

The Incidence of Metacognitive Strategies in Reading Comprehension in English Learning.

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Submitted to the Faculty of Human Sciences in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of B.A in the Department

of Linguistics and Languages

University of Nariño

June, 2012

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“Las ideas y conclusiones aportadas en la tesis de grado son responsabilidad exclusiva del autor”

Art. 1 del Acuerdo N° 324 de octubre 11 de 1966. Emanado por el
Honorable Consejo Directivo de la Universidad de Nariño

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RESUMEN

El proceso de aprendizaje de idiomas requiere la aplicación de diferentes técnicas y estrategias con el fin de facilitar su aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, los profesores deben conocer cuáles son las estrategias que deben utilizar con sus alumnos, por ejemplo, las estrategias metacognitivas. Estas estrategias pueden ayudar a los profesores y estudiantes de generar nuevas ideas para mejorar sus habilidades en Inglés, por ejemplo, la comprensión de lectura. De hecho, nuestros estudiantes no tienen el hábito de la lectura en L1 (lengua materna) y por eso no pueden hacerlo en Inglés (L2). Este artículo muestra algunas de las estrategias metacognitivas que se pueden aplicar con el fin de promover y mejorar la comprensión de lectura en Inglés.

Palabras clave: comprensión lectora, estrategias metacognitivas, L1 (lengua materna), L2 (Inglés)

ABSTRACT

Language learning process requires the implementation of different techniques and strategies in order to facilitate its learning. Therefore, teachers should know what strategies they should use with their students for example the metacognitive ones. Such strategies can help teachers and students generate new ideas for improving their skills in English; for example, reading comprehension. In fact, our students do not have the habit of reading in L1 (mother tongue) for that reason and they cannot do it in English (L2). This article shows some metacognitive strategies which can be applied in order to foster and enhance reading comprehension in English.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, metacognitive strategies, L1(mother tongue), L2 (English)

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The Incidence of Metacognitive Strategies in Reading Comprehension in English Learning.

In the process of learning English as a foreign language and taking into account the needs of learners, it has been necessary the application and the development of different techniques and strategies for fostering English learning and its skills; one of them is reading. Reading is a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process which starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs. There is thus an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. The writer encodes thought as language and the reader decodes language to thought (Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 2000). In some cases learners present some difficulties in reading comprehension in English; the problem that they encounter is because of a number of factors including lack of suitable reading strategies, lack of background knowledge related to the topic of the target language or lack of attitudes toward reading, which had been necessary to include different reading strategies for enhancing reading comprehension; one of them is metacognition or metacognitive strategies, which Anderson (2002., p.1) defines as "thinking about thinking." As Anderson states, the use of metacognitive strategies ignites one's thinking and can lead to higher learning and better performance. Furthermore, understanding and controlling cognitive process may be one of the most essential skills that teachers can help foreign language learners develop.

This paper is focused on metacognitive strategies in reading comprehension because research in the area of reading has begun to concentrate on the role of metacognition due to, many English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers find that there is insufficient practice

time for students who are required to cope with studying a new language and to read for content. Learners need to be involved in reading comprehension in English; therefore, metacognitive strategies comprise the executive abilities of learners for getting a successful outcome. Nowadays, researchers and English teachers are studying problems that students show lack of planning in reading, which is related to metacognition. For that reason it is important that teachers know about metacognitive strategies because they may help to overcome reading comprehension problems in English learning.

Moreover, foreign language students at the University of Nariño understand that we, as future teachers, must manage a proficiency and accuracy competence in the four skills of language: Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing. On this paper a special emphasis is placed in Reading.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted process (Adams, 1990). According to Goodman (1998), it is the process of constructing meaning from text. Reading comprehension involves at least two people: the reader and the writer. For students to adequately comprehend text, they will need an awareness of print, which can be obtained through multiple channels to facilitate word recognition. Carlisle and Rice (2002) found that the lack of phonological sensitivity did impede reading, for this reason it has been important to use new strategies for improving reading. In addition to decoding skills, students need vocabulary knowledge and reflect on what has been read.

