

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

with the special focus on reading strategies.

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1. Introduction

The underlying idea of my research is that if students experience success in learning, they develop confidence in themselves and are willing and motivated to persist in their efforts. As a means to help students to be better and more successful learners, I decided to try to teach them how to learn more effectively, using language learning strategies.

Language learning strategies (henceforth LLS) seem to be especially important for language learning as they can help students to be actively involved in developing their language competence. It can be hypothesized that they not only improve students' proficiency but also their self-confidence. This might be all that is left when everything else is forgotten; this will enable them to learn beyond school.

Though LLS can be applied to all skills, this research concentrated on using these strategies in reading. Why success in reading is a priority in this work has several reasons:

- reading is the most neglected skill both by teachers and course-books;
- reading is integrated with other skills [listening, writing, speaking];
- learning strategies used in reading are transferable to other skills as well;
- reading is the basis for acquiring information in the case of adult students who are basically instrumentally motivated.

2. Review of Literature

There are very few examples in the literature of second or foreign language learners' acquisition of how these strategies can be used for non-native readers.

Wenden and Rubin (Wenden, and Rubin 1987) simply conclude that L2 readers do not read in the same way as native readers because they do not use the same lexical cues for prediction and are thus wholly dependent on the text, reading word for word.

O'Malley and Chamot (O'Malley, and Chamot 1990) suggest that the approach the native reader takes when processing a text may vary in dependence on the context or situation, and is influenced by his prior knowledge and purpose of reading, while non-native reader uses strategies with no coherence with the context or task, or deploys strategies that are not appropriate. Thus the non-native reader tends to employ the same type of strategies as he advances in his proficiency, but he does not try to restructure them and only increases the speed of reading processes. They also claim that the reading task influences the choice of strategies, such as to remembering information versus to following directions, as does the context or situation – e.g. preparing for an exam versus reading for pleasure.

Wenden and Rubin (ibid) define reading similarly; as an interaction between the reader and the text, and point out the importance of reader's background knowledge about the content area of the text. Besides this necessary factor involved in comprehending a written text they identify two other influential factors: ability to recognize the rhetorical structure of the text and the ability to use efficient reading strategies.

They suggest that the structure of a text changes according to its type. This structure is called “schema” after Bartlett and according to Wenden and Rubin (ibid) if learners fail to activate the right schema during reading, it can result in inability to comprehend the author’s message.

Nunan (Nunan 1991) acknowledges the strategies employed by good readers and he claims that good readers, when facing a difficult text, read slowly so that they can pause and consider what they have read, read the text again to make logical connections between its parts and summarize the text. He believes that in this way the reader is able to remember the text better and in more detail. The schema theory is favourably viewed by Nunan (ibid), who says that this previous experience of the experiential world enables readers to make predictions and reconstruct meaning. He states that these schemata are extremely important particularly to second and foreign language learners. (Teaching or instilling these strategies, is of course, another question).

All of the above-mentioned authors are looking into ways learners go about learning something; the skills and strategies they use in order to make sense of the learning and to achieve goals. They try to define the strategies, find some system of their categorization and determine which of them are most effective and can help students be more successful.

O’Malley and Chamot (O’Malley, and Chamot 1990) claim that typical strategies for reading comprehension are:

- cognitive: organization or grouping, inferencing, summarizing, deduction, imagery, transfer, elaboration
- metacognitive: selective attention, planning, monitoring, evaluating
- social/affective: cooperation, questioning for clarification, self-talk.

Wenden and Rubin (ibid) examine the results of several studies of good readers and their reading strategies, and as the most efficient ones they assign predicting and imagery.

Although these authors’ strategy classifications are slightly different as **O’Malley and Chamot** (ibid) offer commonly used strategies, while Wenden and Rubin (ibid) identify strategies by good readers, all of them have the same primary goal: to find ways for more effective reading.

The description of learning strategies for reading includes, in the pre-reading phase identifying the reason for reading and the problem to be solved, planning approaching the problem and resourcing. In the while-reading phase, it is focusing on new information, analyzing and monitoring information during acquisition, organizing and elaborating on new information, taking notes and highlighting key points and summarizing; post-reading phase means evaluating the reading comprehension and task accomplishment and assuring oneself that the learning activity was successfully completed.

