Second Language (L2) Reading Strategy Instruction:

Its Effects on Comprehension and Word Inferences Ability

Submitted by:

Betty Easterling Adams, Ed. S.

Date:

August 11, 2009

ABSTRACT

Comprehending a second language is a complex process that occurs with a few external signs along the way. Out of recent research has come a growing understanding that comprehension is not just understanding words, sentences, or even texts, but involves building a model within the mind of the comprehender (Hammadou, 1991). This paper aims at emphasizing the importance of using methods of improving learner's ability to comprehend L2 texts.

Second Language Reading Instruction:

Its Effects on Comprehension and Work Inference Ability

There has been a prominent shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the last twenty years with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. In parallel to this new shift of interest, how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information has been the primary concern of the researchers dealing with the area of foreign language learning. This paper provides the background of language learning strategies, gives various definitions and taxonomies of language learning strategies presented by several researchers. It also stresses the importance of language learning strategies for foreign language learning and the teacher's role in strategy training.

What is the background of L2 learning strategies? Research into language learning strategies began in the 1960s. Particularly, developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies (Wiliams & Burden 1997:149). In most of the research on language learning strategies, the primary concern has been on "identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language." (Rubin and Wenden 1987:19). In 1966, Aaron Carton published his study entitled The Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study, which was the first attempt on learner strategies. After Carton, in 1971, Rubin started doing research focusing on the strategies of successful learners and stated that, once identified, such strategies could be made available to less successful learners. Rubin (1975) classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. Wong-Fillmore (1976), Tarone (1977), Naiman et al. (1978), Bialystok (1979), Cohen

and Aphek (1981), Wenden (1982), Chamot and O'Malley (1987), Politzer and McGroarty (1985), Conti and Kolsody (1997), and many others studied strategies used by language learners during the process of foreign language learning.

In the past, comprehension research has been widely influenced by the generative-transformational theory of language, which described comprehension as building meaning from the smallest, simplest sentence-level features. This view predominated for some time despite some evidence to the contrary. For example, in 1932 Bartlett objected to research that used simplified stimuli such as nonsense words to test the unsimplified response of comprehension. He tested subjects recall of a unified text over a period of ten years to show that memory and comprehension were model building process. In this day, however, his work was largely ignored (Hammadou, 1992).

In second language (L2) research background knowledge has proven to play a significant role in comprehension. According to Hammadou, Johnson gave ESL (English as Second Language) a passage on Halloween and demonstrated that cultural familiarity had a greater impact on comprehension than the pre-teaching of vocabulary.

General topic knowledge, not just culturally bound prior knowledge, is significant in L2 comprehension. Hudson's research demonstrates that cueing readers about an upcoming topic with a picture aids comprehension more than teaching vocabulary (Hammadou, 1992).

Advances in L2 reading comprehension as well as the recent formation of *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Reading* had brought attention to the complex array of skills which constitute L2 reading proficiency as well as to issues surrounding the development of reading proficiency (Kern, 1989). According to Kern, a small but increasing number of researchers,

curriculum designers, and teachers are now thinking of ways in which to help L2 readers develop such skills as making and confirming predictions, creating pre-reading expectations, identifying a text macro-structure, and using textual redundancy, context, signaling cues, and background knowledge to enhance comprehension (Kern, 1989). One widely recommended method of improving learner's ability to comprehend L2 texts is explicit instruction in reading comprehension (Kern, 1989).

Reading in any language is cognitively demanding, involving the coordination of attention, perceptual processes, and comprehension processes. Recent research suggests that reading in a second language can place even greater demands on these components, making reading less efficient (Czicko; Favreau; McLaughlin; Oller & Tullius). For examples, while word recognition processes normally operate automatically in L1 Reading (Britton; LaBeie & Samuels) they often require conscious attention in L2 reading (Bruder & Henderson; Edfeldt; Faaborg-Anderson & Edfelt; Oller & Tullius).