The current understanding of reading strategies has been shaped significantly by research on what expert readers do (Pressly & Afflerbach, 1995). These studies demonstrate

that successful comprehension does not occur automatically. Rather, successful comprehension depends on directed cognitive effort, referred to as “metacognitive” processing, which consists on knowledge about and regulation of cognitive processing. During reading, metacognitive processing is expressed through strategies, which are “procedural, purposeful, effortful, willful, essential, and facilitative in nature” and “the reader must purposefully or intentionally or willfully appeal to strategies” (Alexander & Jetton, 2000, p. 295), and does so to regulate and enhance learning from text.

Some teachers may assume that reading comprehension will develop naturally without any direct teaching of comprehension (Denton & Fletcher, 2003). This line of reasoning places reading in the same developmental progression as oral language development. Children are able to acquire speech without formal instruction if given enough exposure to it. This led many researchers to believe that given enough exposure to print the child would experience the same developmental pattern.

Instruction of these components like knowledge of syntactic structure and grammar structure enables the child to decode unknown words. These components are the basics or prerequisites needed for reading. Learning to decode is a means to an end, and that end is to read and understand written communication created by others and to be able to write in order to communicate. In other words, reading instruction does not end when students can decode the words. They continue to need instruction that will support their understanding of what they have read and implement reading strategies for improving reading comprehension in English. Therefore, an essential strategy that teachers and students should implement in English learning and reading comprehension are metacognitive strategies. Taking into account the problems that our teachers face daily in the

classrooms, metacognitive strategies provide the teacher the ability to identify students' failures in the process of learning of a foreign language, unfortunately, in our context some teachers spend his/her time explaining to his/her students grammatical rules which students will memorize in a mechanic way this makes learners feel frustrated and bored in a large English class, if the teacher gives a text for reading, students will try to translate every word for understanding of the text. In this way, learners will lose a lot of time and when the teacher asks information about the text, learners will not find adequate and accurate answers to tell the teacher, so that, it causes a big disaster between learners and English teachers; because, some teachers think that are students who do not pay attention to his/her English classes, they are distressed, etc. On the other hand, some students believe that English is a tedious subject, with all those things it is important to promote and facilitate new strategies that encourage learners and teachers to get a good reading comprehension. Therefore, teachers should make students are interested for reading, taking into account students do not read in their L1, the teacher has a great deal to accomplish. One way that the teacher can develop reading comprehension in English is knowing learner's attitudes, talents, needs and interests. With these elements, the teacher can enhance academic achievements by students due to learners do not feel forced to do something, for example, for some students who like sports, the teacher can carry them a reading about sports. Other students like readings about music, science, health, food, etc, as mentioned before; the main idea is attach students' interest for reading. Moreover, it will promote a good relationship between learners and teachers. Although, it is necessary to mention that in our settings like a Pasto, high schools do not have many resources like internet, computers, books, photocopies, etc. The teacher could use markers and board and write the reading that he/she chose to present to his/her students; another, alternative that the teacher could have is to

carry the reading in a nice billboard with a good visualization and a good size of letters for students can appreciate the reading. An important issue to notice is that the teacher must be very creative in his/her English classes; in order for his/her classes not to become monotonous. Then, the teacher can apply to his/her students metacognitive strategies, and he/she can notice reading' problems and give them an adequate monitoring.

Metacognitive Strategies

Reading comprehension requires the decoding of words written in a text and the appropriate application of comprehensive metacognitive strategies. Allen (2003, p.3) says that metacognitive strategies increase readers' meaning construction, monitoring of text and reading comprehension and their ability to evaluate the text they are reading.

Metacognitively skilled readers are readers who are aware of knowledge, procedures and controls of the reading process. They use this knowledge during the reading process to improve reading and comprehension ability.

On the one hand, Oxford (1990) defines metacognitive strategies as actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices and which provide a way for learners to coordinate their own learning process. These are divided into three groups: Centering your learning, Arranging and planning your learning and Evaluating your learning.

Centering your learning: According to Oxford (1990), it helps students to join their attention and energies on certain language tasks, activities, skills and materials. This provides a focus on language learning, for example, overviewing and linking with already known material; revising a concept or set of materials in a future language activity to associate it with what is already known.

