Metacognitive Strategies of Reading among ESL Learners

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Abstract: This article makes an attempt to identify metacognitive strategies of reading among 20 ESL learners enrolled in the Department of English at Aligarh Muslim University. A set of questions was administered to the respondents who participated in this study. These questions basically aimed at looking into the awareness of metacognitive strategies related to reading by these respondents, their assessment as readers, and their knowledge of reading goals and strategies.

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition has been viewed as a complex cognitive skills. Interdisciplinary approaches from cognitive psychology and information processing in computer science have been applied to second language acquisition. These provide a detailed view of second language acquisition and a means for suggesting how language-learning ability can be improved. Language generation in cognitive theory is an active and meaning based product. Studies suggest that language learners employ certain ways to learn a language and are capable of becoming aware of their mental processes, which are their metacognitive knowledge. Flavell (1979), who invented the term ‘metacognition’, defines ‘metacognitive knowledge’ as “consisting primarily of an understanding or perception of the ways in which different factors act and interact to affect the course and outcome of cognitive enterprise” (Goh, 1997:362). Three major factors have been identified by Flavell, which are person, task and strategy. Wenden (1991) elaborated on this to include under ‘person knowledge’ factors like age, aptitude, learning styles. ‘Person knowledge’,
according to Wenden, also includes what learners know about themselves as learners, and the beliefs that they have about what leads to their success or failure in language learning; knowledge that the learners have about the purpose, demands and nature of learning tasks are, therefore, included in ‘task knowledge’. It also includes the knowledge of the procedure that learners have. What learners know about strategies is the ‘strategic knowledge’. In other words, it includes understanding how best to approach learning a language. Anderson (1983) does not make a distinction between learning strategies and cognitive processes but describes how information is stored in memory. He distinguishes between declarative knowledge from the procedural knowledge: declarative knowledge takes the form of abstract propositions whereas procedural knowledge is the ability to apply knowledge of rules to solve a problem. Strategies, therefore, need to be represented as complex skills before they become procedural in nature. The goal of strategy use is ‘to affect the learner’s motivational or affective state or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes or integrates new information’. (Weinstein and Mayer 1986) This may include focusing on new information, monitoring information and organizing information.

2. Learning Strategies

Learning strategies have been differentiated into three categories, which are cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are applicable to tasks like rehearsal, organization, elaboration and inferencing process. Metacognitive strategies involve selective attention, planning for organization and monitoring comprehension. Social and affective strategies involve ideational control over affect and include tasks like cooperation and clarification. Learning strategies are complex procedures, which are applied to various tasks. They may be represented as procedural knowledge acquired through cognitive, associative and autonomous stages of learning. It may be conscious at early stages and later may be performed without the person’s awareness. Rabinowitz and Chi (1987) suggest that strategies must be consciously applied. A person applying unfamiliar strategy to a
demanding task has difficulties in processing which can be anticipated from performing complex tasks. Teaching new strategies with cognitive tasks, therefore, becomes difficult. According to Anderson (1983), the transfer of strategies is based on pattern matching conditions where the learner recognizes similarities between tasks. Writers have commented on the difficulty of strategy training and of furthering strategy transfer. (Derry and Murphy 1980) They make a distinction between detached training where strategies are used independent of the context and embedded training where strategy use is in specific subject area.

3. Reading Strategies and Second Language

Among other issues, Second language research, in fact, focuses on reading strategies. Reading strategies suggest how readers view interaction with written text and how strategies are related to text comprehension. Reading strategies reveal ways in which readers manage to interact with written texts and how strategies are related to text comprehension. Reading strategies encompass skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, critical reading, inferencing and recognizing text structure. In certain studies of descriptive nature, think-aloud has been used to view the difference between reading strategies among successful and unsuccessful reader, Block (1986) suggested that the differences between successful and less successful readers was in the following aspects:

1. Integration,
2. Recognition of aspects of text structure,
3. Use of general knowledge, personal experiences and associations, and
4. Response in extensive vs. reflexive modes. In case of extensive mode readers attempt to deal with the message conveyed by the author, focus on understanding the author’s ideas and do not relate the text to themselves affectively or personally. In case of reflexive mode readers relate the text to themselves affectively and personally, directing their attention
away from the text and focus on their own thoughts and feelings rather than on the information in the text.

