

Facilitating the Acquisition of Second Language Reading Strategies with the Explicit Reading Strategy Training and the Reading Portfolio Approach

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Abstract: This essay explores various reading strategies and their corresponding categories, such as the three-phase reading strategies that enhance comprehension at different stages of reading, as well as cognitive and metacognitive strategies. It emphasizes the importance of correctly applying these strategies for effective reading comprehension. It highlights how diverse strategies enable readers to understand a wide range of texts. The study also underscores the value of using a portfolio approach to track students' reading progress, allowing them to document their reading journey, identify gains, and note questions. This method fosters greater confidence and efficiency in the use of reading strategies. The essay addresses the challenges faced by primary school students in Shenzhen, where many struggles to apply reading strategies effectively. By equipping students with knowledge of both targeted reading strategies and a portfolio-based reading approach, the study aims to enhance their ability to become successful L2 English readers. This integrated approach is expected to significantly improve their reading skills and overall language development.

Keywords: Second Language, Reading strategy, Reading Portfolio, Education, Linguistic

1. Introduction

Reading is an incredibly important tool for gaining knowledge, broadening horizons, and developing self-confidence. The fundamental skill of reading is to comprehend the meaning of texts [1]. However, reading comprehension can be challenging when the texts are unfamiliar or complex [2] and it can be difficult and slow [3]. In second language (L2) reading research, it has been shown that learners can employ various techniques or strategies to acquire, store and retrieve information. Studies suggest it is possible for non-native readers to overcome language deficiencies and achieve greater reading proficiency by using reading strategies.

2. Teaching Context and Issue

The school discussed in this essay is a private primary school in Shenzhen. It was founded on the concept of small classes (there are only sixteen students in each class). Students have benefited a lot from the small class system as they are provided with sufficient peer working chances as well as teacher feedback. Hence, they have a greater proficiency in English compared to public school students.

The upper grade students have been introduced to reading strategies such as asking questions, predicting, and summarizing in their ESL classes. However, most of the students merely know the basic concepts and rarely apply reading strategies effectively or efficiently. In other words, they simply know several strategies as declarative knowledge referring to ‘what’ [4]; they lack the procedural knowledge of ‘how’ [5] and conditional knowledge referring to ‘when’ [6].

As Grabe and Stoller stated, reading strategies and strategy instruction are not independent entities in L2 reading [7]. Considering that point, this essay explores possible teaching approaches to facilitate the acquisition of reading strategies to improve students’ reading comprehension and encourage them to become successful (skilled and strategic) readers [1].

3. Literature Review

3.1. Reading Strategy and its Significant Importance in L2 Reading

Reading strategies are techniques used by readers, which enable their reading to be ‘easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations’. Classification of the reading strategies varies among researchers. Many classifications are based on the time that reading strategies are implemented, for example, Grabe and Stoller classified reading strategies into three categories: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading (see Table 1) [7].

Table 1: Reading Strategy List adapted from Paris et al.

Pre-reading	While-reading	Post-reading
• Setting reading purpose. • Accessing prior knowledge. • Asking questions based on the title. Semantic mapping. • Skimming for general idea. • Previewing the text. • Reviewing instructions. • Identifying text structure and genre. • Determine what is known about the topic. • Predicting what might be read.	• Checking comprehension in reading. • Identifying the main idea. • Making inferences. • Recognising text structure patterns. • Looking for discourse markers. • Monitoring vocabulary knowledge. • Predicting the main idea of each paragraph. • Comparing what is read with what is known. • Evaluating the value of what is being read. • Rereading the text.	• Appreciating the text and writer. • Revisiting pre-reading expectations. • Reflecting on text understanding. • Consolidating and integrating information. • Evaluating text value. • Determining what additional information is needed. • Applying new information to the task. • Relating the text to one’s own experience. • Critiquing the text.

