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**Explicit Teaching of Cognitive Strategies and its Effect on the
Reading Comprehension of ESP Readers**

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In the Name of God
The Beneficent,
The Merciful

Dedicated to

*the soul of my father
and
my devoted mother*

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ABSTRACT

As learners have the most important role in education, raising their awareness of learning strategies and helping them utilize these strategies practically is a crucial aim for teachers. One type of these learning strategies is cognitive strategies. The present study aims at examining the effect of explicit teaching of cognitive strategies on the reading comprehension of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) readers. To this end, two tests (TOEFL and a reading comprehension) as well as an attitude elicitation questionnaire were administered to 60 male and female ESP readers studying accounting at Tabriz University. First, TOEFL was administered to all the students to homogenize the participants regarding general language proficiency. Then, a reading comprehension test was administered to all subjects as the pre-test. Next, experimental group received instruction on reading strategies based on The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach model. Subsequently, all subjects were given the same reading comprehension test as the post-test and were asked to write down test completion time on top of their answer sheet. Finally, an attitude measurement was administered to the experimental group. Data analysis revealed that the experimental group which received instruction on cognitive strategies outperformed the control group on the reading comprehension test. The study concluded that, students of various reading competency benefit differently from reading strategies. The amount of gains made by low proficiency group was found to be much greater than that made by high proficiency group. In addition, the results confirmed that sufficient length of time is required for mastering how to apply strategies skillfully and automatically. Students generally responded positively to the use of reading strategies and acknowledged these strategies as good, effective, and useful for their reading comprehension.

Keywords: Cognitive strategies, Reading strategies, ESP readers, Reading strategy instruction

CHAPTER ONE

Preliminaries

1.1 Introduction

Reading is a basic skill for language learning. Second language learners need to be trained to read communicatively and fluently considerable quantities of authentic and non-authentic materials. Richards and Renandya (2002) stress the importance of reading skill because of the following facts:

In many second or foreign language teaching situations reading receives a special focus. There are a number of reasons for this. First many foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals. They want to be able to read for information, for their career, and for pedagogical purposes. Extensive exposure to linguistically comprehensible written text can enhance the process of language acquisition (p.273).

English as an international language has become the primary means of communication for many professions (e.g. physicians, engineers, businessmen, lawyers, scientists, etc.) around the world. In Iran, English is the most widespread foreign language. The ability to read in English is crucial not only for educational goals, but also for one's promotion in career. English is one of the subjects learned at secondary schools in Iran as well as at colleges and universities in the country. However, many of the students enter higher education unprepared for reading demands due to their low level of reading strategy knowledge. Accordingly, helping students to raise their awareness of learning strategies and to make use of these strategies is a significant aim for teachers. One category of such learning strategies pertains to cognitive domain including scanning, skimming, skipping unknown words and previewing for general meaning.

Oxford (2001) believes that, learning strategies are teachable, and any program directed toward strategy instruction can potentially lead to considerable achievements in listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as strategy use and self- efficacy (i.e. a perception of being effective as a learner), anxiety reduction, increased motivation, strategy knowledge, and positive attitudes.

The importance of reading strategies has inspired many second language reading researchers to focus on them. Singhal (2001) says “ reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with the written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension” (p.1). Research in the second language reading suggests that learners use a variety of strategies to assist them with the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information (Rigney, as cited in Singhal, 2001).

In this study the researcher tries to see how reading comprehension of ESP readers is affected by The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) as a model for teaching reading strategies.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In most Iranian universities English for General Purposes (EGP) courses are taught in the first year and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in the second year. The EGP textbooks usually consist of reading comprehension texts with general topics followed by some grammatical and vocabulary activities. However, ESP textbooks consist of reading passages with specific topics related to students` field of study followed by grammatical and vocabulary activities. The method of teaching is the same in both EGP and ESP courses with minor differences such as translation practice which is mostly favored by ESP instructors. The prevailing techniques in reading sessions of ESP courses are to define some words, to translate the passages, and to answer reading comprehension exercises. In the final exam,

most students face difficulties in understanding meaning of the texts. The problem exists even in the case of familiar words and structures.

Successful readers have a variety of strategies to help fix-up their reading skill when they are struggling to comprehend the text. Accordingly, it is worth conducting research to find efficient instructional methods for teaching reading strategies.

In this study, the researcher tries to study the impact of reading strategies on ESP readers.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The success of strategy training depends on many factors such as individual characteristics, different contexts and various proficiency levels (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Although there is a general consensus that strategy training enhances reading comprehension, its effectiveness has to be demonstrated in different contexts (Griffiths, 2006). In a similar vein, the main objective of this study is to explore the impact of explicit teaching of cognitive strategies on Iranian ESP readers.