Block further divides unsuccessful readers into a hierarchy of integrators and non-integrators where the former integrated information and were aware of text structure, while the latter failed to integrate and tended not to recognize text structure.

First language reading has investigated different aspects of relationship between metacognitive ability and effective reading. Flavell recognizes two dimensions of metacognitive ability, namely, knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition. The former includes the reader’s knowledge about his cognitive resources, i.e. his conceptualization of the reading process: how the reader conceptualizes what he/she is doing in reading, and the latter suggests monitoring between the reader and the reading situations. Both these dimensions basically tantamount to suggesting that if a reader is conscious of what is required in performing effectively, then it is possible to take steps to meet the demands of a reading situation more effectively. On the other hand, if the reader is not conscious of his/her own limitations as a reader or of the complexity of task at hand, then to expect that the reader would take preventive actions to anticipate or recover from problems would not be possible. Second language reader’s conceptualizations about their reading in second language have been investigated by Devine (1984), which suggests that younger and less proficient readers tend to focus on reading as decoding process. Further research has pointed to a problem area where a discrepancy arises on account of the knowledge of strategies.

4. Methodology

In this paper, we attempt to identify metacognitive strategies of reading among ESL learners. These strategies revolved around the assessment of themselves as readers, their knowledge of reading goals and strategies. Difficulty in reading on account of language structure was also examined.
4.1. Subjects

For the purpose of identifying metacognitive strategies, the respondents selected in this study were 20 Indian postgraduate learners specializing in English Language Teaching in the Department of English at Aligarh Muslim University.

4.2. Procedure

The subjects were briefed about the administering the questionnaire on their awareness of metacognitive strategies related to reading. Four metacognitive strategies were administered:

1. Assessment of oneself as a reader, which included a number of questions, related to reading activities.
2. Knowledge of reading goals, which included a number of questions concerning goals of reading.
3. Knowledge of reading strategies. This was further subdivided into advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention.
4. Reading difficulty, which included questions related to difficulty in reading arising out of language structure.

All these reading strategies were then rated on a Likert scale, which had five categories ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The result was analyzed and the differences were noted.

5. Result and Analysis

5.1 In the first category titled “Assessment of oneself as a reader” five questions concerning reading activities were given to the respondents. The first question related to reading speed was whether reading speed in L₂ was better than in L₁. Here 7 students strongly agreed and 5 agreed to this, whereas 6 disagreed and one showed strong disagreement. One respondent remained neutral. Taken together, in this section twelve students agreed as compared to seven who did not agree. These points toward the fact that for the majority the reading speed in L₂ is better than the speed in L₁.
The next question in this category was regarding the use of prior knowledge in text understanding. The answer in the neutral category was just four whereas the next sixteen were divided into agree and strongly agree scales. The use of prior knowledge in text understanding suggests its importance and usefulness.

Leading onto this was the next question regarding a culturally familiar text. The answer showed four students as neutral, two as disagreeing and fourteen in agreement over this. It is obvious from this rating that students find culturally familiar text easier to read.

The next question was how far $L_1$ strategies assisted in $L_2$ reading when faced with $L_2$ text. The answer evoked mixed response. It showed nine students as neutral, two disagreeing and nine agreeing to transference of strategies from $L_1$ to $L_2$.

The last question in this category was how skilled the learners were to anticipate what would be next in which ten marked the category as neutral and ten agreed to this.

5.2 Five questions regarding the “Knowledge of reading goals” were administered. The first question was how far one monitored one’s reading. In this category, five students were neutral while ten agreed and another five strongly agreed to it.

The next question was trying to locate the topic sentence while reading. In this category, three were neutral, eleven agreed, six agreed strongly. This suggests that the majority agreed to locate the topic sentence with no one disagreeing on this aspect.

