A Comparative Study of Reading Strategies among College Students

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Abstract

Among the four language skills, reading is perhaps the most frequently used one by speakers of English as a foreign language and second language. Contributory metacognitive reading strategies are essential in reading comprehension in that students plan, monitor, regulate and evaluate their reading activities. This study indicates that although good readers make use of significantly more reading strategies than poor readers do, they also use non-contributory strategies. However, it is the poor readers that need more help in reading strategy training. Thus it’s important that teachers integrate reading strategies into students normal reading activities.

Keywords: metacognition    reading strategies    learning difficulties     scanning

1. Introduction

Among the four language skills, the ability to read academic text is considered one of the most important skills that university students of English as a second language and foreign language need to acquire (Levine et al., 2000). To understand and complete the large amount of reading material by means of contributory reading strategies is essential for college students. Unfortunately, many students enter universities unprepared for the reading demands placed upon them. Reading requires reader’s coordination of attention, memory, perceptual and comprehension processes (Kern, 1989). Research has demonstrated that reading comprehension is not just understanding words, sentences, or texts, but involving a complex integration of the reader’s prior knowledge, language proficiency and their metacognitive strategies (Hamadou, 1991). Metacognition refers to knowledge about cognition and self-regulation of cognition (Grabe, 1991). Metacognitive reading strategies fall into two categories: contributory strategies and noncontributory strategies. Contributory metacognitive reading strategies are essential in reading comprehension in that students plan, monitor, regulate and evaluate their reading activities and solve problems. Students who read well are found good users of such strategies. On the contrary, students with LD (learning difficulties) are poor users and what they depend on mostly are strategies to cope with reading tests (Yang & Wire, 1998).

This study tries to identify where the good readers and the poor readers differ exactly in terms of metacognitive reading strategies. The author hopes that the findings have some practical implications in future reading instruction to help the students, especially those with reading and learning difficulties, to improve their reading comprehension and enjoy reading.

2. Purpose

By comparing the reading strategies employed by the top twenty college students and the same number of students with learning and reading difficulties, the author intends to identify:
1. whether the normal achievers and those with LD use completely different strategies.
2. where they differ.

3. Method

The students are from the department of computer science majoring in computer science and information management. They are in the last stage of English study. The selecting criteria: the top twenty students scored more than 32 points (out of a total of 40 points) in five consecutive preliminary tests for CET-4. The last 20 students averaged 26 in the same series of tests. Two questionnaires were administered in the week before the final examination in the fourth semester. The author asked all the students (total 121 students in two classes) to fill in two questionnaires in the last 15 minutes in two separate sessions within one week. The first questionnaire is administered to get an overall picture of the two groups of students concerning reading. It consists of five incomplete statements concerning their reading self-efficacy, causes for poor reading performance, students’ perceived means of improving their reading comprehension, the frequency at which they finish the teacher’s reading assignment and the frequency at which they read materials in English other than textbooks. Questionnaire Two is adapted from Oxford (1995) which consists of six parts, altogether 24 strategies. Each strategy is followed by a five-point Likert scale with ‘one’ representing completely not true and ‘five’ very true of the student. Soranastaporn & Chuedoung reported coefficient alpha reliability of 0.78. Independent Samples T-test was used to identify the differences between the two groups of students.

4. Result and Discussion
Table one
G = top 20 students in reading comprehension tests
B = last 20 students in reading comprehension tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements regarding your reading.</th>
<th>G(percentage)</th>
<th>B(percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Your reading ability is ____________</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. very good</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. good</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. fair</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. poor</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. very poor</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. You are not satisfied with your reading ability</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because ______. (multiple )</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. small vocabulary</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. poor grammar</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. insufficient cultural backgro</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. lack of reading strategies</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. lack of interest</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. The best way to improve reading comprehension is _____ (multiple)
   A. to enlarge vocabulary  90  95
   B. to improve grammar  45  80
   C. to know more of the cultural background knowledge  85  20
   D. to improve reading strategies  40  70
   E. to foster interest in reading  20  80

4. You ______ finish the reading assignment the teacher assigns you.
   A. always  25
   B. often  70  25
   C. sometimes  5  30
   D. seldom  45
   E. never

5. Besides your textbooks, you _______ read in English from other sources.
   A. often  70
   B. occasionally  20  15
   C. seldom  10  85

