and therefore it is difficult to account in detail for all its characterizations (Mokharti & Reichard, 2002). However, a simple definition of metacognition is the awareness of the state of learning which can be shared verbally. The construct is also expanding to include not only the cognitive side of thinking and learning but also its affective and motivational components (Paris & Winograd, 1990).

Second, a clear definition of the term “strategy” was required. The literature includes terms such as “technique” (Stern, 1983), “tactic” (Selinger, 1984), and “move” (Sarig, 1987). Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) also differentiate between micro and macro strategies. Cohen (1996) suggests that all of these terms be referred to as strategies and that a strategy can, by definition, range from a general approach to a specific tactic for language learning. However, regardless of whether the strategy appears on the approach or the tactic end of the continuum, it must be within the conscious focal attention of the learner to be labeled a strategy. If learners are largely unaware of their cognitive behavior, the process of their learning is simply referred to as a “skill”, not a strategy (Cohen, 1996).

After clarifying the meanings of these key terms, the next issue to be addressed was how to best introduce explicit strategy instruction into the reading course and how to encourage students’ metacognitive awareness of these strategies. Carrell (2002) draws upon the work of Flavell (1978) and Paris, Lipson and Wixson (1983) when she divides metacognitive ability into two separate dimensions: cognition, and regulation. The knowledge of cognition is subdivided into the declarative, the procedural, and the conditional. Declarative knowledge refers to being aware of what a strategy is (ie: knowing what scanning is). Procedural knowledge is the ability to perform (ie: knowing how to scan). Conditional knowledge refers to knowing the reason a certain strategy might be used (ie: knowing why you scan).

Knowledge of the strategy of scanning is not complete however without regulation. This refers to one's ability to plan, monitor, test, revise and evaluate strategy use (ie: planning on scanning a text for certain information, checking to see if the scanning is working to accomplish the objective, and, if not, trying another strategy).

Since explicit instruction should direct students to know the what, how and why of strategy use and also aid them in making during-use and post-use adjustments and evaluations, it is helpful to investigate what other teachers are doing in their classrooms to accomplish these same goals. Singhal (2001) probably provides the most comprehensive guidelines for explicit strategy instruction. Included here is a summary of her recommendations because these suggestions informed classroom practices during this study. (1) Teachers must analyze strategies and select those for explicit classroom instruction based on the needs of students. (2) Teachers must model strategy use. (3) Teachers must show that strategies are applicable to a variety of text types and tasks. (4) Strategy instruction must be long term and involve continuous review in order to be effective. (5) Students must have ample opportunity to practice strategy use. (6) Teachers must be prepared to let students teach each other about the strategies that shape their own reading process.

Phakati (2006) also offers specific advice for explicit reading strategy instruction which is based on the work of Winograd and Hare (1998). She recommends a step by step process which includes a complete description of the target strategy, an explanation of why the strategy is important and a demonstration on how to use it, an emphasis on when the strategy can be employed, and instruction for students on how to evaluate their use of the strategy.

While Phakati's (2006) advice is thorough, it may be somewhat teacher centered. In keeping with Singhal's (2001) recommendations, Mokharti and Sheorey (2002) also advocate for students to have the opportunity of discussing and evaluating

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their strategy use in small, co-operative groups. After all, if metacognition requires students to be able to verbalize their reading process, they should have the chance to do so with their peers during class time.

In addition to defining terms and examining successful models of explicit strategy instruction, one final issue central to the project was that of data collection. A brief survey of the previously published literature shows that this is fraught with difficulties. Abraham and Vann (1996) review the various methods which have been employed to gather information from students about their use of learning strategies which include observation, think aloud protocols, interviews, questionnaires, and computer assessment. Since the primary method for gathering data in this project was through use of questionnaires (as recommended by Oxford, 1996), specific focus was put on the problems noted by Abraham and Vann (1996) about this means of getting information. First, do learners really understand what they are being asked and, if so, do they tell the truth or do they provide the answer they think the teacher/researcher wants to hear? Second, how complete and accurate is the picture of the reading process that learners are able to self report?

These two problems are briefly addressed here. In response to the first issue of understanding the questionnaire and telling the truth, every effort was made to follow Cohen's (1996) advice and ask students semantically simple questions. The questions had already been successfully used in a previous study (Roberts Auerbach & Paxton, 1997) and they provided students with some instruction to guide their responses but were not so structured that they framed students' answers entirely. Also, the research project and its goals were disclosed to the students and they responded to questionnaires anonymously. To address the second issue of how accurately individuals can report on their learning, students were provided with a completed sample questionnaire and ample time was given them to fill in their own.

While these precautions do not nullify the challenges of collecting data in this way, they do attempt to address the issues.