The third question was the ability of learners to recognize reasons for failure in understanding a text. There was one disagreement, two remained neutral, fourteen agreed and three agreed strongly. This indicates the ability of the learners in recognizing their lacunae in reading. Reading texts fluently is indicative of the skill to master the story grammar of different types of texts.

While reading a text, the question regarding awareness of the ways in which texts differ (e.g. narrative texts, expository texts, etc.) evoked overwhelming neutrality. It clearly showed a response where eleven were neutral, six agreed two showed strong agreement and one disagreed.

The next question was how far one keeps reading hoping for clarification if things are not clear. In this category, ten showed
agreement while another ten showed strong agreement. This is a clear indication of how learners try to overcome their problems by extensive and intensive reading if things are unclear.

5.3 The next section was “Knowledge of reading strategies” which subsumed three categories, which were advance organizers, directed attention and selective attention. In the ‘advance organizer’ category, the first question dealt with skimming the main idea before reading where the result showed six as neutral, two in disagreement and twelve in agreement. Related to this was another question in the same category, which suggested that in reading the reader tries to relate the main idea to other related ideas. In this category, six were neutral, twelve were in agreement and two showed strong agreement. This section strongly indicates agreement for skimming the main idea and relating it to other ideas. It shows learner’s awareness about the importance of skimming the main idea and of relating it to others.

In the section ‘directed attention’ the first question was related to the task as one reads. In this category, four answers were neutral, three respondents showed disagreement and thirteen showed agreement. Another related question was whether in academic reading tasks were attended to as one reads and the response was three showing strong agreements, twelve showing agreement and five remained neutral.

In ‘selective attention’, the last subcategory of “Knowledge of reading strategies”, the first question was whether intersential ties could be established by reading the text. Here six remained neutral, twelve respondents showed agreement and two showed strong agreement. Another question was whether the learner was able to establish connection between the text read and other texts in which eight suggested that they were neutral, ten agreed and two disagreed.

5.4 The last section was related to the categorization of reading difficulties in the following categories (1) inability to guess sounds (2) problem with grammatical structures (3) organization of text (4) inability to deduce meaning. The inability to guess sounds marked strong disagreement 65% as being the cause of hampering readings. In the category of grammatical structures as making reading difficult, eight disagreed, one strongly disagreed, four were neutral
and seven agreed. In the category organization of text as being the
factor responsible for reading difficulty, seven disagreed, eight
were neutral, four showed agreement, and one showed strong
disagreement. With regard to the inability to deduce meaning, four
agreed and three agreed strongly, seven were neutral, five disagreed
and one strongly disagreed. This showed that the most likely reason
for text difficulty was grammatical difficulty, followed by text
organization and inability to guess sounds.

6. Conclusion

This study identified metacognitive strategies of reading among
ESL learners. The result showed that there were certain strong
agreements to the questions raised in “Assessment of oneself as a
reader”. Majority of our respondents pointed out that the reading
speed in L2 is better than in L1. The majority also agreed that prior
knowledge is used in understanding, that it is easier to read a
culturally familiar text, and that they were able to anticipate what
will come next. Regarding monitoring of one’s reading under the
heading “Knowledge of reading goals”, a large section agreed that
they monitored their reading and tried to locate the topic sentence
and could recognize reasons for failure in understanding a portion
of a text. While the respondents displayed neutrality towards their
awareness of the ways in which different texts differ, but when it
came to clarifying difficulties in the reading of a text, majority of
the respondents were able to overcome their difficulties through
indulgence in extensive and intensive reading. In the subsection
‘advance organizers’ as part of the section “Knowledge of reading
strategies”, 52.38 % agreed that they skimmed for the main idea
before reading and 57.14 % agreed that they also they related the
main idea to other related ideas, thus suggesting that there is
learners’ awareness about the importance of skimming the main
idea and of relating it to others. In the subheading ‘directed
attention’ the majority agreed that they attended to tasks of reading
while reading. The subheading ‘selective attention’ suggested that
the majority established intersental ties by reading the text and by
relating it to other texts. The last component of reading difficulty
suggested that difficulty level was on account of grammatical
structures, followed by text organization, inability to guess sounds, and meaning problem.

References