Arranging and planning your learning: For Oxford (1990) these strategies help learners to organize and plan so as getting the most out of language learning, for example, finding out about language learning: refers to making an effort to find out how language learning works by reading books or talking with others, then, learners use this information to increase their own language learning by: organizing, setting goals and objectives, identifying the purpose of a language task (decide the purpose of a particular language task involving listening, Speaking, Reading or Writing), planning for a language task (planning for the language elements and functions necessary for an anticipated language task or situation) and seeking practice opportunities.

Evaluating your learning: Oxford (1990) talks about two related strategies, both aid learners checking their language performance; these are, self- monitoring and self-evaluating.

Self-questioning is a common metacognitive comprehension monitoring strategy. If learners find that they can not answer their own questions, or those learners do not understand the material discussed, they must determine what needs to be done to ensure that she/he meets the cognitive goal of understanding the text.

Students decide to go back and re-read the paragraph with the goal of being able to answer the questions they had generated. If after re-reading through the text learners can now answer the questions, they may determine that they understand the material. Thus, the metacognitive strategy of self-questioning is used to ensure that the cognitive goal of comprehension is met.

On the other hand, O'Malley and Chamot (1990), state that metacognitive strategies include selective attention to the task, planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluating. As applied to reading, these metacognitive strategies entail specifying a purpose for reading, planning how the text will be read, self-monitoring for errors in reading comprehension, and self-evaluating how well the overall objectives are being fulfilled, which allows for taking corrective measures if comprehension is not being achieved.

Reading comprehension uses strategies such as reading aloud, guessing, deduction, and summarizing. Research shows that the use of appropriate language learning strategies often results in improved proficiency or achievement overall or in specific skill areas (Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, & Sumrall, 1993). It should be noted that different metacognitive skills interact with each other during the process of reading comprehension. The components are not used in a linear fashion. More than one metacognitive process along with cognitive ones may be worked during a learning task (Anderson, 2002).

In addition, the application of metacognitive strategies in reading comprehension in English in Pasto could cause resistance by older English teachers because they do not believe in new techniques, methods or approaches for teaching and learning a foreign language and they do not like being told what to do in their classroom. These teachers are accustomed to traditional methods and feel more comfortable with focusing on grammar, but if teachers apply these strategies could not only improve English in grammar or reading, but also students could enhance the four skills and sub-skills, because teachers and learners would manage much better time, students would be monitored by the teacher, who would be seeing the possible problems that learners present in this process, at the end, students can notice how their task was, how to do to improve it, what happened through

the reading, etc. Therefore, students can appreciate their accuracy while they are reading and seeing their production and evaluating about it.

Another reason for those teachers to not implement metacognitive strategies in their classes is due to, students only have three hours per week and the teacher should cover the topics which he/she believes more important; unfortunately, it is a big disadvantage teachers deal with; however, teachers can develop their themes focusing on metacognitive strategies and having an adequate management of the time. Moreover, taking into account contexts like Colombia where the goal is to develop different competences in students which are related with metacognitive strategies and reading comprehension that are: interpretative competence, argumentative competence, and propositive competence.

Interpretative competence encompasses the understanding of different kinds of texts, diagrams, charts, and graphs and the skill to identify thesis, antithesis, examples and illustrations. Argumentative competence refers to the ability to explain and justify statements and actions (i.e., explain why, how something is done, show hypothesis, prove facts and support conclusions). Finally, the propositive competence deals with visualizing creativity and production. These competences help students become active agents of their own learning.

Metacognition and reading

Although metacognition has become a “buzz” word in education, it seems that the meaning is often assumed. Kuhn (2000) defined metacognition as, "Enhancing (a) metacognitive awareness of what one believes and how one knows and (b) metastrategic control in application of the strategies that process new information" (p. 178). This

awareness is developmental and lies on a continuum. Proficient readers use one or more metacognitive strategies to comprehend texts. The use of such strategies has developed over time as the reader learns which ones are best suited to aid in comprehension. Pressley et al. (1998) found that students' comprehension was not enhanced by just reading more texts. If the students used even one of the strategies, for example summarizing, comprehension was improved. If students were given a host of strategies that they could apply at their discretion, comprehension was greatly improved. Williams and Burden (1997, 148), for instance, say that metacognitive strategies "include an ability to manage and regulate consciously the use of appropriate learning strategies for different situations. They involve an awareness of one's mental processes and an ability to reflect on how one learns, in other words, knowing about one's knowing."