What are some foreign or second language (L2) reading strategies? Foreign or second language (L2) learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use -- often consciously -- to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990b). For example, Lazlo seeks out conversation partners. Oke groups words to be learned and then labels each group. Ahmed uses gestures to communicate in the classroom when the words do not come to mind. Mai Qi learns words by breaking them down into their components. Young consciously uses guessing when she reads. Strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement needed for developing L2 communicative ability (O'Malley &

Chamot, 1990). Research has repeatedly shown that the conscious, tailored use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency.

Vocabulary knowledge is the most important component of second language (L2) reading comprehension, even more so than background knowledge and syntax (Laufer, 1997). When learners come upon an unknown word that they cannot infer from context, they can either ignore the word or consult a dictionary. While it is often stated that learners tend to depend on dictionary use excessively, research shows that learners' strategy use varies depending on a number of variables (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Hulstijin, 1993; Zhang, 2001). Second language instructors often have different assumptions as to the effectiveness of using a dictionary while reading. Instructors following traditional grammar-translation methods have tended to focus on decoding text and have encouraged the extensive use of dictionaries. However, current communicative practices in the field focus on strategic reading and inferring the meaning of unknown words from context (Grabe & Stoller, 2004; Knight, 1994; Laufer, 1997), and many teachers discourage the use of dictionaries altogether in the reading classroom (Bensoussan, Sim, & Weiss, 1984).

L2 Learners' Dictionary Use

There are a number of factors that influence learners' dictionary use. Research has shown that most learners do not look up words at random. Hulstijin (1993) found that advanced learners were somewhat less likely to consult a dictionary if the meaning of the unknown word was easily inferred. Moreover, studies have shown that learners tend to look up *relevant words*, defined in these studies as words that were needed to answer comprehension questions (Hulstijin, 1993;

Laufer & Levitzky-Aviad, 2003; Peters, 2007). As will be discussed in the next section, research shows that more proficient learners use a variety of vocabulary strategies, rather than depending exclusively on dictionaries (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Hulstijin, 1993; Zhang, 2001).

As long as the learner's vocabulary is not too limited (Laufer, 1997), explicit instruction may also be useful in order to help learners identify which words are relevant to the main points. First, learners may benefit from instruction on recognizing the organization of reading passages (Carrell, 1985; Jiang & Grabe, 2007). The location of the main points can often be predicted by previewing the organization, but second language reading textbooks rarely mention where to find the main points in news articles, feature stories, and essays. As mentioned in the materials section, the news article and book passage in this study had fairly predictable organization compared to the feature story, but the participants did not look up words in the main points of these two passages any more often.

Recognizing transition words could also help learners understand if a sentence is a main point, supporting detail, or example. The following excerpt from the feature story about Japan and global warming shows how transition words could have been used to distinguish examples from main points:

Second, though it may seem obvious, learners should be made aware that words that are repeated often in a passage tend to be either high-frequency words or words essential to the topic (Hirsh & Nation, 1992). In this study, the words *vat*, *participation*, and *emissions* were used

several times and were key to the main points of the passages on the chocolate factory accident, women's involvement in politics, and global warming, respectively.

Conclusion

Some L2 instructors urge students to use their dictionary as much as possible while others encourage them not to use a dictionary at all. However, though the issue needs to be examined more carefully, research suggests that encouraging selective dictionary use may more efficiently improve L2 learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary. This study defines selective dictionary use as looking up words that are either useful to learn or relevant to the passage's main points or the reading task. In addition, for learners just below the level of the text, dictionaries should be used to enable adequate coverage of the passage (roughly 95–98% of the running words), while other strategies should be used for the remaining words.

Though educators sometimes claim that learners do not use dictionaries efficiently, the findings here suggest that many high-intermediate and advanced learners are often selective when considering whether to look up a word. Nevertheless, a third of the participants in this study were judged to have perhaps used the dictionary link excessively. A quarter of the words looked up in the study were neither essential to the passages' main points nor frequent or useful words, according to corpus research. It could be concluded that some learners might benefit from instruction on selective dictionary use. Learners may need help learning to recognize a passage's main points and evaluating the frequency and usefulness of unknown words (Barnett, 2000).