Educators and researches are interested in extending the information found in their research and transforming their findings into practical classroom activities. There are several teaching models suggested by various authors but they are all based on a very similar classroom procedures.

Williams and Burden (Williams, and Burden 1997) recommend a teaching model divided into five steps aimed for teachers beginning with assessing the current strategies used by learners, selecting and describing some alternative strategies, modeling them and using them by a process of scaffolding. Teacher’s support in using the new strategies should decrease gradually so that students would become independent.

O’Malley and Chamot (ibid) base the sequence of steps on their own instructional model, the **Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach** (CALLA), which is also divided into five stages: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, expansion activities.

Instruction for strategy training developed by **Wenden** (Wenden 1991) follows a sequence similar to other learning strategies training approaches. Students are first made aware of their own mental processes, then they are provided with a rationale for strategy use and continued practice with strategies for different tasks, and finally the cues to use the strategies are reduced so that students can become autonomous strategy users.

3. Description of the Research

The students in this research are fourteen enrollees in an EFL one-year post-secondary school courses in a private language school in Brno, the Czech Republic, all of them between eighteen and twenty years old. This type of education is supervised by the Ministry of Education, it is a full-time study (20 lessons of English per week).

There is no united curriculum for these courses and each language school produces its own syllabus and decides on the type of course book determined by the only ultimate goal – to prepare students for some kind of language exam according to the students' choice and abilities.

Some of the most frequently used course books are **Headway** (OUP), **Success at First Certificate** (OUP), **Target First Certificate** (Heinemann), **Progress to First Certificate** (CUP), **Language in Use** (CUP), **English Grammar In Use** (CUP).

The students are all at an intermediate level of English proficiency and the level of their competence is approximately equal. They are all of the same language background, Czech language being their mother tongue. Besides their individual or short-time goals, the long-term goal for reading comprehension is clearly set by both educational bodies organizing **Czech State Examinations** and **Cambridge examinations**.

The primary objectives of the research were to identify a range of reading strategies used by EFL students and to determine whether strategy instruction would result in improved reading. I was particularly interested in the effectiveness of strategy instruction with reading tasks in a natural classroom setting. The reading tasks had to be representatives of the types of tasks that students are expected to perform within their EFL studies and later in national or international language exams. When devising reading comprehension exercises and choosing appropriate texts another point had to be taken into consideration. Most reading texts in the **State Exam** and all in **Cambridge exam** are authentic, including literary fiction and non-fiction sources, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, information leaflets, etc.

When selecting texts for reading I tried to find unsimplified material at the right level, and right length, texts that would appeal to the students and would be worth spending time on and would also suit the purpose of the reading lesson.

Three data collection instruments in gathering information on reading strategies of the participants were used. The first that preceded the actual strategy training was a questionnaire with twenty items focusing on participants' reading strategy use. The questions represented cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective strategies as to obtain an overall view of the students. The second data collection instrument – an interview, and the third instrument – think-aloud are commonly used separately, but I combined these two assessment instruments and used them at the beginning of strategy training. The think-aloud interview was conducted with six students chosen randomly who were asked to perform a reading task (a cloze) and to think aloud, describing what they were doing to accomplish the task. After the interview the strategies were labeled and counted and after training the results of the first and the second-final interviews compared.

Comparison of the results of the questionnaire and think-aloud interview indicated that there were significant differences between what reading strategies the students thought they were using and what strategies they actually did use. This discord might be caused by the fact that in answering the questionnaire the students were reporting on their generally used strategies, including reading in their mother tongue, and this fact indicates that most students do not transfer the strategies to reading in foreign language.

The most striking difference occurred in strategy labeled “translating”, which was reported among the least used in questionnaire but, in fact was frequently used in think-aloud interview.

Another factor that influenced strategy use was the task itself. A wider choice of strategies was used in the cloze task; the students included the use of structural clues, semantic clues, morphological clues and background knowledge. By contrast, when they worked on the longer text to answer multiple choice questions, the students were not sure where to look for the information needed, and this made them read word-by-word. This narrowed the range of strategies, fewer guesses of unknown words and inferencing were applied than during the cloze task.