It was believed that ESP readers of various proficiency levels benefit differently from reading strategies. Accordingly, the second purpose is to study the effectiveness of reading strategy instruction on the readers with different proficiency levels. Findings of some studies in the field of learning strategies (such as O'Malley & Chamot 1990) have confirmed that learning strategies help students accomplish learning tasks (such as listening and reading comprehension tasks) quickly and relatively in a short period of time. This leads to consider the impact of reading strategies on developing fast readers.

The final purpose of the research is to elicit Iranian accounting university students' attitudes towards strategy training which is achieved through data collection and data analysis process.

1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study was an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Does instruction of cognitive strategies have any significant effect on the reading competency of Iranian ESP readers?
2. Is there any relationship between effectiveness of cognitive strategies and different reading competency levels of Iranian students in ESP contexts?
3. Does the implementation of reading strategies help students accomplish reading comprehension tests more quickly?
4. Do subjects have positive attitudes towards teaching reading strategies?

On the basis of the above questions the following hypotheses were formulated:

H0 1: There is no relationship between teaching of cognitive strategies and reading comprehension improvement of Iranian ESP readers.

H0 2: There is no relationship between the effectiveness of cognitive strategies and reading competency levels of Iranian students in ESP contexts.

H0 3: Reading strategies do not help students accomplish reading comprehension tests more quickly.

H0 4: ESP readers do not have positive attitudes towards teaching reading strategies.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Strategy teaching is very promising. Strategy instruction will not only improve comprehension of various learning tasks (such as reading or listening) but also help learners take control of their own learning (Dreyer & Nel, 2003).

Although teaching of reading strategies has been the focus of attention in recent years and many projects have been conducted in this field, little is known about the effects of strategy instruction on reading comprehension of ESP readers. In this sense, this study is significant, since it extends the existing knowledge in the area of strategy training. The present study investigates the role of reading strategy instruction in the ESP course of accounting in Iranian universities. The researcher also investigated the effectiveness of reading strategies on students with different reading competency. The impact of such strategies on time needed for the accomplishment of reading comprehension is the other objective.

The results of this study are of use for teaching reading to ESP and English for academic purposes (EAP) students who need to be able to do extensive reading to stay update in their field of study.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

While the study provides some implications for teachers in ESP courses, it is not free from limitations. The followings are the limitations of this study.

1. This study considered just one language skill (reading comprehension). If it had been done on various skills such as listening or speaking, more generalizable results would have been gained.
2. The researcher limited her study to a group of 60 male and female learners of about the same age studying accounting at Tabriz University. Selecting students from various subjects was out of the scope of this study.
3. Multiple-choice questions were implemented to elicit students' attitudes toward strategy training. Although open-end questions were suitable for the purpose of a

qualitative investigation, the researcher used multiple-choice format because of its feasibility as well as objectivity.

1.7. Definition of Key Terms

The terms “Learning Strategies”, “Reading Strategies”, “Cognitive Strategies”, “ESP Readers”, and “Reading strategy instruction” are utilized in this study in the following senses.

1. Learning strategies

Allen (2003) defines learning strategy as “a step or action that is designed to enhance learning, that is not automatic, and it is deliberately chosen by the learner and applied to a learning task” (p.321).

2. Reading strategies

Pani (2004) quotes Barnett`s (1988) definition of reading strategies as “mental operations involved when readers approach a text effectively to make sense of what they read” (p.355).

3. Cognitive strategies

Oxford (2001) believes that Cognitive strategies enable the learner to control the language material in direct ways, e.g. through reasoning, analysis, note taking, summarizing, outlining, recognizing information to develop stronger schemas (knowledge structure).

4. English for specific purposes (ESP)

Richard and Schmidt (2002) define ESP as: The role of English in language course or program of instruction in which the context and aims of course are fixed by the specific needs of a particular group of learners.

5. Reading strategy instruction

In this study, reading strategy instruction refers to a method of teaching students how to comprehend reading texts by teaching them the reading strategies that efficient learners use.

1.8 Abbreviations

ESP: English for Specific Purposes

EAP: English for academic purposes

EGP: English for General Purposes

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

CALLA: Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

ELT: English Language Teaching

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Introduction

Increased interest in student-centered learning approaches amongst language educators has led to numerous studies investigating individual language learning strategies and their relationship to achievement in learning second/foreign languages. Ample research has been conducted dealing with reading, reading comprehension, reading skills and strategies, and ESP readers since 1980s. Each study has focused on reading from its own perspective, thereby presenting a particular account of reading for its own purposes. In order to shed light on the issue in this area, the existing literature concerning reading comprehension, learning strategies, reading strategies and the related classification are reviewed. Afterward, models of reading strategy instruction and pedagogical implications of strategy instruction are dealt with. As this study assesses reading strategies on ESP readers, relevant literature regarding ESP readers is a part of the enquiry. Finally, research findings on strategy teaching will be reviewed.

