

Elementary EFL teachers' familiarity with reading strategies¹

ABSTRACT

The present study investigated EFL teachers' familiarity with reading strategies. It aimed, particularly, at gaining an insight into whether they instruct students in using strategies in their attempt to derive meaning when interacting with written texts in EFL. The sample of the research consisted of ten (10) instructors, who work at public elementary schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analyzed through content analysis. The results of this study indicated that most of the teachers were not involved in teaching students how to use reading strategies to approach and comprehend written texts in EFL, which contributes to autonomous learning, as they were not familiar with the concept of reading strategies. However, further research on this issue is required in order to verify and extend the results of the current study.

Keywords: Reading strategies, strategy instruction, reading comprehension in EFL, elementary classrooms

Introduction

L2 reading is regarded as a complex, multifaceted cognitive skill, which draws on many knowledge sources and processes ranging from lower level processes, such as decoding, to higher level ones involving text comprehension and integration of text ideas with the reader's prior knowledge (Koda, 2007). Furthermore, reading is viewed as an interaction process between the text and the reader (Carrell, 1988; Hudson, 1998; Psaltou-Joyce, 2010) during which readers deploy a variety of strategies to achieve comprehension, the major goal of reading. In this context, successful comprehension emerges, when the reader extracts information from the text and combines it with existing knowledge (Koda, 2005).

Literature Review

Based on literature, reading strategies are deliberate, conscious actions, identifiable to the agent and others by intentions and selected goals (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson,

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1983) and constitute ways of getting around difficulties encountered while reading (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). In this sense, strategies represent a conscious response to a specific problem arisen, such as a failure to understand the meaning of a word or find the information one was looking for while interacting with written texts (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, activating background knowledge, predicting, summarizing-to name just a few- belong to reading strategies. According to Carrell, Gasdusek, and Wise (1998), "Reading strategies are of interest not only for what they reveal about the ways readers manage interactions with written text but also for how the use of strategies is related to effective reading comprehension" (p. 97).

Researchers have provided a link between successful L2 comprehension and reading strategy use. Namely, studies conducted on reading strategies deployed by proficient and less proficient readers indicated that more proficient readers developed more reading strategies focusing on text meaning and monitoring comprehension more frequently than their poor counterparts, who were highly concerned about details, vocabulary problems or decoding (Block, 1986; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). In this context, reading research has indicated that students should be instructed to use the strategies employed by the more successful ones, while reading, as training in the use of strategies can help them improve reading comprehension (Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989; Kern, 1989; Macaro & Erler, 2008; Song, 1998). Strategies can be directly taught through strategy training to help students understand what they are doing, when, why and how they are doing (Oxford, 1990). More often than not, strategy training follows a cycle of direct explanation of strategies, modeling, guided practice, where there is gradual transfer of responsibility from teachers to students, leading to more independent practice (Duffy, Roehler, & Rackliffe, 1986; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

The present study

The present study, which is part of a broader study on reading strategies instruction, is an attempt to examine whether Greek elementary EFL teachers are familiar with the concept of reading comprehension strategies and whether they are engaged in teaching students to use reading strategies. The interest for this study arises from the fact that researchers continue to express concern that teachers are not familiar with strategy instruction (Baker, 2002) and highlight the need to conduct comprehension research in the context of primary-grade education (Pearson & Duke, 2002). In fact, although there are a lot of studies focusing on L1 reading comprehension practices

(Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000; Durkin, 1978-1979; Ness, 2011; Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta-Hampston, & Echevarria, 1998), there is dearth of relevant research in L2 (Cabaroğlu & Yurdaisik; 2008; Janzen, 2007). Getting an insight into what really happens in EFL elementary classrooms and how much comprehension instruction takes place is really critical, because, as Alvermann and Hayes (1989) stated: "Any attempt to intervene in instructional practices must begin with an examination of what those practices are" (p. 307).

In particular, this study tried to answer the following questions:

- a) Are Greek elementary EFL teachers familiar with the concept of reading comprehension strategies?
- b) Do they teach students to use reading strategies during interaction with EFL texts?

