

A History and Overview of Research of Reading Strategies in Language Learning

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Introduction

There has been a marked increase in recent years in the variety of learners coming into second and foreign language classrooms. Language learners now differ greatly in such learning factors as learning experience, learning purpose, and conditions of study. To maximize their learning potential, language learners need to develop the ability to direct their own learning autonomously in the specific conditions they face with their own unique abilities, learning characteristics, and needs. Therefore a large part of the learning process depends not only on the teacher but on the student and his capacity for autonomous learning, or his ability to learn by and for himself.

In her study, *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*, Anita Wenden identifies three "learner-centered practices" for learner autonomy, namely learner-centered teaching methods, learner-centered language content (where the content of a lesson is determined by the learners' purpose for studying the language), and the last of which she writes, "A third set of learner-centered practices has focused on changing the learner--on making the learner a better learner"(1991, p.2). This last aspect of the drive for achieving learner autonomy, "making the learner a better learner", directly involves the use of strategy.

An integral part of autonomous learner-centered learning, learner strategies include any set of operations, steps, plans, or routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information, i.e., what learners do to learn and to regulate their learning. Within this broad category of learner

strategies are the following subdivisions: reading strategy, writing strategy, listening strategy, and speaking strategy (listening strategy and speaking strategy may be combined under the general heading of communication strategy). For the purposes of this study, reading strategy was focused on as that which greatly improves and facilitates language learning, effectively leading the learner in the direction of autonomous learning.

Reading has been defined as "the effort to understand the content and writer's intention through reading a text written in letters" (Tenma, 1989). Compared with writing or speaking, reading is considered to be a rather passive activity, but the reading process does have an active aspect. As Tenma explains, "a reader is not just a passive follower to the writer, but an active builder of the contents of the text by working on it progressively" (p.96). It is when this active dimension of reading, of the reader as "builder", is applied that reading strategy comes into being.

In the field of language education, the meaning of "strategy", the second half of the "active reading+strategy" equation, is derived from studies of the most appropriate way to approach the mastering of the target language. Rubin (1975) and Ellis (1986), for example, studied good language learners and analyzed the kinds of strategies which led to successful reading. Ellis notes that the study of learners' strategies is a core issue in second language acquisition.

Summing up the equation, reading strategies are strategies used by readers when approaching written texts. Barnett defines reading strategies as follows, "the reading strategy is a psychological handling to understand what we read through the effective approach to the text" (1988, p.155). In this study, I would like to focus on and investigate the work in the area of reading strategies of these main researchers: Hosenfeld, Block, Barnett, and Carrell. As I will relate in more detail, following the pioneering work by Hosenfeld (1977) in the area of reading strategies, a greater emphasis was increasingly

placed on strategy use and strategy awareness. This led to the study by Block (1986) which advanced the use of think-aloud protocols in analyzing learners' reading strategies, followed by Barnett (1988) who concentrated on learner awareness of reading strategy use, and whose work is a central component of this study. Finally, Carrell (1989) progressed one step further and studied the relationship between metacognitive awareness and reading, an aspect which I will also address. In addition to these, I will also investigate the "language threshold" theory as proposed by Clarke (1980) and furthered by Alderson (1984) and Bossers (1992, 1998).

Research on Learner Strategies

Although many variables can contribute to the success of learners, the current focus is on the behaviors and thought processes which learners use in the process of learning, as well as the learner's knowledge about the language in question. Much of the research on learner strategies has concentrated 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. Research on learner strategies dates back to 1966, when Aaron Carton first published his study "The Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study". In this study, he notes that learners vary in their tendency to make inferences, and in their ability to make valid, rational, and reasonable inferences. Carton also recognized that tolerance of risk varied depending upon the learner's ability to make good inferences. In a second article (1971), Carton provides a detailed discussion of inferencing as a strategy used by second language learners. Arguing for the importance of student perception of "probabilistic contingent relations", Carton suggests that this allows for improved selection of appropriate comprehension. He views language learning as a form of problem-solving in which the student can bring to bear his/her prior experience and

knowledge in the processing of language.

