

READING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: PROBLEMS & STRATEGIES

Badria AL Brashdi

Badria AL Brashdi joined the LC in 2000 as a demonstrator and worked in the AADL Program for one year. She has a Master degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Reading, UK. She is interested in teaching academic writing. She is currently teaching in the Science Intensive Program.

Introduction

The study (carried out in 2002) was designed to yield data that would contribute to our understanding of the nature of problems our students encounter in comprehending English texts and the way they process such texts. The reading literature, which presents the shift from product-focused approaches in the reading research to a more process-focused view, has become of interest to me. Through investigating the reading process, we can learn a great deal about how our students approach reading and what kind of strategies they use. It is hoped that this study will establish the ground for program designers in the Language Centre where, as Block puts it ‘Knowledge about the process, not just the product of reading, is needed if we are to move from head-scratching to designing programs which truly meet the needs of our students’ (1986:463-464).

Anderson (1999) discusses the growing interest in metacognition¹ in reading research where teaching comprehension, according to his view, requires students to discuss the type of strategies they use to comprehend a text. A similar view is discussed by Nuttall who claims that students need to monitor their own comprehension ‘to recognize that they do not understand a text, find out why and adopt a strategy that will improve matters’ (1996:33).

The term ‘strategy’ has been distinguished in the reading research from the term ‘skill’ based on consciousness. This seems widely accepted among researchers (e.g. Barnett, 1989; Williams and Moran, 1989; and Cohen, 1998). Accordingly, strategies are defined as conscious deliberate behavior while skills operate at the subconscious level.

With the growing interest in the investigation of the reading process, as opposed to the product, researchers have been seeking tools for tapping such processes to reveal all thoughts

¹ ‘Metacognition’ means ‘understanding the processes of knowing, or how (not just what) readers know and perceive’ Aebersold & Field (1997:95).

which are generated in the readers' minds when performing a reading task. The investigation of these strategies has been carried out using the 'Think aloud' method, also referred to as 'verbal protocols'. This term is borrowed from cognitive psychology, and has been defined by Nunan (1992) where he states 'Think-aloud techniques, as the name suggests, are those in which subjects complete a task or solve a problem and verbalise their thought processes as they do so' (ibid:117).

My study, then, takes a similar direction to the work done by Hosenfeld (1977, 1984), which has been viewed as 'part of a growing emphasis on process rather than product' (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984: 245). The aim is to see reading as a problem-solving process as viewed by Olshavsky (1976-77).

Why the 'English Specialist Students' (EES)?

The variety of reading texts, which those EES students have to read, creates an interesting area for investigation. It is my intention to find out whether the type of text affects the problems encountered and the strategies those students adopt. The language proficiency level, which influences the reading strategies, as discussed by a number of researchers such as Olshavsky (1976-77), is a focus point of interest, too.

Proposed Research Questions

This study aims to provide answers to two main research questions:

1. What are the main reading comprehension problems encountered by first year English Specialist university students in the Language Centre, Sultan Qaboos University?
2. What are the strategies students use in processing a text and solving their comprehension problems?

The data collected will allow the discussion of the influence of text type and L2 proficiency level in the problems encountered and strategies used by the students.

Methods of data collection

Two methods of data collection were used in this study: the questionnaires and the think aloud interviews.

(A) Questionnaires

A five-point scale questionnaire was designed for the purpose of the study where students were presented with stated comprehension difficulties (e.g. unknown words) and asked to grade their difficulty according to the agreement scale (strongly agree-strongly disagree). The questionnaire was written in Arabic, the students' L1, and distributed to 50 students of the same specialization (English Specialists). Forty-eight responses were collected.

(B) Think-aloud interviews

The subjects who participated in the think-aloud interviews were adult first year English Specialists from the College of Education (seven females and one male), aged between 18-20 years. All of them speak Arabic as their first language and have the same learning experience of English as a foreign language which they have been learning from grade four.

In order to select eight subjects (four proficient readers and four less proficient ones), the students' results in the last reading course they took in the intensive program was considered as a more accurate way to distinguish between the students' reading ability than the placement test, where reading constitutes only one part of the tested skills.

The reading texts

The reading texts used in this study were taken from the syllabus of the English Specialist program. The aim was to present the subjects first with reading texts that they were reading in their specialization and secondly, texts they would be reading in the following years of their study. Two texts of around 300 words in length were selected: a story (as an example of literary texts) and a reading comprehension passage taken from a teaching textbook². The story was taken from a syllabus of a course called LANC 1119, reading and vocabulary II courses. The second reading text was taken from an educational course called 'Educational aims and instructional objectives'. This course is the first of a number of educational courses this group has to take to prepare them for their teaching career as English teachers. Both reading texts were new to the subjects.

Readability of the two texts

Having made sure that both reading texts would be new to the subjects, both texts were judged in terms of readability. The Flesch Formula³ was used, assisted by the word processor and showed a readability score of about (61.4) for the story and (26.3) for the comprehension

² This passage will be referred to as 'the comprehension passage' in later discussion.

