STRATEGIES INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION: THE SCHEMA THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Reading comprehension receives the special focus in second or foreign language teaching. Besides, as the most important academic language skill, it is greatly highlighted for academic purpose in most English learning settings. This concept paper focuses on the influencing factors in second or foreign language reading comprehension including vocabulary size, syntactic and semantic knowledge and background knowledge. It also discusses reading models consisting of the bottom-up model, the top-down model, and the interactive model of reading as well as the significant role of schemata in reading comprehension. At last, it deals with issues such as the significance of reading strategies, their definitions, classifications plus the importance of strategies instruction in the context of SL/FL teaching.

Index Terms: strategy instruction, schema theory, teaching reading comprehension

1. Introduction

Reading, as the most important academic language skill, receives the special focus in SL/FL teaching. Besides, according to Kim and Anderson (2011, p. 30), "reading is essential for successfully completing all college-level courses. In other words, college students who are more proficient readers are most likely to experience more success in their courses".

The significant role of background knowledge in reading comprehension has also been stressed by some scientists (e.g., Carrell & Eisterhold, 1987). It is stated that a reader's comprehension relies on his ability to connect the information that he gets from the text with his pre-existing background knowledge. That is to say, comprehension is based on the principle that every new input is mapped against some already existing schema and that all aspects of this schema should be compatible with the new input information.

Reading strategies are essential basically for the reason that if a reader can adopt the suitable strategies and can utilize these strategies proficiently, he can increase his reading comprehension. That is why, the significance of research on reading strategies as a way of helping students do well in their reading classes as well as the related tests seems undeniable.

2. Definitions of the Variables

2.1 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is commonly known as an interactive mental process between a reader's linguistic knowledge, knowledge of the world, and knowledge about a given topic (Rahmani & Sadeghi, 2011). In the setting of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it is frequently supposed that reading comprehension is the fundamental way of learning new information and it is the most significant skill required for the students' success.

The term reading goes with various definitions by different people. For instance, Chastain (1988) defines reading as a receptive decoding language process. In the meantime, Nuttall (1996) believes that the view of reading is fundamentally related to meaning, particularly with the transfer of meaning from mind to mind i.e., the transfer of a message from

writer to reader.

In the past several decades, reading scholars have suggested different theories of reading and created several reading process models. By drawing on the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, they have also tried to apply the insights from L1 reading research to L2 (or FL) reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Scholars recommend that a better perception of these models provides a theoretical base for effective strategies instruction. For example, Ruddell and Unrau (2004) stated that teachers can gain numerous advantages from a clear insight of reading process. Firstly, it gives them an explanation of how reading occurs. Secondly, it aids them to distinguish where comprehension failures could take place. Thirdly, it allows them to expand their instructional practice and suggests about intervention strategies that can aid readers at various steps of reading development. Next section deals with an overview of these models as well as the role of background knowledge in comprehension.

2.2 Reading Models

2.2.1 The bottom-up model of reading

The bottom-up model of reading, also named the "data-driven" or "text-driven" model, puts great emphasis on cognitive information and decoding skills (Tsai, 2000). This model conceived reading as a linear process that entailed decoding written symbols into their aural equivalents. Initially, readers discriminate each letter that they encounter in texts, decode those letters to sound, match the written symbols with their aural equivalents, integrate those to form words, and ultimately derive the meaning of the words. Gradually, readers construct an interpretation of the whole text through the repetition of the abovementioned overall procedures, and the assistance of their long-term memory of background knowledge. Each component in this model operates independently of one another and builds upon the antecedent component (Alderson, 2000).

However, the bottom-up theory of reading was not totally accepted because it fails to credit the reader's role in the process of reading. According to Al-Nujaidi (2003), this model overlooks the role of the reader's prior knowledge in reading comprehension. One more problem with the bottom-up model of reading is that it does not explicate how reading process operates. In brief, the bottom-up model of reading was rejected since it failed to recognize the reader as an active participant, and also failed to explain what happened during the reading process.

2.2.2 The top-down model of reading

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the top-down model of reading, also called "concept-driven" or "reader-driven" approach, was proposed by researchers as an alternative(Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2011a). This model considers the important role played by readers' expectations of the contents of the text being processed. Reading in this approach is a process of reconstructing the overall meaning of texts. It underestimates the importance that reading texts themselves typically bear and highlights the significance of what readers themselves bring to the process (Alderson, 2000).