It should be recognised that the list above is hardly exhaustive because of the intricate nature of reading strategies. The strategies in Table 1 are also without any linear, sequential or hierarchical importance order [8]. Particularly, those strategies are applied by successful readers in clusters interactively rather than as individual approaches [9][10][11]. For example, making inference of unknown words and expressions depends on activating prior knowledge, understanding text structure, monitoring comprehension, and engaging in many other strategies.

Depending on the function, however, reading strategies can be categorised into other groups. Cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies are especially highlighted among these. Cognitive strategies help readers figure out the meaning of texts [11]. Moreover, there is a binary division of cognitive strategies: bottom-up and top-down. According to Salataci and Akyel, and Richards, by applying bottom-up strategies, readers can identify the meaning of words, the grammatical category of words, sentence syntax, text details etc. [11] [12]. By applying top-down strategies, such as making predictions, getting the gist of the text, skimming, etc., readers can utilise background knowledge to interpret texts.

In contrast, metacognitive strategies are about readers' understanding and controlling of their cognitive strategies process to perform successfully (e.g., planning, arranging, and evaluating) [6][8][13]. For instance, evaluating the efficiency of skimming for information is a metacognitive strategy as this is the understanding and controlling of the cognitive strategy: skimming a text for specific information.

The results of numerous empirical studies suggest that successful learners use cognitive and metacognitive strategies to a greater degree than less successful learners. Furthermore, successful learners understand when and how to apply appropriate reading strategies for various tasks [6].

3.2. Teaching Reading Comprehension Strategy in L2 Reading Class

Undoubtedly, reading strategies contribute greatly to enhancing L2 reading comprehension. However, the process of learning strategies is ongoing and continuous [6]. Some readers are unable to comprehend texts even after decades of reading practice, however, assisting struggling readers with the acquisition of reading strategies may be crucial in helping them to comprehend better [3]. Numerous researchers, e.g. [14][7][2][5][15] have also emphasised that effective reading strategies are teachable. For example, Carrell et al. found that readers who were trained to use semantic mapping performed significantly better in L2 reading than those without training.

In view of this, some researchers have advocated the integration of reading strategies into classroom instruction. Taylor et al. highlighted explicit reading strategy training (ERST), in which reading strategies are explicitly introduced to L2 readers with the goal of enhancing L2 reading comprehension [16]. This advocacy echoes the characteristics of one of the instructions Hudson indicated: explaining the nature and purpose of reading strategies carefully [8]. The rest of those suggested instructions' characteristics are 1) specifying the benefit of using reading strategies; 2) modelling the use in reading, providing ample practice and feedback and offering a content base for authentic learning purposes; 3) encouraging the use of strategies to new learning situations.

Grabe and Stoller highlighted similar instructional procedures: 1) assess students' reading needs; 2) define meaningful instructional goals and objectives; 3) design (and redesign) the course; 4) plan purposeful reading lessons; 5) adopt, adapt and develop instructional materials and assessment instruments; 6) provide feedback to students on various aspects of reading; 7) adjust daily lessons in response to students' immediate needs, responses and attitudes; 8) redefine and adjust curricular priorities to meet students' evolving needs [7].

It is easy to discern from the above that L2 reading teachers should understand not only the nature of reading and teaching methodologies but also the nature of students and the context (text topic, contents, genre etc.) [13]. Unsurprisingly, teachers are advised to choose student-appropriate strategies and texts cautiously [17].

3.3. Reading Portfolio Approach

A portfolio is defined as 'a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in a given area. This collection must include student participation

in selection of portfolio content; the guidelines for selection; the criteria for judging merit; and evidence of student self-reflection' [18]. It is used as an alternative assessment method to critiqued conventional tests. This is because conventional tests impede the motivation of students [19] by testing them with structured format approaches, like multiple-choice and true or false questions with high-stakes outcomes [18][20]. Conversely, a portfolio shows students' current knowledge better and presents students' detailed thoughts, progress and achievements. Portfolios have also been used as activities to develop students' foreign language skills [21].