Table two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Strategies</th>
<th>G</th>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std.</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While reading, you have difficulty concentrating on the material.</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>2.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You generally read everything at the same speed.</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>5.28***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While scanning, you read from the beginning until you find the information you are looking for.</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>2.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You try to find clues.</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>2.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You identify the relevant part of the text and then read it more carefully.</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>2.63*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You take notes while reading.</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>3.45***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You note diagram tree of the passage you read for review.</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>2.99**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The poor readers have a more objective assessment of their reading ability than the good readers. About two-thirds of the good readers rate their reading ability “fair”. They explain that in the test, although they get higher grades, they still have difficulty understanding the text. But somehow they make the right choices. This is probably caused by the uncertainties in reading passages in CET-4 which are both complex in syntactical structures and diverse in content. Regarding the causes for the unsatisfactory reading performance, the good readers list limited vocabulary (90%), limited background knowledge and domain specific knowledge (85%). Six of them mentioned insufficient use of contributory reading strategies. For the poor readers, the most cited causes are: limited vocabulary (95%), poor grammar (85%), lack of interest (75%), insufficient reading strategy use (60%). Only two students cite poor background knowledge also hinders their understanding. The two groups of students reach consensus in attributing their unsatisfactory reading ability to limited vocabulary, but their opinions differ regarding grammar, background knowledge, strategy use and interest. When it comes to the ways to improve reading comprehension, both groups, in accordance with the causes they have listed, think enlarging their vocabulary is vital. Good readers also suggest the teacher introduce more of the cultural background of the west while poor readers insist that grammar knowledge should be enhanced. Besides, poor readers also hope the teacher assigns them more reading materials that appeal to their interest. Regarding the reading strategies, the poor readers are more strategy conscious than the good readers. As it will be demonstrated later in this study, the good readers actually differ with the poor readers in nine out of the 24 reading strategies. Therefore, we may conclude with certainty that the good readers actually may have internalized the strategies so much so that they are no longer aware of it. Finally, as a result of the above-mentioned differences, most of the poor readers, unlike the good readers, fail to finish the reading assignment in time and seldom read outside the textbooks.

Statistical analysis of the results of Questionnaire Two shows that although good readers make use of significantly more reading strategies than poor readers do, they also use non-contributory strategies in actual reading activities. Among the 24 reading strategies, the two groups only differ in nine. They share the rest reading strategies, both contributory and non-contributory.

First of all, the poor readers report that they have more difficulty concentrating on the reading tasks (t =-2.36, p < .05), because they are not motivated to read. The poor readers also have difficulty adjusting their reading speed based on the materials they read (t =-5.28, p <.001). While looking for specific information, the poor readers treat all information with equal attention (t =-2.13, p <.05). Besides, they are not good at identifying clues (t =-2.38, p <.05) while reading. The good readers are better at scanning reading materials than the poor readers (t =-2.63, p <.05). The good readers are more likely than the poor readers to take notes while reading (t =-3.45, p <.001). To better memorize and organize information in expository writing, the good readers also are more likely to draw a diagram than the students at risk (t =-2.99, p <.01).
poor readers are less able to distinguishing between facts and opinions in reading texts ( \( t = 3.89, p < .001 \) ). Finally, the poor readers seldom make predictions based on the given information as they read ( \( t = 3.77, p < .001 \) ).

5. Conclusion

Metacognitive reading strategies help students plan, monitor, and evaluate their reading activities. Theoretically, after more than eight-year’s English study, students should be familiar with efficient reading strategies in English. In fact, college students, even good readers among them, still use some noncontributory reading strategies though they themselves are not conscious of it. When pressed to read, students, especially those poor readers, select ineffective and inefficient strategies with little strategy intent (Saumell et al., 1999). Therefore, it’s important that teachers integrate contributory reading strategies into students’ normal reading activities. To motivate poor readers to sustain effort, teachers should assign them reading materials that appeal to their interest and are appropriate in degree of difficulty. With improved confidence, the poor readers are likely to catch up. Strategy training makes sense for the poor readers only when they are able to read and enjoy reading. As for good readers, teachers should add more background knowledge to the normal teaching besides strategy training. Studies show that explicit reading strategy training facilitates students reading comprehension and reading strategy use.

Although the findings of this study have its practical applications, the author is well aware of its limitations, among which the limited sample number is not the least. Future studies should involve more students majoring in science as well as liberal arts. Whenever time permits, experimental studies should be carried out not to identify the problems only but to strengthen the students’ consciousness of metacognitive reading strategies.

References

Appendix

The questionnaire for metacognitive reading strategies (adapted from Oxford, 1995)

Identifying your problems

1. You start reading an assignment by going to the first paragraph of the first page of the assignment and beginning there.
2. Your mind wanders to other things while you are reading.
3. You don’t pay much attention to footnotes, caption, pictures, graphs, or charts, etc.
4. You generally read everything (newspapers, novels, textbooks, journals) the same way and at the same speed.

Purposes of reading

5. Before start reading any book at any time you, first of all, think about what the purposes of your reading are.
6. Before start reading any book you will survey its title, topic sub topic or pictures to be assure that it is the book you need.
7. You read summary, topic sentence, chapter questions before deciding to read that book.

Reading for main idea

8. You read title and topic sentence.
9. You read subheading and topic.
10. You read title, subheading, and topic sentence.

Reading for specific information

11. You read continuously until you find specific information you need.
12. You try to find clues.
13. You try to find the topic you needed from index.
14. You look through the text as quickly as possible until you reach the relevant part of the text. Then you read that part to get information you want (scanning).

Read in detail

15. You read only the part you are interested in. You do not pay attention to the other essential part.
16. You pay attention to all information.
17. You read the text more than one time in order to understand what is stated or implied.

Note-taking from reading

18. You do not write anything, just keep it in your mind.
20. You note or group the passage you read*.  
21. You note diagram tree of the passage you read for review*.  
22. You can understand or memorize the passage you note*.  

* contributory reading strategies  
^ noncontributory reading strategies  

While you’re reading  

23. You make predictions while reading*.  
24. You try to distinguish facts from opinions*. 