2.2 Reading Comprehension

Interest in second language acquisition, particularly as it relates to reading in the second language, has originated in the past decades. According to Anderson (as cited in Karbalaeei, 2010), reading is the interaction of four factors including the reader, the text, the fluent reading or “the ability to read at an appropriate rate with adequate comprehension,” and strategic reading, or “the ability of the reader to use a variety of reading strategies to accomplish a purpose for reading” (p. 165). Discovering the best methods and techniques or processes the learners choose to utilize, is the goal of research in reading strategies.

For many students, reading is the most important of four skills in second language, particularly in English as a second or foreign language (Carrel, Davine & Eskey, 1988).

Almost reading is the main reason for learning second/foreign languages around the world.

Aebersold and Field (1997) assert that the acquisition of reading skills in a second or foreign language is a priority for millions of learners around the world, and there is a growing demand for both effective reading courses as well as high-quality second language materials.

Richards and Renandya (2002) have also focused on the importance of reading skill as they point out:

In many second or foreign language teaching situations reading receives a special focus. There are a number of reasons for this. First many foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals. They want to be able to read for information, for their career, and for pedagogical purposes. Extensive exposure to linguistically comprehensible written text can enhance the process of language acquisition (p.273).

Since reading skill is of utmost importance, its teaching would not be considered a simple task. According to Celce Murica (2001) teaching reading skills to non-native speakers of English involves unique problems and challenges of all possible levels of instruction. Students clearly need help in learning to read in a foreign language. “Unassisted, students learn strategies that impede their obtaining meaning efficiently from printed text” (Hosenfield, 1984, p.234).

Although the significance of reading comprehension is emphasized by many experts, there is not agreement on the definition of reading comprehension. Richard and Schmidt (2002) define reading as perceiving written materials in order to understand

their meaning. This cannot be done silently and the result is called reading comprehension.

Nunan (1999) argues that reading is an interactive process involving the exploitation of linguistic knowledge and real world knowledge. In the most general terms we may say that reading involves the reader, the text and the interaction between reader and text (Rumelhart, as cited in Aebersold & Field, 1997).

Smith (2004) has the same view and asserts that comprehension is the condition of relating whatever we are attending to in the real world around us to knowledge, intensions, and expectations we already have in our head. Kern (1989) holds that “reading in any language is cognitively demanding, involving the coordination of attention, memory, perceptual processes, and comprehension processes” (p. 40).

From the definitions above, it can be concluded that reading comprehension is mentally active interaction between readers and texts, deducting information included in texts, understanding main idea of written materials, and relating background knowledge with information provided in texts.

2.3 Reading Objectives

Students need to have an understanding of the purpose for reading and viewing particular texts before they start reading.

Traditionally, it was believed that reading goals are to read for meaning or to recreate the writer`s meaning, to read for improving pronunciation, practicing grammar points, and learning new vocabulary. But modern definitions as mentioned above put great focus on reading as comprehension process. In fact, when readers do not comprehend texts they are not reading.

Hyland (as cited in Karbalaei, 2010) points out that “There are different purposes for reading. The purposes of reading are to have general knowledge, get a specific detail, find the main idea or theme, learn, remember, delight, summarize, and do research” (p. 167). As readers` purposes for reading change, they vary the way they read. For example, they do not read the poem the same way they would a prose passage. When they read for information they read differently from when they read for interest or for pleasure. If they are reading for pleasure they are likely to read toward the top of reading speed, or at a rate that permits extensive reading. “Most account of the reading comprehension process focus on three elements: the text being read, the background knowledge possessed by the reader, and contextual aspects relevant to the interpreting the text” (Royer, Bates, & Konold, 1984, p. 92). They believe another element that is important in a discussion of reading comprehension is the reader`s intent. The importance of intent is apparent without much thought. When we have read a novel or short story for pleasure, we can report general details such as plot and gist with ease, but recalling with more detail may be difficult. If we attempt to recall what we have read in great detail, we quickly resort to fabrication, and our recall may be based more on general knowledge than on remembered fact. Compare this performance to what can be recalled after reading a professional article. Most researchers could report in great detail the logic, citations, specific procedures, outcomes, and conclusions of articles they have read with little difficulty. These two examples refer to the fact that the level of detail learned from text will vary depending on what the reader wants to learn from text. The following purposes for reading are introduced by Richard and Schmidt (2002, p. 443).

