METACOGNITIVE READING STRATEGY USE AMONG MOROCCAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract- Recognizing that textual understanding requires a considerable amount of mental effort, it is evident that recourse to metacognitive reading strategies can be of significant assistance. In essence, the usage of these strategies while being involved in text reading enables readers to achieve an efficacy-based comprehension. However, it can be observed that many Moroccan EFL university learners’ strategic behavior in text processing is typically characterized by their reduced dependency on metacognitive strategies. This may hinder learner readers’ attempts at reaching an adequate comprehension. Thus, this study attempts to probe into the most frequently implemented metacognitive text-processing strategies among Moroccan EFL university learners. The data were elicited through a ‘retrospective questionnaire’ that was administered to a sampled first-semester university learners (n= 63) after assigning them two reading comprehension tests (i.e., narrative, expository). The findings revealed that the participants did not sufficiently use metacognitive strategies during the act of textual reading.

Index Terms- Monitoring, Metacognitive Strategies, Reading Strategies, Text Analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

The link existing between metacognition and the reading process, as a cognitive act, has been underscored by many researchers (e.g., Brown, 1981; Garner, 1987; Casanave, 1988) interested in the receptive skill of reading. In fact, textual processing necessitates a great amount of metacognitive thinking and control for the attainment of effective comprehension. This delineates that the methodical use of reading techniques on the part of learners plays a key role in the analysis and synthesis of the text content. In this respect, a range of leading research studies were conducted as regards the investigation of the learners’ reading strategy use. Among these studies is the one effected by Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) who examined native versus non-native readers’ strategy awareness and use (metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, support strategies) in text processing. The findings of this study revealed that ESL (non-native) readers had more recourse to support strategies for attaining an adequate understanding of the text input. Also, the results displayed that both native and non-native readers of high reading ability reported higher usage for cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies than lower-reading ability learners of the same groups (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

Another major study undertaken by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) was intended to investigate skilled versus unskilled readers at the level of strategy usage (i.e., global strategies, problem-solving strategies, support strategies) by means of a self-report measure (MARCI). Their findings succinctly suggest that skilled readers use ‘global’ and ‘problem-solving’ strategies more frequently that less skilled readers during the reading process.

Worthy of claiming is that the findings presented by Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) show a significant correlation between higher reading ability and high frequency of cognitive and metacognitive strategy use. This calls into question whether learners of low, or even average, reading ability do not tap some metacognitive strategies (i.e., planning, monitoring, evaluating) with a higher rate during the reading process. Thus, the need for the investigation of the use of metacognitive strategies involved in conducting the reading act among Moroccan EFL learners of mixed reading abilities is critical. Further, it is crucial that the issue of identifying which set of strategies (i.e., planning strategies, monitoring strategies, evaluating strategies) is more frequently used than the other strategies by learners be addressed in a Moroccan EFL context. Indeed, the ‘juxtaposition’ of planning, monitoring and evaluating strategy use amongst learners can provide clearer insights in EFL reading research. Given this, this small-scale study is an attempt to probe into the most frequently used metacognitive reading strategies among Moroccan EFL learners in coping with the written discourse. It also attempts to uncover how the process of comprehension monitoring is undertaken by learners during textual analysis. In this regard, some preliminary findings pertaining to these stated objectives will be reported. Issues relevant to the learnability of the metacognitive reading strategies will be discussed.

II. METACOGNITIVE THEORY

The concept of metacognition dates back to the period of the seventies and eighties in which Flavell (1976) focused on the study of human memory. This concept refers to “a variety of decisions and strategic activities that one might engage in during the course of working through a cognitive task or problem” (Lester & Garafalo, 1985). To illustrate, metacognition, as a means of reasoning, is the learner’s basic ability to think critically and reflectively about the cognitive processes that are involved in academic tasks. It
apparently reflects an awareness of the mental processes and strategies required for performing any cognitive endeavour (Schmitt & Newby, 1986).

Indeed, metacognition consists of two interrelated components: knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition (Lester & Garafalo, 1985). The first component, knowledge of cognition, “is concerned with what a person knows about cognitive abilities, processes, and resources in relation to the performance of specific cognitive tasks” (Lester & Garafalo, 1985: 164). This knowledge is divided into three basic elements which are the person variable, the task variable and the strategy variable. The second component, regulation of cognition, pertains to “the regulatory mechanisms used to solve a problem with comprehension during reading” (Griffith & Ruan, 2005: 7). It consists of requisite strategies such as planning how to approach a given written text, monitoring the process of comprehension and evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies used. These three stages assist learners, in a way, to conduct their reading process in a successful manner.

