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Journal Article

Integrating reading strategy and phonics instruction to enhance foreign language reading comprehension: A complex approach to a complex phenomenon

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Abstract

This article argues that the skillful integration of reading strategy instruction with phonics instruction is highly useful for the enhancement of foreign language reading comprehension. There is a vast amount of evidence which clearly suggests that reading strategy instruction improves learners' ability to understand foreign language texts. However, some researchers have argued that foreign language learners need a critical amount of lexical and grammatical knowledge to make use of reading strategy instruction; in other words, lower proficiency readers are unable to profit from reading strategy instruction. Yet, a detailed analysis of relevant published and unpublished research indicates that while more proficient readers are able to take full advantage of reading strategy instruction on its own, less skilled readers require an integrated phonics component in order to fully benefit from reading strategy instruction. This conclusion is in line with our current understanding of the complex process of reading which suggests that reading proficiency is the product of linguistic knowledge *and* strategic behaviour.

1. Introduction

Grabe and Stoller (2011) describe the ability to read fluently as an extraordinary, if not miraculous, feat; indeed, reading for comprehension is an incredibly complex activity that requires the efficient coordination of both lower-level processes (i.e., rapid and automatic decoding of words) and higher-level processes (i.e., formation of main ideas). This feat appears even more extraordinary when we consider reading in a second or foreign language (L2) and yet second language reading is an important skill that L2 learners need to achieve success in a variety of educational contexts (Taylor et al., 2006). According to Yapp and colleagues (2021), L2 learners' reading comprehension is facilitated by the strategies they have at their disposal. Although there is little consensus as to the exact definition of *strategies* (Afflerbach et al., 2008; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Grenfell & Macaro, 2007), we might describe reading strategies as 'deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text" (Afflerbach et al., 2008, p. 368). However, as reading strategies are not always acquired easily or naturally,

explicit reading strategy instruction is essential in any reading programme (Pressley & Fingeret, 2007). The goal of reading strategy instruction is the skilled and independent use of strategies which is achieved through a process of explicit description, modelling, and guided practice in the use of one or more reading strategies (Afflerbach et al., 2008). Instruction can also include a metacognitive component which pertains specifically to the strategies involved in planning, monitoring, and evaluating the reading process (Macaro & Erler, 2008). In this paper I will argue that reading strategy instruction, which appropriately integrates a phonics component in the case of less skilled L2 readers, is highly useful for enhancing L2 reading comprehension.

2. Examining the Impact of Strategy Instruction on L2 Reading Comprehension

According to Grabe (2009), not only is the effective use of reading strategies characteristic of the good reader but reading strategies can also be successfully taught to learners; thus, direct and explicit

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strategy instruction should be a central component of L2 reading comprehension development. There is, in fact, a substantial body of empirical research indicating that reading strategy instruction is beneficial for enhancing L2 reading comprehension. In an effort to synthesise the quantitative findings available in the literature, Taylor and colleagues (2006) conducted a meta-analysis which included 23 experimental (i.e., random assignment of subjects to treatment and control groups) and quasi-experimental (i.e., intact classes paired with pre- and post-tests) samples and found that learners who received explicit reading strategy training comprehended L2 texts significantly better than those without such training.

In an examination of which variables might moderate the efficacy of reading strategy instruction, the findings indicated that whether the instruction included metacognitive strategy training (i.e., strategies used for planning, monitoring, or reviewing the reader's interaction with the L2 text) or solely cognitive strategy training (i.e., strategies applied to the language itself in the L2 text) did not lead to any significant differences in L2 comprehension. In addition, no single strategy stood out as particularly effective, instead the findings suggest that a combination of strategies contributes to the efficacy of reading strategy instruction. This finding is line with Pressley and Fingeret (2007) who claim that good readers do not use single strategies, but rather flexibly use a repertoire of strategies before, during and after reading. The results of the meta-analysis also indicated that reading strategy instruction appeared to be effective in studies with adult and adolescent learners, but not with young learners. However, the authors suggest that this finding needs to be interpreted with caution as there were only two samples of young learners, and both demonstrated no improvement in reading comprehension. Regarding L2 proficiency, studies focusing on learners with two or more years of L2 language instruction revealed moderate effect sizes whereas studies focusing on beginner L2 learners resulted in negligible effect sizes. In sum, Taylor and colleagues (2006) suggest that to date there simply had not been enough studies to allow for any strong conclusions as to which factors might affect the efficacy of reading strategy instruction. Chaury (2015) conducted another meta-analysis on 19 samples of reading strategy instruction published after 2006 with the aim of updating the findings of Taylor and colleagues (2006). However, this meta-analysis differed from that of Taylor and colleagues (2006) in that it focused only on L2 learners of English. Nonetheless, the results were similar: learners in a variety of settings who received reading strategy instruction comprehended L2 texts significantly better than those who did not receive such instruction. Like Taylor and colleagues (2006), Chaury's (2015) findings indicated that a combination of strategies was most effective, suggesting that instruction is most profitable when learners can choose from a repertoire of strategies to suit their needs and preferences. Unfortunately, the author noted that several other potential moderator variables (e.g., L2 proficiency level and age) were not analysed in the meta-analysis due to inconsistency in the data reported in the studies.