The data were used as the basis for designing the lesson plan of reading lesson for the following month in which introduction, practice, and evaluation/self-evaluation of reading strategies were the three elements focused on. The activities and tasks developed from easy and demonstrative to more complex and demanding.

The first lessons demonstrated what reading strategies can be employed when the meaning of unknown words is sought. I wanted my students to realize from the very beginning that there will always be words in a foreign language text that they will not understand but it should not discourage or prevent them from reading and neither should it make them consult a dictionary whenever an unknown expression appears.

In the very first sessions I tried to make the students aware of several strategies they could employ while guessing, such as inferencing, deduction, elaboration, transfer, imagery, and find out whether these strategies would improve their reading performance.

The students proceeded without any difficulty through the exercises, which were deliberately slightly below their level of proficiency. The aim was to demonstrate that guessing is a quick and easy aid for reading and I also wanted to motivate them for further work on learning strategies.

During the following week the students were given several opportunities to practise and consolidate “finding the meaning of unknown words” and choose from the suggested strategies those that suited them best. Although my role during this training was that of a mediator, my help was asked for less and less as the students were becoming more autonomous. The culminating point was the introduction of a cloze in which the students had to put together all the trained strategies to complete the task successfully and independently.

After the cloze evaluation and feedback with the students I found that their repertoire of reading strategies was enriched and the method of fading explicit directions and cues provided by the teacher proved efficient. Both good and poor learners used a number of strategies, especially cognitive ones, such as elaboration, transfer, inferencing and deduction.

As one of the most difficult reading tasks is to answer multiple-choice questions, as the pre-testing and the interview proved, this type of activity was trained as the final one. The reading strategies for multiple-choice task cover all those already mentioned, but include also previewing, predicting, anticipation, note-taking, summarizing. Top-down procedures were strictly observed during the whole training in order to forestall word-by-word reading and translating, which was found to be the most serious obstacle for reading comprehension in the think-aloud interviews.

Some reading strategies, such as previewing and predicting are applicable on complex texts accompanied by a title and illustrations when reading is not interrupted by missing expressions and readers must take into account the author’s objectives and views, and the overall function of the text.

Before presenting the students with longer texts in which they would have the chance to use multiple kinds of strategies, I decided to let them read shorter extracts with one sole aim: to concentrate not so much on individual words in it, but to approach the text as a complete picture.

In the following reading lessons the students were presented with copied extracts from "Kiss Kiss" by Roald Dahl and I brought the book to class for better demonstration of strategies such as anticipation and previewing. The students were encouraged to find as much information about the book as possible using only the cover, the preface and the table of contents. I urged them to preview what the story "Parson's Pleasure" might be about using the title and illustration. Unexpectedly, this brought to the lesson a new strategy listed in Oxford's diagram under affective strategies – "lowering anxiety". The students' predictions as for what a parson's pleasures could be were fairly unexpected but witty and everybody burst out laughing. Thus, very naturally, the students' anticipation was roused and they were eager to start reading.

During completing the actual task - choosing among options, the **most often used strategies were:**

- directed and selective attention: the students tried to succeed and decided in advance to concentrate and maintain their attention to the task and particularly to the relevant parts of the reading text;
- self-monitoring: the students checked, verified and corrected their guesses and choices;
- self-evaluation: when the task was completed, they evaluated their overall execution of the task, their strategy use;
- imagery: they formed mental pictures of the scene;
- elaboration: they related parts of the task to each other;
- transfer: they used previously acquired linguistic and procedural knowledge to facilitate the task;
- summarization: they made a mental summary of the text while choosing an option;
- questioning: while discussing the choices afterwards;
- self-reinforcement: praising themselves for successful accomplishment of the task.

In the reading lessons that followed the students received a lot of further practice so as to consolidate the use of strategies.

4. Results

Teaching learning strategies through multiple-choice is highly effective as this kind of task demands choosing from a wide range of multiple strategies. To enable students to use not only cognitive and metacognitive strategies, but to incorporate also social and affective strategies, it was advisable to divide the whole task procedure into periods when individual work alternated with group work and the whole procedure was closed in a discussion.