As a reading record of a student [22], a reading portfolio is a useful tool for both teachers and students for the following reasons: 1) it is a journal of students' reading development across the entire reading classes. 2) It helps students build metacognitive strategies, like rereading, asking questions and taking notes. 3) It helps teachers to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of the students. 4) It motivates students to output because it derives from students' authentic experience. 5) It contributes to students' reading strategies' with others [20].

However, there are limitations as well. For example, it is complex in terms of vocabulary and structure [23]. It also requires a large effort from both teachers and students [20]. Valencia stated that the items included in a portfolio are almost limitless but may contain reading logs, selected reading work and written reading responses [24]. Additionally, Mualim and Aziez indicated that a reading portfolio should contain the course's goals, students' favourite and selected texts and clearly defined criteria for marking and evaluation on a continuous basis [23].

Cohen and Wiener [25] provided more details about the seven sections in a good reading portfolio: 1) a reading log - including all the texts students read and all the texts' descriptions; 2) the reading project-including various post-reading tasks, e.g., essays, diaries, book reports etc. 3) self-reflection or assessment reports-including checklists or brief notes where students can record their reading achievements; 4) reading strategy checklists which can show the readers' reading development across time; 5) rubrics, criteria and expectations of reading tasks; 6) reading test-process and performance-oriented, not including multiple choices or true or false questions; 7) teacher observation and diagnostic notes – with habitual reading behaviours and collaborative learning skills especially recorded. Although there are detailed suggested contents for reading portfolios, the exact content of the portfolio can vary due to different curriculum goals and different students [24]. In other words, a reading portfolio is flexible in its nature.

4. The Solution to the Issue

At that private primary school in Shenzhen, few upper grade students have developed good reading habits, and even fewer are successful strategic L2 readers, despite being introduced to some reading strategies, as mentioned earlier. It is necessary for L2 reading teachers to intensify the intervention of reading strategies in class, which empowers the development of students' reading strategies from the basic declarative knowledge of 'what' to a more advanced procedural knowledge of 'how' and the conditional knowledge of 'when' [4][6][5].

Considering this, the use of Explicit Reading Strategy Training (ERST) [16] is proposed as the main instructional method for L2 reading classes. Adapted from the proposition of previous researchers, the ERST could consist of the following procedures:

- The teacher explains the concept of a newly introduced strategy.
- The teacher reinforces students' understanding of the strategy by modelling. Voluntary groups or individuals can model if this strategy if understand the concept well.
- Students apply the strategy or strategies in learning groups and the teachers assist when necessary.
- Students use the strategy in class independently. The teacher should provide oral feedback simultaneously.

- Students use the taught strategy again in follow-up reading tasks which are normally assigned as filling out relevant worksheets. The teacher should give written feedback.

By utilising this method, students can gain proficiency in applying the strategy (how). It should be noted that these procedures are not fixed, and the teacher should adjust the teaching procedures according to students' academic behaviours and lay emphasis on the challenging parts, like modelling more or practising more. As for the texts involved in the class, the majority should be appropriate fiction texts since quality stories can arouse students' interest in reading and encourage them to learn and develop necessary reading strategies. An example of a quality text can be seen in the Oxford Reading Tree series (level five). Each book narrates a unique story which is highly suitable for fourth graders.

Given that the process of learning strategies is ongoing and continuous [6], it requires meticulous records and the reflection of both teachers and students. Moreover, the use of reading portfolios as reading journals [20] could be an effective approach to meet the teaching needs of the instructional materials' adaptation and development; it also allows for student feedback, the daily adjustment of lessons based on students' immediate needs and more [7].