Following leads from Carton and learning theory, in 1975, Rubin initiated research which focused on the strategies of successful learners. Her assumption was that, once identified, such strategies could be made available to less successful learners. The research results described in her paper (1975) include the following variables: learner psychological characteristics, learner communication strategies, learner social strategies, and learner cognitive strategies exhibited and used by self-defined good language learners. Rubin's 1981 report of subsequent research classifies strategies in terms of processes that may contribute directly to learning, and those that may contribute indirectly to learning.

In 1975, Stern compiled a list of strategies necessary to attain second language competence. This list served as a frame of reference for following researchers, including Wesche (1975) and Naiman et al (1978). Wesche completed her dissertation on the learning behaviors of successful adult language students in the Canadian Civil Service, and found these students used many of the same strategies listed by Rubin and Stern. Research conducted by Naiman et al, along the same lines as Rubin (1975), also focused on personality traits, cognitive styles, and strategies that were critical to successful language learning. They modified Stern's (1975) list of strategies based upon the statements and views of the interviewees in their study, to form a list of five general strategies and related techniques.

During this time, Wong-Fillmore (1976) in her study of five Chicano students who were learning English, identified social strategies used by successful language learners. Further, she found that by using a few well-chosen formulas, learners could continue to participate in activities which provided contexts for the learning of new material. Wong-Fillmore notes that staying in the conversation has an important connection to learning, because the new material becomes learnable and memorable by virtue of being embedded in

current, interest-holding activities. She provides strong evidence for the link between strategies which contribute indirectly to learning (social strategies) and learning strategies.

Bialystok (1979) reports on research which shows the effects of the use of two functional strategies--inferencing and functional practicing--and two formal strategies--monitoring and formal practicing. According to Bialystok, the focus of functional practicing strategies is language use, while formal practicing strategies focus on language form. Bialystok used the term "monitoring" in the more narrow sense, where the focus is on the form. Results indicated that the use of all four strategies had positive effects on achievement in certain kinds of tests, but only the functional strategies significantly modified performance for all tasks.

The work of Wenden (1982, 1986) has added an important new dimension to our understanding of learner strategies--namely, the importance of metacognitive knowledge to: (1) the language; (2) student proficiency; (3) the outcome of student's learning endeavors; (4) the student's role in the language learning process; (5) how best to approach the task of language. Wenden's research has contributed important insights on metacognition in second language learning and how it may be used.

As a further application of Wenden's research, Chamot (1987) provides the first clear contrast between cognitive and metacognitive strategies. "Metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of learning while it is taking place, and self-evaluation of learning after the learning activity. Metacognitive strategies can be applied to virtually all types of learning tasks, whereas cognitive strategies are more directly related to a specific task...and may not be applicable to different types of learning tasks."

Research on Reading Strategies

In much the same way that the focus of research in learner

strategies has moved from the general use of learner strategies by learners to metacognitive awareness of strategy use, so also in the subdivision of reading strategies, there has been a progression in the focus of research from strategy use to metacognitive awareness of strategy use. Attention has shifted from an emphasis on the product of reading to an emphasis on determining the strategies that readers use in various reading contexts. Aside from Hosenfeld's pioneering studies (1977a/b, 1979, 1984), only recently have researchers become interested in strategy use in second and foreign language reading. The following different aspects of reading strategy use are being examined: (1) descriptions of strategies naturally used by second or foreign language readers; (2) the transfer of first language strategies to second or foreign language reading; (3) the actual effectiveness of strategies generally deemed "successful"; (4) learners' thoughts about what they do when they read (their metacognitive perception); (5) the relationship between readers' metacognition and their comprehension and actual strategy use; (6) the usefulness of training students to use productive strategies. These different aspects of reading strategies are combined in the research work on strategy use in second and foreign language reading which follows.