I find this approach to multiple-choice task very valuable not only because in this way the teacher can ensure that everybody works actively struggling with the text, even the weaker students are willing to fight for their chosen options, and this approach also produces a high level of motivation – a factor for any work.

Based on the results of the research it may be presumed that:

- learning strategies are not the preserve of highly intelligent and capable individuals, but can be learned by those who have not discovered them on their own;
- learning strategies for reading used in the first language are usually not transferred to the second language without training;
- learning strategies can be applied to a variety of language tasks in combination of cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies;
- learning strategies can be presented in the same way as any other complex skill and can be stored and retrieved similarly;

- language strategies proceed through declarative stage, in which they are used consciously and may reach the autonomous stage, in which they are used spontaneously;
- language strategies training can be implemented successfully in second language classroom within the syllabus.

5. Conclusion

Having evaluated the results of the research I carried out during my teaching practice for the period of two months, I came to the conclusion that there is a direct parallel between students' success and their motivation.

Another parallel can be drawn between language learning strategies applied for reading and success. As a consequence of using learning strategies suitable for reading, the students' reading comprehension was improved and they coped with various tasks and problems in a more systematic and autonomous way.

The notion that good language learners might be doing something special or different that we could learn from, laid the basis for introducing strategies to my current students.

One of the most important findings of this research was that strategy training brought a new and interesting feature to teaching/learning routine, was enthusiastically accepted by the students and influenced their reading comprehension positively. I would not dare to claim that students' improvement resulted solely from broader strategy use as improvement could be traced in all other skills as well, but the feeling of attainment and success pervaded the reading lessons and the students' approach to learning was positively changed. Moreover, the students themselves underwent a radical change altering from passive learners to active participants.

References

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Resume

Tento výzkumný projekt se zabývá možnostmi, jak zvýšit motivaci studentů učit se cizím jazykům a vychází z předpokladu, že úspěch a dobré výsledky v učení posilují motivaci. Tato hypotéza mě vedla k tomu, že jsem hledala způsob, jak docílit toho, aby se studenti učili efektivněji. Celý výzkum byl tak prováděn na základě přesvědčení, že úspěch v učení přináší s sebou i větší motivaci.

Pojem Language Learning Strategies (strategie používané při učení) ještě u nás v systému výchovy a vzdělávání příliš neznámá a proto cílem mého projektu bylo ověřit užitečnost využívání strategií při učení. Strategické postupy pro učení (dále jen LLS) se zdají být optimálním prostředkem, protože pomáhají studentům aktivně rozvíjet jazykové schopnosti a dovednosti a vedou je k samostatnosti v učení.

Přestože se LLS mohou používat pro všechny dovednosti (čtení, psaní, mluvení), ve svém projektu jsem se zaměřila na strategie vhodné pro čtení.

Otázky, na které se projekt snaží najít odpovědi jsou:

1. Jsou si studenti vědomi toho, že používají strategie během čtení?
2. Jaké strategie používají?
3. Existuje vztah mezi rozsahem používaných strategií a úspěšností studentů?
4. Ovlivnila praktická aplikace strategií pro čtení rozsah a samostatné používání strategií?
5. Mělo zavedení strategií do běžného vyučovacího procesu vliv na motivaci studentů?

V běžných vyučovacích hodinách studentů střední školy byly použity různé metody průzkumu (dotazník, pozorování, pohovory, praktická cvičení) ke zjištění, které strategie studenti již používají; údaje byly shromážděny, statisticky vyhodnoceny a výsledky použity pro zpracování dalšího praktického postupu při aplikování strategií vhodných pro čtení. Ty strategie, které studenti vůbec nepoužívali, byly prakticky předvedeny a se studenty procvičovány. V následném samostatném čtení byli studenti nabádáni používat co nejširší škálu strategií. Tato druhá fáze byla opět vyhodnocena a úspěšnost v porozumění čtenému textu mezi první a druhou fází srovnána.

Výsledky průzkumu naznačují, že pokud studenti používají vhodné strategie, jejich porozumění čtenému textu se do určité míry zlepšilo, studenti se mnohem aktivněji podílejí na vyučovacím procesu a skutečnost, že dosahují lepších výsledků jim umožňuje posílit důvěru ve vlastní schopnosti.