³ 'Flesch Reading Ease readability formula' is one of the readability formulas that judges reading texts.

passage. It was clear that the comprehension passage appeared to be much more difficult than the story. Consequently, pooled teachers' judgments were sought to check on the readability of both texts, since such judgments were found to be very reliable, as opposed to individual opinions (see Klare, 1976 and Harrison, 1977). Eleven teachers from the Language Center at Sultan Qaboos University were asked to read the two reading texts and grade their difficulty. The selection of texts was then finalized.

Demonstration materials

A number of exercises were prepared to familiarize subjects with the think-aloud task. Three examples of think-aloud responses were taken from Olshavsky's (1976-77) study and translated into the subjects' mother tongue. Also, two extracts (a story and a comprehension passage) were taken from similar reading texts used in the actual study but are not the ones used in the experiment.

Training sessions

Four training sessions were conducted prior to the real experiment to familiarize the subjects with the think aloud technique. Students were introduced to the task and given a copy of the demonstration materials prepared to practice with the experimenter. Each session lasted between 30-40 minutes.

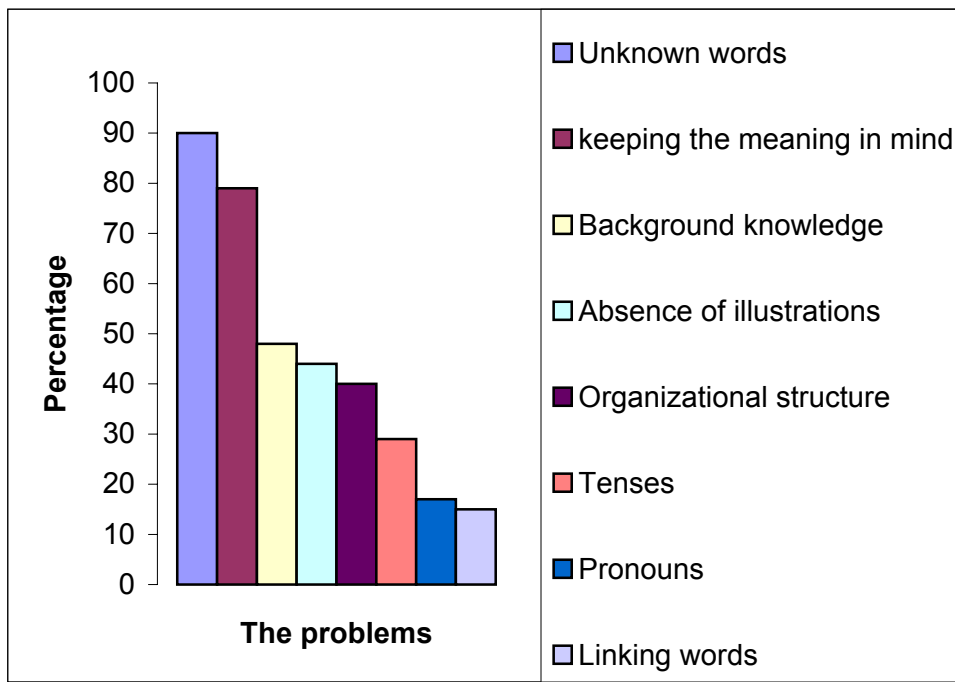
The procedure

Before recording the actual interviews, subjects were given instructions for performing the task. These instructions were taken from Ericsson and Simon (1993) and translated into Arabic. The subjects were interviewed individually and instructed to verbalize in Arabic in order to make them express their thoughts easily. They were told to read the text and try to understand it because they would be asked to give an oral summary at the end. Subjects were not given any prompts, but were instructed to say aloud all thoughts which came to their mind while reading. The second reading text was given immediately after the post-reading interview of the first reading text. During the think-aloud interviews, subjects did not get access to dictionaries and the reading time was kept open. At the end of the verbalization task, introspective interviews, or what we can refer to as post-reading interviews, were carried out. Subjects were asked to summarize the text orally. After the summary, the experimenter asked for clarification of some points that subjects made during the think-aloud interview. Subjects were also asked at the end of the interview to fill in a short questionnaire to reflect on their reaction to the texts they read.

Data analysis

The results of the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively (to measure the extent to which the students agree/disagree with the stated sources of comprehension difficulties) and qualitatively (to reveal other sources of reading difficulties reported by the students).

The following table indicates the degree of difficulty of all eight problems presented in the questionnaire as rated by the students.



It is clear from the above figure that vocabulary is perceived as the greatest difficulty. This is consistent with Yorio's (1971) findings with Spanish readers and Trevor-Roper's (1993) with Omani adult readers. Other comprehension difficulties were also reported such as: style of writing, speed of reading, difficulty in getting the main idea of the text, and not given enough time for reading.