METHODOLOGY

Two freshmen IC Reading classes with a combined total of 40 students participated in the project. While heavily indebted to the researchers mentioned in the Literature Review for helping structure this study and inform classroom practices during the semester, perhaps the most significant influence on this work was research conducted by Roberts-Auerbach and Paxton (1997). The methodology of this study is based on their work and includes the following.

1. A pre-course questionnaire was completed by students. The purpose of the questionnaire was two fold. First, students' general attitudes and feelings towards reading in Japanese and English were gauged. Second, students' use of strategies and their reading skills were probed in three ways: by asking them to explain what they do when they encounter a difficult reading, to respond to yes/no questions about their reading process and provide examples, and finally, a modified think aloud exercise was included in the questionnaire. In this section, the exercise was modeled on a sample text. Then, students were given a different text and asked to note down as much as they could about their reading process as they read.

This type of questionnaire was used at the beginning of the course because although it was observed many students were reading word by word and relying heavily on the dictionary, it cannot be assumed that students were coming to the class without any knowledge of reading strategies, particularly because Kanda students tend to have varied language learning backgrounds.

2. Students were explicitly taught eight strategies, one per week. Following each strategy lesson, students were required to practice using that strategy while

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completing an intensive reading from the textbook and then to review and assess the strategy by filling in a logbook. In the logbook, they recorded the name of the strategy, how to use it, when and why the strategy might be used and what the effect of using the strategy was on their reading. Students were encouraged to modify the strategy to best suit their learning styles and the task. They were also permitted to add to and revise the information in their logbooks during the course as they gradually gained more experience using the various strategies. Students were given time to discuss the contents of their logbooks and these were also collected periodically so that both positive and negative assessments of strategies could be printed out and shared with the class.

It is important to note here that although students were given an intensive reading from the textbook to practice each new strategy learned in class, every attempt was made to encourage students to apply their strategic reading to the extensive reading assignments completed outside the classroom. This was done in two ways. First, specific readers were not assigned to groups of students as is normally done because I wanted them to go to the library / SALC and practice surveying the books (looking at the title and subtitle, the table of contents, the index and glossary, and the blurb on the back) and choosing a book that was both interesting and level appropriate for them. Second, instead of requiring students to complete the same book report each week (the standard curriculum), alternative reports were assigned which aimed at getting students to engage with macro reading strategies covered in class such as “Identifying the Author’s Purpose” and “Reacting to the Reading.”

3. Mid-semester, students were given an assignment which was not graded. They were required to look at a text, choose three strategies to employ while reading, justify their choices, and then report on how their choices affected their reading. This assignment was collected as data.

4. At the end of the course, students were requested to fill in the same questionnaire that they had completed on the first day. These post-semester questionnaires were then matched with the pre-semester questionnaires according to a random number on them (not student names) so that a pre and post course comparison could be made regarding attitudes towards reading as well as strategy use.

FINDINGS

The pre-course questionnaire revealed a significant amount about students' attitudes towards reading and some of the strategies they already had at their disposal. Because there is not space here for a detailed account of student responses, the most salient points that appeared across the data will be the focus. First, out of 40 students, seven reported they did not enjoy reading in Japanese. Those same students said they did not like reading in English either. Second, the remaining 33 students said they enjoyed reading in Japanese and listed a wide variety of material they were interested in which included internet websites, manga (graphic novels), newspapers, novels, essays, and non-fiction books on various topics. Those same students reported that they also liked reading in English but they identified several problems reading in their L2. These issues included frustration when facing unknown words, a lack of sufficient opportunity or experience, and an overwhelming feeling that they wanted to give up when they encountered difficult texts.

When asked to give advice about reading, students who reported that they disliked reading seemed to have trouble giving advice. Other students who reported that they enjoyed reading in English also had trouble giving advice or gave very general advice. However, some student responses revealed awareness of both cognitive and affective strategies. A few students highlighted the importance of having sufficient background knowledge to aid comprehension. For example, some suggested reading

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books in English which they had already read in Japanese or watching films based on books and then reading the book itself. Students also recommended different methods of dealing with unknown vocabulary based on their own personal learning styles. They knew of various ways of monitoring their comprehension and suggested focusing on the “who, what, where, when and why” of the reading. They also recommended re-reading difficult passages as many times as necessary. In terms of affective strategies, students wrote about the importance of choosing reading material that they were intrinsically motivated to read and that was at the appropriate level. They also stressed the importance of being relaxed while reading.

The modified “think aloud” exercise, during which students were required to read an unseen passage and note down as much as they could about their reading process, revealed a few more strategies that students were already using. Some students took notes in the margin to help them focus, others summarized the author’s main points at the bottom of the page, and a few students responded to the author as they read, questioning his line of reasoning or stating whether or not they agreed or disagreed with his claims.