Like bottom-up model, top-down model of reading also faced with criticisms because top-down models suppose that readers would have no decoding difficulties to use the text as a prompt for activating and implementing higher-level comprehension processes (Barnett, 1989).

2.2.3 The interactive model of reading

The interactive model proposes that reading is cognitive and perceptual process in which both bottom-up and top-down information interact with the prior knowledge of the reader (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). According to Wolff (1987), both text-driven processing and reader-driven processing are "interdependent processes" (p. 311). They complement one another and it is difficult to process L2 reading texts on the strength of either bottom-up or top-down approach alone. As Grabe and Stoller (2002) stated, the interactive model of reading, overall, involves dual notions. The former indicates that an interaction takes place between readers and texts. Readers should draw on both what they see in the text and on their prior knowledge in order to construct meaning (Nassaji, 2007). The latter denotes that multiple components interact with one another in the reading process at the same time– from a low-level skill such as word recognition to a high-level skill such as synthesis or evaluation (Koda, 2005).

According to the abovementioned reading models, a skilful reader utilizes his prior knowledge and experiences as well as his linguistic knowledge to perceive the written material. Actually, such a reader not only resorts to his prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge but also makes use of both bottom-up and top-down strategies to comprehend a text.

2.3 Schema Theory

The concept of schema has been defined and used by several authorities. For instance, Cohen, Kiss, and Le Voi (1993, p. 28) explain schemata as "packets of information stored in memory representing general knowledge about objects, situations, events, or actions". Ajideh (2003, p. 4) defines schema as "a hypothetical mental structure for representing generic concepts stored in memory." According to the schema theory, there are three main areas of schemata connected to reading: *linguistic schemata, formal schemata*, and *content schemata* (Li, Wu & Wang, 2007).

3. Reading Strategies in L2 Reading Comprehension

3.1 The significance of Reading Strategies

Reading strategies give emphasis to reading process rather than reading product. That is, they disclose how a reader processes his reading and interacts with the text. For example, they show how a reader approaches a reading activity, which contextual clues he pays attention to, how he comprehends what he reads, and what he does while he fails to comprehend. Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), on the basis of previous studies, asserted that good readers are characterized by an awareness of reading strategies and comprehension monitoring. They said that readers need to use their metacognitive knowledge about reading and utilize conscious and intentional strategies to achieve comprehension of the text. This may mean that only when readers are aware of certain reading strategies can they make use of them on the task. As a result, according to Boardman, Klingner, Boelé and Swanson (2010), "any strategy is only effective if you know what it is, why to use it, how to use it, and when" (p. 206).

Lee (2011) underscored that reading strategies are important simply because if readers are able to adopt the suitable strategies and can utilize these strategies proficiently, they can increase their reading comprehension. Moreover, Paris, Lawton, Turner and Roth (1991) also proposed that teaching students how to process the text strategically has five benefits. They believed that reading strategies enable learners to:

1) elaborate, organize, and evaluate information conveyed in text;

2) coincide with their cognitive development in other areas;

3) take control of their own learning as they acquire a larger repertoire of strategies;

4) foster metacognitive development and motivation; and

5) achieve growth and development in all areas of the curriculum.

3.2 Definitions of Reading Strategies

The word strategy derives from the ancient Greek word *'strategia'* which means steps or acts taken in order to win a war known as military strategy (Wikimedia Foundation Inc, 2015). As indicated below, in the area of reading strategy research, there are two opposing viewpoints of what reading strategies refer to.

One viewpoint suggests that readers employ reading strategies intentionally and consciously. For instance, Erler and Finkbeiner (2007, p. 189) described reading strategies as "intentional actions chosen to facilitate reading at any level of processing". Paris, Lipson and Wixson (1983) also defined reading strategies as intentional and cognitive acts which a reader can do in order to acquire, store, and retrieve new information much better and thus they can be accessed for a conscious use. In contrast, the second notion proposes that readers use reading strategies without a conscious awareness that they are doing so, particularly when the reading is not very difficult (Anderson, 1980). Besides, Liang (1997, p. 20) stated that "it is now recognized that strategy functioning at its best occurs without deliberation".