Meanwhile, the application of a reading portfolio could develop students' metacognitive strategies such as rereading, asking questions, and taking notes. In addition, reading portfolios can motivate students to engage in reading by allowing them to reflect on their own authentic experiences [20]. To align with the grade four students' reading strategies learning and development goals, the tailored portfolio could contain the following sections (adapted from Valencia [24] and Cohen and Wiener [25]):

- The reading log. It will start with fiction texts then shift to non-fiction texts.
- The reading strategy list. It will be organised into pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading strategies [7][8] as it shows in the table from part 3.1.
- Selected reading work. Students will be required to finish some follow-up written worksheets (for example, summarising the story in their own words or comparing what they know with what they have learned).
- The checklist. Students will evaluate their level of understanding of the newly introduced strategy on a scale from one to ten and document their learning difficulties.
- Teachers' written feedback. The teacher will comment on the worksheets and give learning advice on the checklist.

It is important to mention that the reading strategy list is organised according to three reading phases instead of functions, as it informs students of the appropriate time to use the strategy. Some strategies could be introduced individually, for example, setting the reading purpose and looking for discourse markers. This is due to their ease of explication and transferability from text to text. Moreover, the follow-up tasks could be simply asking students to write their ideas down on blank paper after class. Then, the teacher could save time designing worksheets.

However, it is more common to apply related strategies in clusters as successful readers do [9][10][1]. Some reading strategies from the same reading phase can be introduced in groups. For example, accessing prior knowledge, predicting what might be read and asking questions based on the title in the pre-reading phase could be introduced together. This is because the analysis of the related prior knowledge and the questions regarding the title could provide hints to the students' prediction of the text. Similarly, appreciating text and writer, evaluating text value and critiquing the text in the post-reading phase could be grouped since they all involve making a judgement about the strengths and weaknesses of the text.

In addition, some strategies could be used together across three reading phrases. For example, identifying the text's genre in pre-reading, identifying the main idea and recognising text structure

patterns while reading and reflecting on text understanding in post-reading. Obviously, recognising the text genre, identifying patterns and the main idea can aid students in reflecting effectively. By embedding the text genre, the text pattern and the main idea, students could better understand the text as a whole. Based on this, it is then reasonable to expect students to produce a written reflection/summary. Figure 1 is an example pedagogical worksheet.

The worksheet is titled "Mountain Story Map" and is designed for summarizing a story. It features a mountain-shaped line graph that spans across five vertical rectangular boxes. The boxes are labeled "BEGINNING", "RISING ACTION", "CLIMAX", "FALLING ACTION", and "ENDING". Each box contains several horizontal lines for writing. At the top of the worksheet, there are two boxes: "Title of the story:" and "Name:". The entire worksheet is framed with a decorative border.

Figure 1: Example worksheet.

Figure 1 can be used to summarise the story read. It is a useful tool for both teachers and students which coincides with the statements of Hudson [8] and Cirocki [20]. First of all, students could practice the two more difficult learnt reading strategies - reflecting on text understanding and recognising the main idea. Meanwhile, to summarise the story, students must reread the text. Thus, the metacognitive strategy is also engaged.

By fulfilling the task, the students' proficiency, both strengths and weaknesses, in utilising the two strategies will be demonstrated. Teachers could then gather the evidence needed to adjust or redesign lesson plans. As students grow more proficient with the application of combined strategies, teachers may remove the five text pattern elements from the worksheet. As a result, students can gain another chance to practice one more learnt strategy: recognising the text pattern.

5. Conclusion

This essay puts forward the combination of explicit reading strategy training and reading portfolio approaches to facilitate reading strategy acquisition of upper grade students in a Chinese private primary school. The feasibility of this intervention could be attributed to various exclusive factors as mentioned in part two: the small size class, ample peer work and abundant feedback from teachers. Nevertheless, those factors are far from enough to promise success. Successful implementation requires a considerable amount of planning and preparation to ensure students are exposed to plenty of strategies that are appropriate for their level of development and understanding.

Additionally, students may possess varied needs and talents, which poses obstacles in crafting a lesson that is effective for everyone. Furthermore, teachers should be knowledgeable of the diverse strategies and effective teaching methodologies. It also necessitates time to monitor the progress students make in understanding reading strategies and make adjustments accordingly. However,

teaching and practising reading strategies can be well worth the effort, as it aids immensely in shaping strategic readers.

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