Grabe and Stoller (2002) indicate that reading long selections of text quickly for general comprehension, which most fluent readers can do in their native language, is difficult to achieve and may not be a skill that is readily transferable to their second language. In the EFL classroom, many readers tend to rely on the slow and careful reading of texts from start to finish, and they have difficulties with reading activities requiring the use of strategies for reading quickly and efficiently, such as skimming a lengthy research article for main ideas (Urquhart and Weir 1998). As many practitioners have found, metacognitive strategies are one way to overcome these problems.

On the other hand, Taylor (1999) defines metacognition as "an appreciation of what one already knows, together with a correct apprehension of the learning task and what knowledge and skills it requires, combined with the ability to make correct inferences about how to apply one's strategic knowledge to a particular situation, and to do so efficiently and

reliably.” For example, learners in a text can do predictions before reading, monitoring comprehension during reading, and reflecting after reading. These strategies help students to understand what they are reading on a higher level than just knowing what happened in a story or teacher introduces the topic of a new read-aloud and ask students what they already know about that topic and finally when students finish, the teacher asks each student to reflect and share one thing that he or she learned from the reading.

Moreover, metacognition is defined by Aebli(1991) as knowledge about cognition, i.e. Knowing about one`s real learning process with its strengths and weaknesses. Students constantly excused themselves for not having done their homework because they lacked time to study English outside of class. However, it is observed that students do not know how to plan their time and besides that, they do not know how to set goals and choose materials for fostering and improving their knowledge in English; it is a problem which face teachers in our schools and high schools because students spend their time in other activities, so that, teachers need to capture students` attention in the learning process, here is where metacognitive strategies take place. Among the main metacognitive strategies are Planning, monitoring, evaluating.

Planning: Previewing the main ideas and concepts of a text; identifying the organizing principle. Students can do predictions about what they are reading, they can analyze, key words, phrases, ideas, linguistic markers or different types of information about the texts. This metacognitive strategy helps to facilitate the learners and connect with reading and find specific information through the texts.

Monitoring: Check understanding and production to keep track of progress and identify problems. Applying this strategy, students can show their knowledge while they are reading if they present problems with this, they can improve it with the teacher`s help.

Evaluating or Self-assessment: Judging how well one has accomplished a learning task. This strategy is applied at the end of the reading process and learners can see how their performance in this task was. So that, learners with difficulties in reading comprehension fail not only because they have less knowledge about tasks, but also because they fail to use the knowledge and skills they have, they tend not to plan, have no strategy in attempting tasks and do not monitor their progress; these failures are lived by our students. The consequence of this is that students do not like reading and they are not interested in improving their reading ability; because students do not know how to do it. Taking into account metacognitive strategies help them to build the reading and foster comprehension. Students have a clearer grasp of what they know and what they do not know, learners know what they can do and what they cannot do and they know what will help them gain the knowledge or understanding they need when they are reading.

Moreover, the importance of metacognition in the English learning process should be stressed since according to O`Malley and Chamot (1990), students who do not possess metacognitive strategies are learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or evaluate their achievements. Teachers must promote these metacognitive strategies in students if they want their students to become autonomous learners.

Williams and Burden (1997) state that involving learners in setting their own language learning goals is an essential component of motivation for learning a language, and that this is an important step towards learner control and autonomy in learning.

Nevertheless, it is believed that helping students to plan their own learning is not the only thing teachers have to do; they need to help students monitor and evaluate their work in order to achieve those goals. Oxford (1990) comments that many languages students adopt a passive role in their learning process and work just to get a good grade and that these attitudes and behavior need to be changed since they make learning more difficult, and the teachers' efforts to train students to be more self-directed and to use better strategies are unsuccessful. One way to help students become more active is to have them assess their own linguistic performance and their attitudes concerning the learning process.