Basically, metacognition can be viewed as a sophisticated set of evaluative thinking processes which efficiently facilitate the execution of a particular cognitive task (e.g., reading). It does equip learners with much broader knowledge of ‘how’, ‘when’ and ‘where’ to use some effective strategies with the intent of reaching a thorough assimilation of the textual content.

III. METACOGNITIVE READING STRATEGIES

Given that cognitive strategies can facilitate the process of tackling learning tasks (i.e., reading), metacognitive strategies are defined as “actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices and which provide a way for learner to coordinate their own learning process” (Oxford, 1990: 136). Indeed, learners make use of metacognitive strategies with the intent of ensuring that text comprehension is sufficiently attained. These strategies enable learners to assess their cognitive progress while engaged in the process of reading the written input. By using metacognitive strategies, learners can define the goals of the assigned task, question the intended meaning and observe the course that they undertake towards achieving a thorough comprehension.

Thus, it can be pointed out that metacognitive strategies can be classified into planning, monitoring and evaluating. The use of all these metacognitive strategies requires learners to be more ‘self-regulated’, ‘self-directed’ and ‘self-controlled’ in an attempt to effectively undertake the reading process. This is illustrated in what follows.

(a) Planning: This strategy refers “to the cognitive processes that function to control information processing or task performance from the outset” (Schmitt & Newby, 1986: 30). As an efficient metacognitive strategy enabling learners to organize the way of tackling a particular task, planning is viewed as a solid foundation upon which the process of reading is strongly based. It is through planning that EFL learners pinpoint the major goals and define the strategies that have to be used to achieve an adequate understanding.

(b) Monitoring: This metacognitive strategy “aids students in keeping track of ongoing cognitive processes and using regulatory strategies to solve problems” (Nietfeld et al., 2005). It significantly assists EFL learners not only to check their understanding of the text’s content, but also to tackle the reading task with greater effectiveness and more accurate efficiency.

(c) Evaluating: It can be conceived of as a paramount strategy via which learners meta-cognitively and critically reflect upon the processes of planning and monitoring that are involved in studying different academic reading tasks. Indeed, this strategy enables EFL readers to measure the extent to which the comprehension process is attained.

All in all, metacognitive strategies can occupy a great part in making the reading process more successful and more efficient, namely at the level of content analysis and meaning synthesis. As claimed by Lawrence (2007), these strategies involve self-reflection and thinking about reading.

IV. COMPREHENSION MONITORING

Gray (1987) contends that comprehension monitoring “entails keeping track of whether or not one is successful in comprehending”. In fact, to make complete sense of the printed text, learners are supposed to be aware that they are proceeding in the right path while reading. That is, they engage in a process of self-questioning and reflection whenever they encounter some unclear ideas and difficult concepts stated in the text. This process of observing one’s understanding, as claimed by Wagoner (1983: 328), is very “essential for competent reading” as it allows readers to focus their attention on getting the overall meaning inherent in the text.

Moreover, detecting a certain comprehension failure, skilled student readers can make recourse to a broad range of strategies which constitute the decisive steps towards remedying the failure in the comprehension of the written discourse. Some of these ‘corrective’ strategies used in the case of a faulty comprehension are explained in Collins and Smith (1980) who classify them as follows: (1) ignoring the obstacles and reading on, (2) suspending judgement, (3) forming a tentative hypothesis, (4) rereading the current sentence, (5) rereading the previous context and (6) going to an expert source. It is through using these procedural steps that learners guide, direct and monitor their understanding in an effective way.
Hence, it seems that comprehension monitoring plays a role in assisting readers to direct their cognitive efforts and metacognitive capabilities with the key objective of assimilating the content. It is through checking one’s understanding while being engaged in reading written texts that one can reach the intended meaning. This can be achieved by EFL readers by explaining and questioning the core concepts and ideas as well as reprocessing the content presented in the text.

V. METHOD

A. Participants

A total of sixty-three of Moroccan EFL university students of the first-semester level took part in the current study. All of them belong to the English Department at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat. Their age ranges between nineteen and twenty-three years old. However, some of them, as an exception, are aged over twenty-three years old. Further, the participants have relatively the same educational and academic background since most of them have received the same curriculum and have studied English as a second/foreign language for four years (one year at Junior High School and three years at High School). Based on the assigned reading tests (i.e., narrative, expository), most of the target learners in this study were of differing reading abilities (skilled and unskilled). The differentiation between skilled and unskilled readers cannot be made on the basis of learners’ rating themselves as ‘Excellent’, ‘Average’ or ‘Not so good’ readers. This kind of ‘self-rating’, which was reported in Mokhtari and Reichard’s (2002) study, could minimize the reliability of the findings. In fact, a reading test can be an effective measure of the testees’ reading potential.