During the course, the strategy logbooks revealed that a more conscious awareness of strategies was developing in the students, as was their awareness of their learning styles and their ability to modify strategies accordingly. Interestingly, although the logbooks were not submitted anonymously and were collected at several points throughout the semester, students did not hesitate to report on how they would change the strategies to best suit their purposes, nor did they refrain from criticizing some of the strategies candidly. For example, one student noted the following in her logbook, “The strategy of guessing word meaning is not good because there are some words I can’t guess and sometimes trying to guess takes much time and I have wrong guess. I like dictionary because with dictionary I feel sure.” Another student

wrote about the effect note-taking had on her reading and made the following assessment of how to apply the strategy to different text types, “As I read I took some notes and I could see the article’s construction more easier. I can also see main points clearly. If article is written about academic subject I would use this strategy again. But, I would not use it for graded readers because it is not useful for stories and it takes much time.”

Despite some constructive criticism of strategies, most students reported that they believed the majority of strategies did in fact support them in becoming more efficient readers. However, I felt that students had not been given enough opportunity to develop their critical reading ability during the course and thought their reading process was in danger of becoming too mechanical. Therefore, the final two macro strategies introduced were “Reacting to the Reading” and “Identifying the Author’s Purpose”. Student response to these strategies was overwhelmingly positive and most students found these strategies easily applicable to both intensive and extensive reading. The following excerpts from the logbooks highlight this. In response to “Reacting to the Reading”, one student wrote, “After I read each paragraph, I ask myself questions about what the author is saying and I think my own opinion about the paragraph. I did criticize reading. This way, I can think about the paragraph more deeper. Sometimes, I don’t think about content and I only read the grammar and words of the sentence but when I use this strategy I must think deeply and I enjoy reading.” After practicing the strategy of “Identifying the Author’s Purpose”, another student noted, “When reading, I think about the author’s purpose to write the passage. For example, does he want to make me think something? It is useful to distinguish author’s purpose. A book is not just information, it is author’s opinion.”

The mid-semester assignment required students to choose three strategies, justify

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their choices, apply them to a reading, and assess the results. This assignment was collected as data and appeared to corroborate what students had reported in their logbooks about how a strategic approach was helping them become more efficient readers. They also seemed to be becoming more metacognitively aware of their reading process. The following excerpts from the assignment illustrate this. One student wrote, “I choose “Surveying and Predicting” because looking at pictures, titles and subtitles helps me to understand the story a little bit more. I also do “schema activation” because if I think about what I already know I can read better. I also choose “Main Ideas” because when I read topic sentences I know main point. Then details are easier to understand.” After reading the passage, the student made the following assessment about her strategy choices which indicates both an ability to analyze the effects of strategic reading and an ability to change course mid-reading in response to unexpected difficulty. “By surveying and predicting, I guessed what the story is about. From the picture, I could know it was about finding love on the internet and I know something about this topic from newspaper and TV in Japan. But, I couldn’t think deeply because I didn’t know meaning of title, “Cybercourtship”. I think this is important word but I cannot guess meaning so I decide to look in dictionary. This word is not in dictionary. So I look at topic sentences for main idea. It was helpful. Although I didn’t read the whole story, I could understand main point.”

Another student’s work indicated similar metacognitive awareness of strategic reading and an ability to assess how her reading aided or impeded her comprehension of the text. After justifying her three strategy choices, this student noted, “I thought these three strategies are the most good because first, I saw the picture and I could guess that this story is talked about love and PC. However, I didn’t know the word of title so predicting contents from title didn’t work well. But it’s okay because I

could find main idea from first sentences of each paragraph. These sentences include important things. However, this time, “Guessing Vocabulary in Context” didn’t work. I have too many unknown words. Only some I could guess but not very well. Others I passed.”

On the last day of the semester, the questionnaires that students had completed on the first day of the course were returned to them. Students had the opportunity of looking over what they had written and were then requested to fill in a second questionnaire. On this questionnaire, students were asked if their attitude towards reading in English had changed in any way now that they had studied several strategies and applied them to intensive and extensive reading assignments. Students were also asked to provide advice on reading, answer yes/no questions about strategy use, and do a second, modified “think aloud” reading. The data collected from these second questionnaires provided a wealth of information about how students had developed through the semester.

In analyzing the data, four points stood out. First, some students who reported that they disliked reading in English experienced a shift in attitude. One student wrote about how strategies helped him to read more easily and thus changed his way of thinking about reading in English. He said, “I also had read English books before I came to here but I didn’t like it because I didn’t know how to read. In this university I learned some strategies. It’s useful for me to read English books and I think I can read them more easily than before because of it.” Another student shared that both cognitive and affective strategies had changed her feelings towards reading, “...I didn’t like reading neither in Japanese nor in English. But now I think I like it. I know which strategies are useful when I read academic books, or novels. I used to try to read every word in the book. That made me spend a lot of time to finish a book. Then I felt bored! Now I’m not bored because I can choose the books I like

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and I know how to read.” A third student wrote about the effects of micro and macro strategies on her enjoyment of reading. “I had tried before to read English books but they were difficult so I didn’t like it. But now I learned that I don’t need to look up every unknown words in dictionary. This helps me read more smoothly. Also, after I read a story in English, I can imagine what the author wants to tell or what I think about the story. This makes reading interesting.”