A pioneer in the field of reading strategy research, Hosenfeld (1977) focused on reading strategies and attempted to observe these through think-aloud tasks. Foreign and second language students can observe and verbalize their learning strategies, and their strategies are often quite different from the strategies their teachers assume they are using (1977a). In her original study on reading, Hosenfeld (1977b) asked forty adolescent foreign language students (half tested as proficient and half as nonproficient readers) to think aloud as they read silently. From the self-reported data, Hosenfeld constructed reading maps providing graphic, visual portrayals of individual student's reading strategies. She divided the strategies she found into two groups: strategies which lead to successful reading and strategies which lead to unsuccessful reading. She discovered

distinct differences between the strategies used by successful and unsuccessful readers. For instance, successful readers kept the meaning of the passage in mind while reading, read (translated) in broad phrases, skipped words they saw as unimportant to total phrase meaning, and had a positive self-concept as readers. Unsuccessful readers lost the meaning of sentences as soon as they decoded them and read (translated) in short phrases. Particularly concerned with how strategies are developed by learners, Hosenfeld also investigated how they are influenced by the teacher or textbook, and called for research about student assumptions--how they develop, how they are influenced by teachers and textbooks, and how they operate.

Furthering her previous research in 1979, Hosenfeld reported on the reading strategies of successful and unsuccessful second language learners obtained by using the "think-aloud" method of introspection. She found that successful readers use some form of contextual guessing, based on the process of inductive reasoning. In addition, Hosenfeld reported on a metacognitive strategy in which the student evaluates his/her thinking by determining the appropriateness of the logic of a guess. Of particular significance in this article is Hosenfeld's report on one of the first attempts to train learners in the use of strategies, in this case efficient reading strategies.

The variety of reading strategies and the individual nature of their application have resulted in a lack of agreement about exactly what constitutes problem-solving strategies promoted by reading specialists. Developed from the self-reports of adolescent foreign language students, the "Interviewer Guide for Reading Strategies" by Hosenfeld et al (1981) lists a number of effective reading strategies:

1. Keeps meaning in mind
2. Skips unknown words (guesses contextually)
3. Uses context in preceding and succeeding sentences and paragraphs
4. Identifies grammatical category of words

5. Evaluates guesses
6. Reads title (makes inferences)
7. Continues if unsuccessful
8. Recognizes cognates
9. Uses knowledge of the world
10. Analyzes unknown words
11. Reads as though he or she expects the text to make sense
12. Reads to identify meaning rather than words
13. Takes chances in order to identify meaning
14. Uses illustration
15. Uses side-gloss
16. Uses glossary as last resort
17. Looks up words correctly
18. Skips the unnecessary
19. Follows through with proposed solutions
20. Uses a variety of contextual clues

From "Second Language Reading: A Curricular Sequence for Teaching Reading Strategies" in C. Hosenfeld et al (1981). *Foreign Language Annals*, 14,5.

Hosenfeld's practical list of observed strategies is frequently cited by foreign/second language reading specialists, who suggest ways to develop students' reading strategies and to encourage students to use effective strategies.

Like Hosenfeld, Block (1986) categorically lists the reading strategies of her subjects, in this case six ESL and three native English-speaking university level students. Although Hosenfeld (1977) in her pioneering study used think-aloud tasks, it was the work of Block which firmly established the use of think-aloud protocol. At the basis of the use of think-aloud protocol is the idea that strategies are deliberate, cognitive steps that learners can take to assist in acquiring, storing, and retrieving new information, and so can be accessed for a conscious report. Verbal reports or think-

aloud protocols are implemented as a method of identifying the mental processes that readers use to understand the printed word. A verbal report or think-aloud protocol is produced when a reader verbalizes his or her thought processes while completing a given task.