Based on literature research and personal experience, our study relied on the premise that Greek elementary EFL teachers were not familiar with the concept of reading comprehension strategies and abstained from strategic reading development. This assertion has been tested through teacher interviews.

Method

Participants

A sample of ten (10) EFL teachers, who were employed at state elementary schools in Trikala, a provincial city of central Greece, participated in the study. The selection process of the sample was at random allowing for access to subjects or data collection sites with individuals and institutions, though we tried to select participants from both inner-city schools and schools situated in the suburbs to secure a representative sample, even in a small scale study (Nunan, 1992). Additionally, teachers of the 6th grade-the last grade of Greek elementary schools- were selected for this research assuming that students at this level (approximately A2 according to the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference) have sufficient cognitive development and language proficiency to assimilate strategy instruction more efficiently. All the participants were women due to the female preference to the specific educational field, as of the total number of sixty (60) EFL teachers employed in elementary education in Trikala 59 (98,3 %) are female and only one is male. All teachers had completed only a Bachelor's degree with the exception of one teacher, who additionally had a Master's degree and a PhD. Regarding their teaching

experience, it ranged from five (5) to twenty-two (22) years. The names mentioned in this study are all pseudonyms.

Data collection

Data were collected through interviews. Namely, a semi-structured, face-to-face interview was conducted with the ten (10) participating teachers. The interviews were carried out at the different schools, where the participants teach EFL, and lasted from eight (8) to fifteen (15) minutes. All interviews were conducted by a sole interviewer (the first researcher) to maintain consistency and ensure that all the important topics would emerge during all interviews (Pressley et al., 1998). There was also an interview guide, that is a list of questions, which was designed in advance by the researchers in order to gather the same information from a number of people (Patton, 1990). The language used during the interviews was Greek, that is the native language of the participants, in order to ensure that the interviewees would feel free to elaborate on questions asked without worrying about possible language difficulties. All interviews included some background questions in order to construct teachers' profile (e.g., qualifications, working experience) as well as questions that among other aspects of reading focused on teachers' familiarity with reading strategies and strategy instruction.

Data analysis

Interviews were tape recorded and then were transcribed verbatim to have objective and detailed record, preserve actual language used and reanalyze data after the interviews being conducted (Nunan, 1992). Data were analyzed through content analysis drawing mainly on a simple numerical technique, where after having carefully read the transcribed interviews, we identified, categorized, and counted the primary patterns in the data (McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Patton, 1990). The main goal of the analysis was to identify and quantify patterns of behaviour and draw tentative conclusions from the overall pictures (McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Patton, 1990). The two authors-researchers independently coded the results into the specific categories. A high level of consistency in coding was established between the two researchers when meeting to compare their coding schemes and discuss possible discrepancies (Patton, 1990).

Findings

To begin with, based on the analysis of teacher interviews the findings of this study indicated that two (2) out of the ten (10) teachers expressed some degree of familiarity with the concept of reading strategies. Ms Grabe answered: "In my opinion, It is skimming or scanning..I do not know if this is what you mean by the term reading strategies...or maybe it is reading for pleasure or extensive reading". Ms Wenden also replied: "I imagine they are ways, techniques which improve text reading comprehension..Is it skimming or scanning? That is, you look for specific information or answers to specific questions or you look for the gist, this is another technique". Another finding was that none of the participants were not engaged in reading strategy instruction. Almost all teachers answered to our question about strategy instruction negatively. According to Ms Grabe's words: "I don't teach reading strategies explicitly. I don't state that now we are going to apply skimming or scanning...I know that we use skimming or scanning in a task, while the children are not aware of it. I really don't know if I have to teach them more explicitly". Ms Draft answered: "No.. but, for example in a filling the gaps task, I tell them to pay attention to the words before or after the gap. If students are asked to choose the correct headings for paragraphs of a text, I advise them to read the paragraph, pay attention to meaning, search for synonyms or antonyms..I help students with all these things..". Another interesting finding was that eight (8) of the ten (10) participants positively answered to the question regarding the importance of reading strategy training. In fact, Ms Smith stated: "I believe that reading strategies should be taught to learners but seminars should be held to inform teachers of what these strategies are and how they can be taught".