- *Literal comprehension*: reading in order to understand, remember, or recall the information explicitly contained in a passage.

- *Inferential comprehension*: reading in order to find information which is not explicitly stated in a passage, using the reader's experience and instruction, and by inferring.
- *Critical or evaluative comprehension*: reading in order to compare information in a passage with reader's own knowledge and values.
- *Appreciative comprehension*: reading in order to gain an emotional or other kind of valued response from a passage.

2.4 Learning Strategies

The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek word *strategia*, which means steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war. The war like meaning of *strategia* has fortunately fallen away, but the control and goal-directedness remain in the modern version of the word (Oxford, as cited in Oxford 2003a).

Learning strategies have received much attention since the late 1970's and the investigation of language learning strategies has advanced our understanding of the processes learners use to develop their skills in a second or foreign language. The interest in focusing on learning strategies appeared when the emphasis on foreign language research shifted from the teacher to the learner and educational account for some of the differences in how students learn. Harlow (as cited in Ok, 2000) insists that although the instructional process involves both teacher and reader, the bulk of research efforts throughout the history of education have centered teaching techniques, while neglecting the importance of learner himself. Many foreign language teachers were so concerned with finding the best method or with getting the correct answer that they fail to attend to the learning process. Therefore, the interest centered on students and their learning and on how students learn and how they can be guided to learn well matter much more than teachers and teaching.

There are different definitions of strategies and learning strategies. Allen (2003) defines learning strategy as “a step or action that is designed to enhance learning, that is not automatic, and it is deliberately chosen by the learner and applied to a learning task” (p. 321). To be a strategy user a student must (1) have alternatives from which to choose; (2) deliberate on the advantages and disadvantages of each relative to task at hand; and (3) select the strategy because it is judged to be more effective for meeting goals than its alternatives (Allen, 2003).

Brown (2000) states that “strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation to achieve a particular end, planned design for controlling and manipulating certain information” (p. 113). He calls strategies contextualized “battle plans” that might vary from moment to moment, or day to day, or year to year. Strategies vary intra-individually. Weinstein and Mayer (as cited in Ellis, 2004, p. 315) defines learning strategy in this way, “learning strategies are behaviors and thought that a learner engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner`s encoding process.”

According to Oxford (2001):

Learning strategies are operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and faster use of information, specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations (p. 166).

To these definitions, one proposed by Cohen (2003) should be added. He maintains, “Language learning strategies are conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of target language” (p. 280).

Studies show that less skilled L₂ learners sometimes are not even aware of the non-communicative strategies they use, such as translation, rote memorization, and repetition (Nyikos, as cited in Oxford, 2002). However less effective learners use these strategies in a random, even desperate manner, without careful orchestration and without targeting the strategies to the task (Vann & Abraham, as cited in Oxford, 2002).

Griffiths (2008) based on 30 years of debate on definition of language learning strategies defines them as “activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning” (p.87).

Learning strategies are classified into some groups. These classifications are also applicable to reading strategies.

2.4.1 Taxonomy of language learning strategies.

Six major groups of L2 learning strategies have been identified by Oxford (2001). Alternative taxonomies have been offered by O’Malley and Chamot (1990) and others. But Oxford’s classification of reading strategies is more related to the objectives of this study. Subsequently, elaboration on more classifications is not in the scope of the present study. Oxford (2001) divides learning strategies into six categories:

Cognitive strategies enable the learner to control the language material in direct ways, e.g. through reasoning, analysis, note taking, summarizing, outlining, recognizing information to develop stronger schemas (knowledge structure).

Metacognitive strategies are employed for managing the learning process for L₂ task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study pace and schedule, monitoring mistakes, evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of language strategy.

Memory-related strategies help learners link one L₂ item or concept with another, but do not necessarily involve deep understanding. Various memory-related strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an early stage (e.g. acronyms), while other techniques create learning and retrieving via sound (e.g. rhyming), images (e.g. mental picture of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g. the keyword method), mechanical means (e.g. flashcards).

Compensatory strategies help the learner make up for missing knowledge (e.g. guessing from context in listening and reading, using synonyms and talking around the missing words to aid speaking and writing).

Affective strategies include identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk.

Social strategies help the learner work with questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and explaining social norms.

2.5 Reading Strategies

Reading comprehension has been highly important in second and foreign languages. To help language learners tackle reading comprehension problems, researchers have focused on investigating reading strategies. Reading research also sheds light on cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies, perception of strategies, and strategy training and use in reading comprehension.

The current trend of research in second language reading has begun to focus on reader's strategies. Reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal the way readers