However, it is fundamental for this process that students decide on the criteria they will use to evaluate their work, because in this way they become aware of their problems and feel the need to make decisions about their learning process. As teachers have to understand, it is not enough to encourage students to become autonomous, but it is necessary to take specific steps to help them to reach autonomy, e.g. training them in learning strategies and in self-assessment. Teachers should be more reflective concerning the role as teachers and more aware of the needs in order to develop as good professionals, for example. It is necessary to gain more theoretical knowledge about teaching and learning.

Furthermore, it has been realized the importance of giving constant feedback to the students concerning what they have gained in their learning process as well as what they

need to improve, but it is important to consider changing the way the teacher addresses students in class when trying to make them reflect on their problems or mistakes in English, if the teacher wants to be a good facilitator and create an appropriate classroom atmosphere that facilitates students' learning.

Metacognitive Strategies Training in Reading

Nunan (1999, 11) says, it is “a mistake to assume that learners come into the language classroom with a sophisticated knowledge of pedagogy, or with a natural ability to make informed choices about their own learning processes”. However, with strategy training, readers can make concrete gains in the reading (Block, 1992). According to Carrell (1998), this training must be clearly sequenced. In addition, there must be a clear rationale for using specific strategies (Oxford, 1990). For example, strategy training should include explicit instruction on when and how to use a particular strategy, and should incorporate metacognitive elements of planning, self monitoring, and self evaluation into the task.

Moreover, Metacognitive strategies alone are not enough, success is dependent on students being able to effectively control and monitor their learning. This is influenced by the elements of metacognition, which are: Metamemory, Metacomprehension, Self-regulation, Schema training.

Metamemory refers to learner awareness of which strategies are used, and should be used, for certain tasks. It includes knowledge about memory systems and memory strategies. Some research indicate that young students and novice learners have difficulty accurately estimating their comprehension and that metamemory strategy instruction should focus on specific strategic knowledge. This may include knowing when, where, and how to

use strategies. Variables related to person such as feelings, ideas, beliefs, and task and strategy should also be taken into consideration. Variables such as feeling of knowing or judgment of recall readiness relate to person while task variables include the perceived value of the task. Perceived self-efficacy is also a factor as students with low self-esteem or external locus of control will not likely invoke correction strategies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1994).

Metacomprehension refers to effective comprehension. Monitoring involves knowing when you do not understand and knowing how to take remedial action to ensure successful comprehension. Remedial action is more spontaneous when errors are detected in context as opposed to being detected in isolation. The use of specified local criteria to prove understanding improves detection (Boulware-Gooden, R., Carreker, S., Thornhill, A., Joshi, R.M. (2007).

However, it seems likely that young learners lack metacomprehension strategies because of their limited opportunities to develop such skills. On the other hand, older and more knowledgeable learners have acquired skills through experience. It requires considerable effort to master metacognitive strategies; training should be in accord with ages and expert levels of learners. Initial training should be specific and embedded strategies must not overburden learners; in the likelihood of this happening it would be preferable to have learners develop strategies outside the lessons (Boulware-Gooden, R., Carreker, S., Thornhill, A., Joshi, R.M. (2007).

The aim of methods to empower learners is to automatize strategies. Learners should be helped to develop strategies based on independent and individual assessments of

learning needs, thus gaining executive control. It seems however that many strategies are learned best if they are embedded in a lesson, so while strategies should facilitate learning of specific content they should also promote strategy use (Boulware-Gooden, R., Carreker, S., Thornhill, A., Joshi, R.M. (2007).

Self-regulation is related to metacognitive adjustments students make concerning errors. This may be as a result of inherent knowing, trial and error, or hypotheses formulation. Executive control may be transferred to students through modeling as they adapt modeled processes for their own use. Social interaction provides additional models while feedback from peers let learners observe the comprehension strategies of others.

Schema training is important to meaningful learning because it helps learners generate their own cognitive structures or frameworks for understanding information and experiences. Learners who are informed about the significance of the training and master strategies during training appear to use them independently and on a continuing basis.