In a very recent meta-analysis on the effectiveness of reading strategy instruction on L2 reading comprehension, Yapp, De Graaff and Van den Bergh (in press, as cited in Yapp et al., 2021) examined 46 studies and obtained a large effect size, providing further evidence that reading strategy interventions in L2 reading comprehension are indeed highly effective. Regarding factors which might affect the efficacy of reading strategy instruction, the results of the meta-analysis suggested that reading strategies which require explicit cognitive action to be taken by the reader (e.g., asking questions while reading, connecting new information to what is already known) were most effective.

From the findings of these three meta-analyses, we can conclude with confidence that reading strategy instruction has a positive impact on L2 reading comprehension. However, any conclusions based on these meta-analyses regarding the factors which might affect the efficacy of reading strategy instruction are tentative and require further examination.

3. Factors Affecting the Efficacy of Reading Strategy Instruction

3.1. Age as a Potential Moderating Variable

As mentioned previously, the findings of Taylor and colleagues' (2006) meta-analysis highlighted age as a potential moderating variable of reading strategy instruction; in other words, adolescent and adult learners benefit from such instruction whereas young learners do not. Indeed, Graham and colleagues (2020) highlight that reading strategy programmes are considered effective in enhancing L2 reading comprehension, but that a number of individual differences including learner age may affect their efficacy. However, there is convincing empirical evidence which suggests that strategy instruction featuring young learners can be effective. Macaro and Erler's (2008) longitudinal and quasi-experimental study aimed to examine the effect of L2 reading strategy instruction on reading comprehension, learner strategy use, and learner attitudes. Participants were 116 beginner learners (11-12 years old) of French-as-a-Foreign-Language whose first language (L1) was primarily English. Six intact classes from six schools in England participated; three classes were assigned to the intervention group and three to the comparison group. The 15-month intervention consisted of explicit awareness raising and modelling of strategies, scaffolded practice followed by independent practice, and ongoing evaluation of strategy use with individualised feedback. The intervention included cognitive strategies (e.g., infer the meaning of a word, sound out a written word) and metacognitive strategies (e.g., decide on a strategy to find the English meaning

of a French word, evaluate the effectiveness of a strategy). To support the 'sounding out' strategy, learners in the intervention group also received phonics instruction in a series of French grapheme-phoneme correspondences (i.e., the relationship between certain written forms and sounds they represent).

Findings indicated that the intervention group significantly outperformed the comparison group on a challenging reading comprehension task post-test. In addition, the intervention group was notably more willing to tackle the challenging reading task and demonstrated an increase in the use of 'text-engagement' strategies whereas the comparison group was less willingly to attempt the difficult reading tasks and revealed an increase in the use of 'teacher-reliance' strategies. Furthermore, at post-test the intervention group showed more positive attitudes overall towards their L2 than the comparison group.

While Macaro and Erler's (2008) study featured young learners of French in a foreign language context, a study conducted by de Zarobe and Zenotz (2015) focused on young learners of English in a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classroom context. Participants were fifty 10–11-year-old students in the Basque Country, Spain. Two intact classes served as the experimental and control groups. The treatment group received seven sessions of reading strategy instruction over the course of three months which included initial awareness raising and exploration of strategies, modelling and scaffolded practice, and finally gradual removal of scaffolding leading to independent strategy use. Finding indicated that there was a significant difference in progress between the treatment and control groups on a metacognitive reading test administered pre- and post-test. From the findings of Macaro and Erler (2008), and de Zarobe and Zenotz (2015), we can reasonably conclude that reading strategy instruction can in fact have a positive impact on reading comprehension outcomes in young L2 learners.

3.2. L2 Proficiency as a Potential Moderating Variable

In addition to age, Taylor and colleagues' (2006) meta-analysis highlighted L2 proficiency level as a possible factor affecting the efficacy of reading strategy instruction. Indeed, none of the three studies focusing on beginner L2 learners included in the meta-analysis resulted in significant positive outcomes. In two empirical studies conducted by Barnett (1988a; 1988b) which featured adult beginner learners of French at an American university, no significant differences were observed on reading comprehension outcomes between treatment groups which received strategy instruction and control groups. Similarly, in an unpublished doctoral study focusing on adult elementary learners of Spanish enrolled at a university in the USA, Evans (2002) did not observe any differences in reading comprehension between an intervention group which received instruction in main idea reading strategies and a control group which did not receive such instruction.