The second point found in the data was that student use of strategies was becoming automatic, or shifting from a strategy to a skill. One student commented that, “Most of the time, I thought about strategies and how to use them because I needed a lot of preparation before reading English book and textbook. And I needed to do a lot of things while reading. But now, I can do these things not thinking too much. Reading English is not hard like before and I became confidence that I can read.” Another student wrote, “I think about my reading in Japanese and I see that I already do many things that we learned about in this course. Now I can do these things easily and I don’t think them. I only think them when there is a very difficult reading and then I think, what can I do? I could know many different ways of approaching to reading.”

The third point that stood out in the data was the fact that some students felt burned out by the constant cycle of learning strategies, practicing using them, and reflecting on the effects. One student reported the following. “At first, I like reading very much because reading English book is new to me. But now each week we have to learning strategy and reading book so reading is like work. We must thinking about so many strategies and what is author saying and we must read book fast. Therefore, I cannot enjoy reading often.”

The final point picked up from the data is some students found that most of the strategies we studied were more suited to academic reading and did not help them

with their extensive reading. One student said she felt well equipped to read the textbook but stated she, “found another problem about reading in English. When I read textbook, I can find main ideas because structure is clear. But, when I read a story, even if words are easy, sometimes it’s hard to understand meaning because structure is different and style is different. Even if I use strategies, I can’t solve this problem. In that point, I feel I don’t want to read.”

DISCUSSION

As a result of conducting this project, two possibilities for curriculum adjustment arose in response to the data collected from students. First, the comments of this last student prompted me to think about the extensive reading program we have in place which represents half of the freshman IC Reading curriculum. Essentially, we require students to read one level 3 or level 4 graded reader per week and write a report on it which is then discussed during class time. Students are prepared for this task during the first three weeks of the course by reading three short stories, one per week, and writing reports on those. Afterwards, students are left without much additional support. It was discovered from the pre-course questionnaires that very few students had ever read a whole book in English and even fewer had the skills which would allow them to do so successfully. Although most students report that they enjoy the graded readers, perhaps their enthusiasm fades during the semester because, in addition to feeling some burn out, they are not as well equipped as they could be for reading such material.

As a result of this issue being raised, it may be worth integrating the reading of one graded reader that we cover together as a class into the extensive reading curriculum. Hopefully, the process of reading and discussing one book together would better prepare students for reading on their own. This possibility has been

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mentioned to the students. Most were enthusiastic about this prospect although some raised the obvious point that it will be difficult to find one reader that is of interest to all students and that is level appropriate. However, the objective of this exercise would not be for all students to necessarily agree on the one book chosen but rather for students to read and finish a book together. Hopefully, this would give students confidence and the tools that may promote a deeper appreciation for all the other extensive material they are expected to read for the rest of the year.

A second possibility is introducing explicit strategy instruction into the intensive reading lessons on a regular basis in future courses. Although conducting this project posed several challenges including the demand on the teacher to develop and effectively deliver a strategy lesson each week and on the students to constantly reflect on their strategy use in their logbooks, I believe that, in the final analysis, the goals of the project were achieved. Students have more reading tools available to them than when they started the course and they are metacognitively aware of their strategic reading process. However, perhaps the way of achieving these objectives could be changed. Since the questionnaires revealed that some students were already using strategies, it might be more helpful for the teacher to choose a battery of target strategies based on those that some students already use and then have students present the strategies to the class in groups, with the support of the teacher in their planning and delivery. In this way, students would have the benefit of thinking deeply about a strategy and teaching it to their class members and a variety of ways of looking at and using a strategy could be explored. In addition, the logbooks could be replaced by a reading journal which is less prescriptive. Students could record their feelings about reading and track their progress in the journal and share their thoughts orally with their classmates to promote further cross-fertilization of ideas on new ways of using strategies.

Although I never asked Ellis to clarify his statement about students spending most of their time in reading class actually reading, I came across the following quote while doing the literature review. “The eventual goal of teaching strategies is to make the strategies become skills and to have them become absorbed into an unconscious reading process” (Ellis in Cohen, 1996). We do not expect our IC freshmen students to speak in class without providing them with detailed instruction and clear guidelines for successful discussions in class. By the same token, we should not expect students to perform in a reading class without the benefit of explicit instruction. Perhaps this is what Ellis meant. Once we have put the necessary tools in their hands, students will be able to spend the majority of class reading.

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