Discussion

The primary purpose of the research described here was to probe into EFL teachers' familiarity with reading strategies through interviews with the goal of revealing if they instruct students in using strategies while interacting with written texts in EFL. The results of this study indicated that the specific teachers were not involved in teaching students how to use reading strategies to approach and comprehend written texts in EFL, as most of them did not express clear awareness of the concept of reading strategies, which is in accordance with previous research (Cabaroglu & Yurdaisik, 2008). Though some teachers seemed to be rather familiar with reading strategies, their answers were characterized by uncertainty, as they replied our questions using a question, and overall there was no evidence for strategy instruction. At this point, it

should be mentioned that one of the teachers, Ms Grabe, who expressed some kind of familiarity with reading strategies had a PhD on Linguistics, which seemed to play a critical role in the different approach and attitude she had adopted to the teaching process. In fact, some of them simply practised a couple of strategies, such as skimming, scanning or contextual guessing and provided students with guidelines during task completion that follow a written text. However, sheer practice can be beneficial only for successful students, while it is possible that the "practice only" approach underlying current EFL Greek elementary classrooms may promote a "rich get richer and poor get poorer" phenomenon (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). By and large, the specific EFL teachers were not engaged in actual strategy instruction, as specific features, which typify strategy instruction like direct explanation, modeling, guided and independent practice (Duffy et al., 1986; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), which contribute to students' self-regulation and autonomy, were not detected in these elementary classrooms. While skimming, scanning or contextual guessing are often strategic behaviors, they are not strategic if teachers just mention them and provide some guidelines during task completion. As a result, the teachers participated in this study fail to boost strategic reading and render their students independent, which is the hallmark of the learning and in particular the reading process. Another interesting finding of this study was that, though its results showed lack in strategy instruction, when teachers were asked about the importance of teaching students how to use reading strategies to comprehend written texts in English, a positive attitude to strategy instruction was evident, as almost all of them agreed on its significance and seemed willing to become informed of it, which concurs with previous L2 research (Cabaroğlu & Yurdaisik, 2008). Indeed, a couple of teachers pointed out the importance of seminars to render them aware of the concept of reading strategies and their instruction.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the central pattern identified in this study is that teachers fail to instruct students in using and coordinating cognitive processes, such as comprehension strategies in order to construct meaning from EFL written texts, despite the bulk of research on the contribution of strategy instruction to comprehension achievement. Although students were given some opportunities to practise reading strategies there was no evidence that they were being taught the active comprehension processes validated in the reading research.

Pedagogical implications, limitations of the present study, and further research

A tentative conclusion drawn from this study is that the specific Greek elementary EFL teachers do not teach students how to derive meaning from written texts. Overall, the data collected in this study reveal that the situation needs to change. Namely, EFL teachers should try to move beyond the narrow focus on vocabulary or content to student mastery of the cognitive processes adopted by accomplished readers, which concurs with previous L2 reading research (Janzen, 2007). They need to be informed of the research findings of contemporary comprehension practices through pre-service and in-service teacher education courses (Celani, 2006) with a special focus on learning strategies in order to select the strategies and methods that suit them best and make the whole reading process more interesting, strategic and self-regulated. On no account, do we put the blame on teachers, as most of them are conscientious professionals, who try hard to help students learn EFL.

The present study-though it was conducted with a modest number of teachers-can have several useful implications, like identifying gaps in the research literature, providing an insight into what really happens in some EFL elementary classrooms and highlighting the need for constant professional development for teachers. Another limitation of this study that we need to consider is the lack of triangulation data. That is, another data collection technique either qualitative or quantitative, such as observation or questionnaires, should have been used to triangulate data. Therefore, further research on this issue is required in order to verify and extend the results of the current study.

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