Unsurprisingly then, researchers have claimed that L2 proficiency may be a factor affecting the efficacy of reading strategy instruction. For example, Laufer (2013; 2020) claims that L2 readers need a critical amount of lexical and grammatical knowledge in order to make use or reading strategies. However, as discussed previously, Macaro and Erler's (2008) study indicated that reading strategy instruction with beginner L2 learners did indeed have a positive impact on reading comprehension. Upon closer inspection, one element which distinguishes Macaro and Erler's (2008) study is the phonics component the researchers integrated into the reading strategy instruction. There was no such implementation of a decoding component in either Barnett's (1988a; 1988b) or Evans' (2002) research. In other words, it may not be that lower proficiency L2 learners are unable to profit from reading strategy instruction, but that less skilled L2 readers need an integrated approach of phonics instruction and reading strategy instruction in order to be able to make use of the strategies taught.

4. Integrated Phonics and Strategy Instruction for Beginner L2 Readers

Empirical evidence which provides strong support for a combined phonics and strategy approach to reading instruction for beginner L2 learners comes from a large-scale experimental study conducted by Woore and colleagues (2018) which aimed to extend Macaro and Erler's (2008) study by teasing apart the different components of the original intervention. The authors examined the effect of two approaches to teaching L2 reading: phonics instruction and reading strategies instruction. The authors describe phonics instruction as helping learners understand the relationships between the written symbols of language and the spoken sounds the symbols represent which allows students to sound out written words when reading. On the other hand, reading strategy instruction is described as teaching learners how to use specific strategies to help them better understand written texts. The researchers sought to examine the effect these two types of instruction have on reading comprehension and learner motivation, among other variables. Like Macaro and Erler's (2008) study, participants were beginner learners of French, aged 11-12, in England; however, Woore and colleagues' (2018) study included 36 intact classes and approximately 900 students. Classes were allocated to one of three intervention groups: phonics, strategies, and a control group which read the same challenging texts as the other two groups but without any explicit instruction in either phonics or strategies. Intervention took place over 16 weeks with 20-30 minutes of instruction per week. All three groups worked with the same texts, eight in total, which were designed specifically for the study and were meant to be challenging but accessible. Like Macaro and Erler (2008), reading comprehension post-intervention was measured through translation tasks and comprehension

questions.

Findings indicated that all three groups demonstrated statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension over the course of the intervention; in other words, there was no evidence that any of the three instruction programmes was more effective than the others in enhancing L2 reading comprehension. Qualitative data obtained through questionnaires and follow-up interviews indicated that both teachers and learners in all three groups viewed the intervention as positive with particularly positive views towards the cultural context of the challenging, pedagogical texts. Based on these findings, Woore and colleagues (2018) make a key recommendation regarding L2 reading instruction: an integrated approach combining explicit instruction in both reading strategies and phonics with the use of challenging and engaging texts of genuine interest to learners is likely to be most beneficial than any approach used in isolation for improving reading comprehension and attitudes towards reading in beginner L2 learners. Indeed, the findings from Macaro and Erler (2008) and Woore and colleagues (2018) taken together provide strong evidence for this claim.

5. Conclusion

It is clear from the findings of the three meta-analyses discussed in this paper that reading strategy instruction enhances learners' ability to understand L2 texts and, thus, such instruction has an invaluable place in L2 reading classrooms. This is particularly true for reading strategy instruction targeted at more skilled L2 readers who are already efficient decoders and can fully profit from the instruction. From our analysis of beginner L2 learners, reading strategy instruction targeted at these less-skilled readers should include decoding strategies and explicit phonics instruction as the ability to extract phonological information from individual words is one of the first and most important steps in achieving reading comprehension (Koda, 2005). Without this component, beginner learners appear to be unable to take advantage of reading strategy instruction. As Grabe (2009) points out, despite the efficacy of reading strategy instruction, even major proponents of the approach do not advocate that such instruction on its own is sufficient for reading comprehension given the complex nature of the reading process. According to Woore and colleagues (2018), reading proficiency is the product of linguistic knowledge (which includes knowledge of the relationship between written symbols and spoken sounds) *and* strategic behaviour, lending support to the importance of an integrated approach to reading instruction which pays due attention to both components. In light of the extraordinarily complicated and miraculous nature of reading comprehension described by Grabe and Stoller (2011), it is no surprise that any approach to reading instruction would have to be equally complex.

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