Through metacognitive strategies readers can control, monitor, and evaluate the reading process (Pressley, 2000; Pressley, Brown, Eldinary, & Afflerbach, 1995) because, he/she can notice what are his/her failures and how to improve them. Besides, students can select and use reading strategies that are oriented toward academic tasks, taking into account the different goals to get or depending on different challenges that students can face in their life.

Brown and Palinscar (1985) suggested that an effective reading should require the application of strategies that are modeled and acquired by the learner in a context, which must be reinforce for obtaining an adequate knowledge about reading in English.

On the other hand, unskilled reading comprehension is one aspect to show the importance and need for training in metacognitive strategies (Cohen, 1998), due to, unskilled readers can become skilled readers and learners of whole text if they are given instruction in effective strategies and taught to monitor and check their comprehension while reading. With respect to this point, Al Melhi (2000) has found that some differences do exist between skilled and less skilled readers in terms of their actual and reported reading strategies, their use of global reading strategies (such as underlining, enhancing vocabulary development and reading comprehension guessing, reading twice and etc), their metacognitive awareness, their perception of a good reader, and their self-confidence as readers.

Finally, Metacognitive strategies can be valuable instructional tools, especially for the reading skill, because many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers find that there is insufficient practice time for students who are required to cope with studying a new language and to read for content.

Second language reading research also suggests that the successful use of reading strategies is less dependent on their availability and more dependent on students' awareness of strategies and their ability to be flexible when using them according to the purpose of the task or the problem to be solved (Carrell, 1998).

Metacognitive strategies are a valuable addition to the challenging task of learning and teaching a second language or foreign language. The purposes of these strategies is to improve performance in the learning and use of a foreign language. Strategies are the conscious actions that learners take to improve their language learning. Rather than focus students' attention just on learning the language, foreign language teachers can help students

learn to think about what happens during the language learning process, which will lead them to develop stronger learning strategies.

Effective use of learning strategies has come to be one of the hallmarks of the good or successful language learner. Learning strategies are the operations or steps used by a learner to facilitate their production and their knowledge developing a task.

The use of metacognitive strategies in English learning ignites one's thinking and can lead to more deep learning and improved performance, especially among learners who are struggling with reading comprehension or any skill. Understanding and controlling cognitive processes may be one of the most essential skills that classroom teachers can help L2 learners develop. The teaching of metacognitive skills is a valuable use of instructional time for a second or foreign language teacher. When learners reflect upon their learning strategies, they become better prepared to make conscious decisions about what they can do to improve their learning. Strong metacognitive strategies empower second or foreign language learners. Moreover, metacognition is not a linear process moving from preparing and planning to evaluating, more than one metacognitive process may be happening at a time during a learning task.

Learners who have effective metacognitive strategies have what is called 'executive control' and not only can select a strategy which they feel is appropriate to a task but can then monitor whether that strategy was effective in accomplishing the task and modify their strategy selection accordingly.

Conclusions

First of all, metacognitive strategies help to foster reading comprehension in English because students can control their own learning, knowing what are his/her strengths and weaknesses in order to improve them. Taking into account our context, applying these strategies teachers and students can manage their time and focus on one goal which is English learning.

These strategies will allow teachers to be more creative and authentic when they are going to present and develop a reading or whatever activity with one group, and his/her English classes will be active. Moreover, teachers could promote autonomous learning in his/her students, however, it is important to emphasize that in our educational context where students are passive, they still need teachers who encourage them towards autonomy, which requires autonomous teachers, since it is an interdependent process, which requires looking at its complexity. We must bear in mind factors such as students' choices, needs, and attitudes.

In addition, we need to learners' ability to self-assessment and apply learning strategies as well as the importance of a good facilitator in this process. After going through this process, it is possible to say that when students see some success in using metacognitive strategies, for example evaluating their work, they change their attitudes concerning their abilities in English reading, and they become more willing to take charge of their own English learning. Our challenge and job as English teacher is to prepare our students to take more responsibility and captivate their attention in English learning, and in this way help

them to develop their autonomy. It will allow students enjoying English and feeling motivated to learn a foreign language.

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