Think aloud results

All the eight protocols were transcribed. Students' responses were then coded into numbers and transferred to the assigned categories. The categories were formulated by adapting the system developed by Block (1986) and Al Alawi (1994) with some additional strategies created for the purpose of the analysis. The following strategies were reported:

*Strategies used in processing both texts by proficient and less proficient readers***1. Proficient readers:**

<i>Type of strategies</i>	<i>Frequency (Text A)</i>	<i>Frequency (Text B)</i>
1. Elaboration	15	2
2. Questioning	11	2
3. Monitor comprehension	7	9
4. Guessing	6	0
5. Correct/reaffirm behaviour	4	1
6. Integrating	3	0
7. Using linguistic clues	2	10
8. Getting the main idea	2	3
9. Ignoring	1	1
10. Prediction	1	0

2. Less proficient readers

Type of strategies	Frequency (Text A)	Frequency (Text B)
1. Elaboration	6	0
2. Questioning	4	2
3. Correct/reaffirm behavior	4	0
4. Monitor comprehension	3	0
5. Ignoring	2	1
6. Guessing	2	0
7. Using linguistic clues	0	3
8. Guessing	2	0

Word Solving strategies**1. Text (A)**

Type of strategies	Frequency (Proficient)	Frequency (Less proficient)
1. Using morphology	1	1
2. Guessing from context	6	1
3. Finding an Arabic word with same pronunciation of the difficult word	1	1
4. Using Morphology	5	5
5. Questioning the meaning of the unknown word (without solving it).	4	9

2. Text (B)

Type of strategies	Frequency (Proficient)	Frequency (Less proficient)
1. Identification of word class	3	2
2. Associate the difficult word with another one with similar pronunciation	2	2
3. Resourcing	1	0
4. Guessing from context	1	0

It is apparent from the analysis of the strategies used with both texts presented, that text type (story (text A) vs. the comprehension passage (text B) did seem to affect the kind of strategies deployed by both proficient and less proficient readers in processing both texts. The absence of some strategies such as ‘integrating’, ‘guessing’ and ‘prediction’ with text (B) emphasizes such influence. However, the greatest effect of text type on strategy use lay more on the frequency in the use of such processing strategies with both texts. It can be concluded that more strategies were deployed by both groups of readers in processing the story than the comprehension passage.

Regarding the influence of the L2 proficiency level, the analysis of strategies used in processing the texts indicates that students’ proficiency level also affected the strategies used. With both texts, proficient readers seem to employ more strategies in processing both texts than less proficient readers in terms of kind and frequency. This finding supports the view of some researchers that ‘good readers have superior strategies and might use them more frequently’ (Golinkoff, 1975-1976; Smith, 1967, cited in Olshavsky, 1976-77:658).

Implications

The findings of the present study highlight a number of pedagogical implications concerning problems encountered by Omani readers and strategies adopted. Perhaps it ought to be pointed out that since these recommendations are based on what has been found with this specific group of readers, they could apply more to those teachers teaching English in Oman than to any other EFL teachers. However, a major concern for all EFL teachers is how to help our students become better readers. Hence, it is hoped that the following recommendations will be of some use to fulfill this goal.

1. Raise students' awareness of the importance of the text's syntactic elements as an important contributor to comprehension.

The results of the questionnaire, supported by think-aloud findings, have demonstrated that students place a great emphasis on vocabulary being perceived as the most essential key to comprehension, while text syntax has been reported as causing no difficulty. Since syntax does play a crucial role in the overall comprehension of reading texts (cf. Nilagupta, 1976; Berman, 1984), teachers are called to raise their students' awareness of such elements in the text. This can be achieved by a number of exercises that can be practiced with the students either in the pre-reading stage or while reading. For instance, teachers can discuss with their students the different cohesive ties presented in the reading text and how they connect the different parts of the texts. Cloze tests dealing with conjunctions can be a good exercise, too. Of course, this does not mean that reading classes can be turned into grammar lessons, but the goal is to make students aware of these syntactic elements they need to grasp and, by so doing, make the text more meaningful.

2. Teach reading as problem identification; our students need help while at the reading stage.

The present study showed that students encountered a number of problems where in some cases they had strategies to deal with while they failed with others. Hence, teachers are called to help their students identify such reading problems and train them on useful solving strategies. It is then the shift in focus from teaching the skills to teaching reading as problem-solving identification and strategies which 'deal with the total reading environments rather than teaching hierarchies of reading subskills' (Olshavsky, 1976-77:673).

3. Help students become strategic readers; think-aloud method is a useful tool to start with.

This study revealed a number of strategies students deployed in processing the reading texts and solving their problems where the think-aloud method appeared to be a useful technique for examining such strategies. By deploying strategies, students become more interactive with the reading text where constructing meaning requires identifying obstacles and finding ways to surmount them. Hence, teachers are called to help their students to become strategic readers and to monitor their own comprehension (a useful guide for achieving this goal can be found in Grabe & Stoller (2002: ch.8) where they discuss nine action research projects that teachers can make use of in class to teach strategies).

To conclude, this study can be added to the small number of studies which investigated the reading strategies in the Arab world, specifically in Oman. It can be considered a starting point for further investigations of reading strategies employed by university students at Sultan

Qaboos University. Further strategy research is needed to support the reported strategies and identify others by which we can add more to our knowledge, as researchers and EFL teachers, about the nature of the reading process and how it is handled by our students in terms of problems and strategy use.

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