Block (1986) used think-aloud protocols to analyze ESL learners' reading strategies. In her descriptive study of the transfer of first language strategies, she had six ESL students (with Chinese or Spanish as their native language) and three native English speakers think aloud about what they understood and thought about while reading two English passages from a college textbook. Their results on tests in English and in their native language were similar to those of the American students. By categorizing the patterns of students' use of strategies, she was able to classify learners into two types: integrators and non-integrators. The average school grade of integrators was C or above, while that of non-integrators was C or below. Based on these results, Block categorized the strategies of her subjects as general (comprehension-gathering and comprehension-monitoring) and local (attempts to understand specific linguistic units):

General Strategies

1. Anticipate content
2. Use general knowledge and associations
3. Recognize text structure
4. Comment on behavior or processes
5. Integrate information
6. Monitor comprehension
7. Question information in the text
8. Correct behavior
9. Interpret the text
10. React to the text

Local Strategies

1. Paraphrase
2. Question meaning of a word
3. Reread
4. Solve vocabulary problem
5. Question meaning of a clause or sentence

Block also defines two different modes in readers' strategies based on research on writing: extensive (when readers focus on understanding the author's ideas) and reflexive (when readers relate ideas in the text to themselves). This concept of modes is helpful in understanding how individual readers see themselves in relation to a text.

Along with Hosenfeld and Block, Sarig (1987) also creates a list of reading strategies, but unlike previous lists, Sarig groups these reading strategies into four types. Viewing the second language reading process as the interlingual transfer of reading skills from the reader's metamodel (native) language to the second language, Sarig works from foreign language learners' think-aloud data to classify their reading moves, or strategies, into four types (all containing "comprehension promoting moves" and "comprehension deterring moves"). As Dubin (1987) comments, this first attempt to group learners' strategies into types may be as significant as Sarig's experimental results.

Barnett (1988) focused on the area of learner awareness of reading strategy use. To expand the relatively small pool of data on reading strategy use and on learner perceptions/awareness of strategy use, Barnett designed a study to analyze the impact on foreign language reading comprehension of three strategies generally considered effective. Two general hypotheses were formulated: (1) readers who use certain problem-solving strategies will understand more of what they read than those who do not use these reading strategies, and (2) readers who perceive that they use strategies generally

considered effective will understand more of what they read than those who do not think they use such strategies. Her experiment on university students showed that reading strategy awareness and comprehension were mutually related; strategy users understood more than readers who didn't use them, and readers who were aware of their strategy use understood more than readers who were not.

Separate experiments conforming to the same format have so far shown two strategies to be effective: reading at the level of discourse rather than the level of words and sentences (Barnett, 1988b) and following key words such as nouns, subject pronouns, and adjectives (Barnett, 1988a). Barnett's particular area of focus was on word meaning in context. She summarized research results in this area as follows:

- a. All second or foreign language readers can guess word meanings to some extent.
- b. Most readers greatly depend on the form of an unknown word, or the "lexical level".
- c. Readers' guesses are frequently defined by their reading schemata.
- d. Readers familiar with text content guess word meanings better than readers unfamiliar with the text topic.
- e. The amount of usable context varies for each unknown word.
- f. Learners vary in their willingness to guess and take risks.
- g. Readers with larger active vocabularies utilize available context better and are better guessers than readers with smaller vocabularies.
- h. No relation has yet been proved between second/foreign language reading proficiency and the ability to guess from context.

Barnett concludes her research by noting the surprising differences in research results based on the amount of significant interaction among the variables of reading text, treatment, strategy use,

perceived use, and recall.

Finally, much as the study of learner strategies progressed with the added dimension of metacognitive awareness in the research of Wenden (1982, 1986) and Chamot (1987), so too in the area of research concerning reading strategies a move to studies of metacognitive awareness can be seen. As Schoonen, Hulstijn, and Bossers (1998) most clearly define, "In the context of reading, metacognitive knowledge should be understood as readers' assessment of themselves as readers and their knowledge and control of strategies for processing and learning from text, in relation to both the complexity of the task at hand and the goals and plans that guide the reading process." Carrell (1989) studied the relation between metacognitive awareness and reading, using questionnaires to analyze learners' awareness of strategy use, and multiple choice items to test their second language proficiency. Based on this data, Carrell divided the subjects into two groups: readers who use global strategies and readers who use local strategies. The average test scores of the former group were higher than those of the latter group. Through further experiments, she concluded that intermediate level learners have a tendency to use global strategies and top-down processing, while beginner level learners have a tendency to use local strategies and bottom-up processing.