B. Study Design

The current exploratory and descriptive study has a two-fold purpose. It intends to identify the reading strategies that Moroccan EFL first-semester university students use in processing reading passages. As a second purpose, the study seeks to explore how the actual process of comprehension monitoring is performed by EFL learners during the act of reading comprehension. In this sense, to elicit quantitative and qualitative data, two kinds of effective instruments include goal-setting and background knowledge activation, were not adequately depended on by learners in their cognitive engagement in the reading process. This is statistically illustrated below.

VI. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In attempting to reveal the commonest metacognitive reading strategies that are utilized by EFL university learners in the textual analysis process, it was essential to assign the sampled subjects two reading comprehension tests (e.g., narrative and expository) coupled with a ‘retrospective questionnaire’. Based on the analysis of the data, it was observed that the metacognitive reading strategies were used by the target learners on a limited scale. This is presented in the following sections.

C. Planning Strategies

As shown in the findings, the metacognitive strategies were not sufficiently made use of by the participating learners. To illustrate, this type of reading strategies was depended on by the respondents to a limited extent. This reflects the underlying view that EFL learners have an overwhelming tendency towards the utilization of cognitive reading ‘heuristics’ for the attainment of textual understanding. Actually, planning strategies, which include goal-setting and background knowledge activation, were not adequately depended on by learners in their cognitive engagement in the reading process.
achieve by the end of textual processing. With reference to background knowledge use, the subjects stated that they depended, to some extent, on prior knowledge with percentages of 63.49% and 55.56% for the narrative and expository texts respectively. However, only 4.76% of the respondents affirmed that they relied, to a large extent, on their schematic knowledge in reading both types of texts. Overall, it can be deduced that planning strategies (i.e., goal-setting, background knowledge use) were not implemented by the target learners to an extended degree.

D. Monitoring Strategies
As for the monitoring strategies, it is reasonably concluded that the target subjects declared using some techniques to check their ongoing comprehension of the assigned texts (e.g., narrative, expository) included in the two reading tests. The findings related to the monitoring process are tabulated below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Usage of Monitoring Techniques in EFL Text Reading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects (N=63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Figuring out the meaning from context</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rereading former sentences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reinspecting former paragraphs</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skipping difficult terms</td>
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<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stopping reading to check comprehension</td>
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<td>Slow reading</td>
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In effect, upon encountering some difficult words/sentences, learners frequently use some techniques which are embodied in guessing the meaning from context and slow reading. The first one was used with a percentage of 61.90%, whereas the second technique was utilized by 42.85% of the participants. Also, stopping the reading process for a while to remedy their comprehension failure and reprocessing the text’s sentences are effective steps that were basically used by the subjects with percentages of 25.39% and 20.63% respectively. Generally speaking, it can be concluded that the majority of the participating learners did not make sufficient use of monitoring techniques which are part and parcel of effectively interpreting and extending the texts’ input (e.g., narrative, expository). Indeed, though most of the subjects checked their reading process in differing ways, the quality of monitoring was ineffective and typically characterized by inadequacy.

E. Evaluating Strategies
As concerns evaluating, it is evident that almost all the subjects did not engage in the process of self-assessing their understanding of the textual content upon completing the reading act. In other terms, the targeted learners did read the assigned written texts without measuring the extent to which they had comprehended the included input. The results attest to the stark lack of evaluating among the learners as shown in the ensuing figure.

Remarkably, 96.82% of learners did not engage in the evaluation process to fully strengthen their mastery of the narrative as well as the expository texts’ content. This shows that the evaluating strategies such as recalling the major ideas and summarizing were not extensively performed by the target learners. This finding is supported by the reading comprehension tests in which only a minority of the participants took the initiative to sum up the texts (narrative & expository) under study in an accurate manner. In effect, the large majority tended to replicate the text content without paraphrasing the ideas/statements. Thus, it can be admitted that the frequently used metacognitive reading strategies among the sampled subjects are embodied in background knowledge use and monitoring. This is indicative of the fact that most EFL learners tend to rely more exclusively on cognitive (i.e., predicting, inferring, main ideas selection) than metacognitive strategies. This is in accord with the findings of previous research studies (e.g., Hamdan, et al., 2010; Tabataba’ian and Zabihi, 2011; Shang, 2011; Dawadi, 2017). In effect, metacognitive strategies, according to the data, were deployed by the target learners in a limited way for processing the text content.