When teachers (Barnett, 2000) of second language reading recognize that each reader brings to the reading process a unique set of past experiences, emotional and mental processes, level of cognitive development, and interest level in the topic, they also recognize that not all teaching strategies will be effective for all students. When isolating the most effective teaching strategies to use with a group of students, the second language teacher must also consider those reader strategies that are not necessarily related to content schemata. Such reader strategies include the following:

- using titles and illustrations to understand a passage,

- skimming,

- scanning,

- summarizing,

- guessing word meanings,

- becoming aware of the reading process, and

- taking risks. All of these strategies can be targeted for use with foreign language materials.

Another step in effectively teaching students how to read materials written in a second language is helping the individual reader to identify effective reading strategies based on text variables (Barnett, 2000). One important part of this step is alerting the readers to significant aspects of text variables that will affect second language reading. For example, pointing out the differences between a fairy tale and a newspaper article helps the reader to recognize the different text types and to prepare for the uncomplicated sentence structure, high-frequency vocabulary, and, in most cases, happy ending that typically characterize a fairy tale. On the other hand, the same reader would need to prepare very differently to read a newspaper article about

the technicalities involved in negotiating a disarmament treaty. In this case, the vocabulary would be very specialized and the sentence structure more complicated (Barnett, 2000).

"Pre-reading" activities introduce students to a particular text, elicit or provide appropriate background knowledge, and activate necessary schemata. Previewing a text with students should arouse their interest and help them approach the text in a more meaningful and purposeful manner as the discussion compels them to think about the situation or points raised in a text. The pre-reading phase helps students define selection criteria for the central theme of a story or the major argument of an essay. Prereading activities include: discussing author or text type, brainstorming, reviewing familiar stories (students review Cinderella before reading Cendrillon), considering illustrations and titles, skimming and scanning (for structure, main points, and future directions).

"While reading" exercises help students develop reading strategies, improve their control of the second language, and decode problematic text passages. Helping students to employ strategies while reading can be difficult because individual students control and need different strategies. Nevertheless, the teacher can pinpoint valuable strategies, explain which strategies individuals most need to practice, and offer concrete exercises in the form of "guided reading" activity sheets. Such practice exercises might include guessing word meanings by using context clues, word formation clues, or cognate practice; considering syntax and sentence structure by noting the grammatical functions of unknown words, analyzing reference words, and predicting text content; reading for specific pieces of information; and learning to use the dictionary effectively.

"Post reading" exercises first check students' comprehension and then lead students to a deeper analysis of the text, when warranted. Because the goals of most real world reading are not to memorize an author's point of view or to summarize text content, but rather to see into another mind, or to mesh new information into what one already knows, second language reading must go beyond detail-eliciting comprehension drills to help students recognize that different strategies are appropriate with different text types. For example, scanning is an appropriate strategy to use with newspaper advertisements whereas predicting and following text cohesion are effective strategies to use with short stories. By discussing in groups what they have understood, students focus on information they did not comprehend, or did not comprehend correctly. Discussions of this nature can lead the student directly to text analysis as class discussion proceeds from determining facts to exploring deeper ramifications of the texts.

"Follow-up" exercises take students beyond the particular reading text in one of two ways: by transferring reading skills to other texts or by integrating reading skills with other language skills (Phillips, 1985).

Transferable reading strategies are those that readers can assimilate and use with other texts. Exercises that emphasize the transfer of skills include beginning a new text similar to a text for which effective strategies have already been taught, i.e., giving students the front page of a newspaper to read after they have learned to read the table of contents of a journal.

Integrative activities use text language and ideas in second language listening, speaking, and/or writing. Integrative skills exercises include such activities as students reacting to texts with

summaries, new endings, or pastiches; reenacting text; dramatizing interviews based on the text; carefully listening for key words or phrases in authentic video or audio tapes; and creating role-play situations or simulations of cultural experiences.