Perhaps, this argument on intentionality and consciousness can be solved by the distinction between reading strategies and reading skills. Pereira-Laird and Deane (1997) suggested that strategies refer to deliberate and purposeful actions that a reader takes to improve and better the comprehension of what he reads. Carrell Gajdusek and Wise (1998) explained

that strategies are much more like tactics that emphasize the reader's conscious and active participation, real way of doing something to resolve comprehension problem purposely, or the reader's performance while skills may suggest the reader's unconscious actions or only passive abilities.

Baker and Brown (1984) declared that when one reads a text that is not very difficult, the process of reading comprehension is unconscious. On the other hand, the process becomes conscious once he has difficulties comprehending a text. In other words, the reader will take purposeful actions to overcome the comprehension problems. Therefore, a reading skill can turn into a reading strategy when used deliberately and consciously (Paris et al., 1991). Similarly, a reading strategy can "go underground" and become a reading skill (Meng, 2006, p. 19).

Based on the cognitive perspective, reading is basically comprised of mental processes that readers deliberately select to use in doing reading tasks. Reading comprehension strategies are alternatives to mental operations and are used when readers formulate hypotheses and expectations to reconstruct the meaning of a text by integrating different types of schema like linguistic knowledge (bottom-up), and conceptual background knowledge (top-down) such as content-related information, rhetorical awareness or cultural elements (Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2011b).

Thus, according to cognitive theory, there are other two levels of comprehension strategy in addition to linguistic decoding strategies. One set is cognitive strategies that are activated to build a framework of the meaning of the context. These strategies are more overtly associated with individual learning tasks, involving transformation or manipulation between the reader and the text. The second set is metacognitive strategies which are made active to develop awareness of strategy uses like planning for learning, evaluating the reading behavior, and monitoring the reading process and output. Some researchers maintain that these two kinds are dependent and must be utilized together and selectively to reach the comprehension outcome productively (Carrell et al., 1998).

4. Strategies Instruction

The ability that enables individuals to use available resources and language strategies by regulating cognitive processes has been referred to as their *strategic competence* which is a component of communicative language (Phakiti, 2008).Strategic competence puts emphasis on 'compensatory' strategies, that is, strategies used to compensate for or remedy a lack in some language areas. Strategies instruction is important because it can help readers develop a sense of conscious control over strategies that they can employ to carry out a reading task. According to Beckman (2002), the primary goal of strategies instruction is "teaching students about strategies, teaching them how and when to use strategies, helping students identify personally effective strategies, and encouraging students to make strategic behaviors part of their learning schema" (p. 1). Therefore, the instruction must consist of both what strategies to be learned and how, when, where, and why to use those strategies. Besides, teachers should provide students with opportunities to practice so that they will employ the strategies efficiently and automatically.

Beckman (2002) suggested a few steps for reading teachers to follow in order to achieve effective reading strategies instruction:

1. Describe the strategy. Students obtain an understanding of the strategy and its purpose— why it is important, when it can be used, and how to use it.

2. Model its use. The teacher models the strategy, explaining to the students how to perform it.

3. Provide ample assisted practice time. The teacher monitors, provides cues, and gives feedback. Practice results in automaticity so the student does not have to "think" about using the strategy.

4. Promote student self-monitoring and evaluation of personal strategy use. Students will likely use the strategy if they see how it works for them; it will become part of their learning schema.

5. Encourage continued use and generalization of the strategy. Students are encouraged to try the strategy in other learning situations.

5. Conclusion

This study has mostly dealt with the significance of reading, the important role of background knowledge in reading comprehension as well as the roles of teaching reading strategies and various schemata in comprehending a reading text. On the whole, it has been indicated that reading strategies instruction as well as the use of such strategies lead to improvement in reading comprehension. Thus, English reading teachers are recommended to go beyond their traditional roles by providing opportunities for their students to become familiar with and apply such strategies. Teachers should put more emphasis on vocabulary development so that their students could have sufficient vocabulary knowledge to comprehend a text while reading. They should also introduce and explicitly teach all the necessary reading strategies so that students can independently employ them while reading a test. In addition, they should also motivate their students to realize the importance and the benefits of learning such strategies that can be applied in reading situation.

In conclusion, it is hoped that educators would maintain to update and enhance ESL/EFL students' existing competencies and expertise especially in reading area. Further studies that gather valuable information on individuals' differences hold great promise in assisting instructors to pick up the quality of SL/FL teaching and learning in general and reading skill in particular.

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