VII. IMPLICATIONS
It is significantly true that Moroccan EFL University learners have a tendency to utilize more cognitive than metacognitive strategies in their way of approaching
the textual input. The outcomes attained in this conducted study reveal that the reading process, as an essential component of language learning, entails ‘higher-order’ thinking skills and critical reasoning on the part of EFL readers. In this regard, the finding of this study is incarnated in the marked insufficiency of metacognitive reading strategy use among EFL readers. Therefore, some practical implications drawn from this small-scale study are presented as follows:

(a) It is recommended that reading comprehension, as a viable course in English language major, be reconsidered and given utmost significance in an attempt to refine Moroccan EFL university learners’ level in text processing, especially at the first-semester level.

(b) It can be further suggested that learners, in the reading comprehension course, be exposed to differential text types, namely narrative and expository, so as to maximize their potential of approaching the included content more effectively.

(c) Learners are expected to be presented with relatively challenging reading texts with purposes of assisting them to develop the potential of applying ‘fix-up strategies’ in any encountered failure in the comprehension process.

(d) The reading comprehension course is supposed to be accompanied with explicit/direct strategy instruction with the intent of enabling flexible use of metacognitive reading strategies among Moroccan EFL university learners.

CONCLUSION

Granted that metacognitive reading strategy use is of crucial significance in text analysis and synthesis, the present paper has tended to manifest the frequent reading strategies tapped by Moroccan EFL learners and reveal how they monitor their understanding of the written discourse. In this sense, it is confirmed that metacognitive strategies, are not made recourse to more frequently by EFL readers when approaching the text content. This evinces that, by heavily depending on the cognitive strategies, most learners focus their mental efforts on gaining an overall understanding without assessing their mastery of the textual input by means of metacognitive heuristics (i.e., planning, monitoring, evaluating).

The participating EFL learners tended to rely on the use of background knowledge and some monitoring tactics. In essence, using prior knowledge and monitoring seem to constitute the most implemented techniques among almost all participant learners. Thus, only these cited ‘heuristics’ were employed by the targeted EFL learners in coping with the written discourse (i.e., narrative, expository). However, the learners reflected a kind of deficiency in the dependence on goal-setting and evaluating. Hence, the process of text reading was manifestly predominated by the limited use of metacognitive strategies in building the text meaning among EFL subjects. This contradicts with Sheorey & Mokhtari’s (2001) claim that both native and nonnative readers of high reading ability use cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies with higher frequency than lower-reading ability learners.

Further, the comprehension monitoring process is typically characterized by inefficiency since the participants targeted in this study did not recruit some strategic moves such as rereading some sentences and paragraphs in order to track their grasping of the included content. Plausibly, though the participating EFL learners reflected their monitoring abilities and engaged themselves, to some extent, in re-reading, their performance in observing their grasp of the text content was insufficient. This is, in a way, in accordance with Pitts’s (1983) claim that readers manifest differences in monitoring skills. Therefore, the combination of planning, monitoring and evaluating on the part of the learners can be the most efficient vehicle of undertaking a successful comprehension of any assigned reading text (e.g., narrative, expository).

Overall, to consolidate EFL learners’ strategic moves in text processing, it is recommended that explicit metacognitive strategy instruction be included in the university curriculum, especially at the first-semester stage. This was emphasized by many researchers (e.g., Taraban et al., 2004; Rupley et al., 2009; Uribe-Enciso, 2015) who accord greater importance to the role of strategy training in enhancing the learners’ reading performance. Indeed, the promotion of the learners’ awareness and use of metacognitive reading strategies can substantially aid in the meaning-making act. Hence, it can be stated that the effective comprehensibility of textual content is causally, if not invariably, correlated with the use of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies on a markedly large scale.

Noteworthy is the fact that the present study is not without some limitations. One limitation is related to the small size of the sampled population (n=63). The inclusion of a larger sample could have guaranteed consistent results. The other limitation is concerned with the issue of addressing only EFL learners belonging to the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat. This was attributable to time constraint that the researcher encountered. Indeed, in order to ensure the generalisability of the findings, other Moroccan Faculties of Letters and Human Sciences should be addressed. This stresses the view that further research is needed for confirmatory purposes.

REFERENCES

Metacognitive Reading Strategy use Among Moroccan EFL University Students