Language Threshold

Proceeding alongside the research on reading strategies was the separate area of study of what is known as the "language threshold" in reading. In 1980, Clarke first introduced the notion of a foreign or second (L2) "language threshold," or limited control over the language, which "short circuits" the transfer of reading abilities acquired in the native language (L1) to L2 reading. Hauptman (1979) and Coady (1979) undertook research in the same direction at the same time, followed by Cziko (1980) and Cummins (1980). In 1984, Alderson presented the state of the art study comparing work

on the "short circuit" hypothesis with that on the "reading universals" hypothesis. This latter hypothesis refers to the notion that "reading is reading" and L2 readers compensate for less well developed L2 skills by means of their L1 reading skills (Goodman, 1973; Hudson, 1982). Alderson thus effectively pinpointed the debate by asking whether L2 reading is more a reading or a language problem. He concluded that it is both, "but with firmer evidence that it is a language problem, for low levels of foreign language competence." In so doing, he lent support to the threshold hypothesis.

A more recent study of L2 reading in relation to L1 reading ability and L2 language competence was carried out by Bossers (1992). Like Carrell (1991), he first asked which of these two predictors better accounts for variance in L2 reading ability. Secondly, he questioned whether a developmental pattern exists, that is, whether the relative importance of L1 reading comprehension increases when a specific level of L2 proficiency has been reached:

"The essence of [the language threshold] notion is that L1 reading comprehension becomes more important, [which] does not necessarily imply that the influence of L2 knowledge decreases at the same moment."

Bossers' (1992) tightly constructed research design enabled him to conclude, like Carrell (1991), that both predictor variables, L1 reading ability and L2 language competence, are statistically significant contributors to L2 reading comprehension and that, in line with Carrell's results for foreign language students (1989), L2 knowledge is generally the more important factor. Unlike Carrell, however, who observed a change in the relative importance of the two key variables between samples whose absolute level of L2 proficiency differed, Bossers did not find evidence for such a change, that is, that L1 reading comprehension becomes more important once a particular level of L2 proficiency has been reached. Bossers concluded that "L2 knowledge is strongly related to L2 reading comprehension even in advanced learners," and that the correlation between L1 and

L2 reading comprehension in readers with low and high levels of L2 proficiency did not differ significantly.

For Bossers (1992), the fact that no change occurred in the relative weight of each variable as L2 knowledge increased, argues neither for nor against the existence of a language threshold. Rather, it is a call for further research to complete the picture on the following levels: Given the various sociolinguistic situations of participants in the studies mentioned, the very notion of a L2 threshold may be pertinent only for readers in L1 academic settings. Similarly, the relative weight of L1 reading, which was strong for Carrell's (1991) hispanophone second language readers, but weak for Bossers' (1992) native Turkish speakers, suggests that L1 reading ability and native language should be taken into account. Finally, since tasks used in both Bossers' and Carrell's studies were described as difficult, the threshold level should not be defined in absolute terms, but rather in relation to the nature and cognitive demands of the task. In 1998 Schoonen, Hulstijn, and Bossers, in a further development of Bossers' (1992) research, found support for the threshold hypothesis in foreign language learning. Conducting a study among Dutch students in grades 6, 8, and 10, they found that metacognitive knowledge of reading strategies did not make up for low levels of L2 proficiency, if this L2 proficiency level is below a given "threshold" level.

The above research, both in the area of reading strategies and the language threshold, has suggested the necessity and effectiveness of the instruction of strategy use in L2 reading, providing information on when such instruction may be most effectively implemented. To help students develop into successful readers, a more precise breakdown of the components of reading strategies may be called for.

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