REFERENCES

Barnett, M.A. (1989). "More than meets the eye. Foreign language reading: Theory and

practice." (Language in Education series No. 73). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall

Regents/Center for Applied Linguistics-ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and

Linguistics.

Bensoussan, M., Sim, D., & Weiss, R. (1984). The effect of dictionary usage on EFL test

performance compared with student and teacher attitudes and expectations. *Reading in a*

Foreign Language, *2*, 262–276.

Bernhardt, E.B. (1986). Reading in the foreign language. In B. H. Wing (Ed.), "Listening,

reading, and writing: Analysis and application." Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference.

Carrell, P. (1985). Facilitating ESL reading by teaching text structure. *TESOL Quarterly*, *19*,

727–752.

Carrell, P.L. (1987). Content and formal schemata in ESL reading. "TESOL Quarterly" 21 (3),

461-481.

Carrell, P.L., Devine, J., & Eskey, D.E. (Eds.). (1988). "Interactive approaches to second

language reading." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. (2004). Reading for academic purposes: Guidelines for the ESL/EFL

teacher. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*

(pp. 187–204). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Gu, Y., & Johnson, R. (1996). Vocabulary learning strategies and language learning outcomes. *Language Learning*, *46*, 643–679.

Hammadou, J. (1991). Interrelationships among Prior Knowledge, Inference, and Language Proficiency in Foreign Language Reading. The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 27-38.

Hirsh, D., & Nation, I. S. P. (1992). What vocabulary size is needed to read unsimplified texts for pleasure? *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *8*, 689–696.

Hosenfeld, C. (1979). Cindy: A learner in today's foreign language classroom. In: W.C. Born, (Ed.), "The foreign language learner in today's classroom environment." Northeast Conference Reports (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 185 834).

Hulstijin, J. H. (1993). When do foreign-language readers look up the meaning of unfamiliar words? The influence of task and learner variables. *The Modern Language Journal*, *77*, 139–147.

Kern, R. (1998). Second Language Reading Strategy Instruction: Its Effects on Comprehension and Word Inference Ability. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Summer, 1989), pp. 135-149.

Laufer, B. (1997). The lexical plight in second language reading: Words you don't know, words

you think you know, and words you can't guess. In J. Coady & T. Huckin (Eds.), *Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition* (pp. 20–34). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Phillips, J.K. (1985, April). "Proficiency-based instruction in reading: A teacher education module. Sample materials--Chinese (Mandarin), English as a second language (beginning and advanced), French, German, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, and Thai." U.S. Department of Education Office of International Studies, #G008402271. Also in, Teaching foreign language reading: A five-step plan. Paper presented at the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, New York, NY, April 25-28, 1985. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 264 732).

Rumelhart, D.E. (1977). "Toward an interactive model of reading." (CHIP Technical Report No. 56). Paper presented at the Attention and Performance VI International Symposium, Stockholm, Sweden, July 1975). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 155 587).

Oxford, R.L. (1990b). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

O'Malley, J.M., & Chamot, A.U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rumelhart, D.E. (1977). "Toward an interactive model of reading." (CHIP Technical Report No.

56). Paper presented at the Attention and Performance VI International Symposium,

Stockholm, Sweden, July 1975). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 155

587).

WILLIAMS, M. and Robert L. BURDEN. 1997. Psychology for Language Teachers: A Social

Constructivist Approach. Cambridge: CUP.

WENDEN, A. and Joan RUBIN. 1987. Learner Strategies in Language Learning. New Jersey:

Prentice Hall.

Zhang, L. J. (2001). Awareness in reading: EFL students' metacognitive knowledge of reading

strategies in an acquisition-poor environment. *Language Awareness*, *10*, 268–88.

- **Interrelationships among Prior Knowledge, Inference, and Language Proficiency in Foreign Language Reading**
- Joann Hammadou