

LEARNING STRATEGIES IN STUDENT APPROACH TO TEXT COMPREHENSION IN EFL

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ABSTRACT: *This paper focuses on two learning strategies used by EFL college students in their approach to text comprehension: resourcing and elaboration. Resourcing refers to the use of the dictionary for word meanings. Elaboration refers to the use of meaningful associations between textual material and previously acquired knowledge. The evidence in the data shows that resourcing was often an ineffective strategy whereas elaboration was a valuable process that promoted involvement with the target language.*

KEY-WORDS: *Learning Process; Strategies; Target Language; Elaboration; Text Comprehension.*

1 – INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to obtain a better understanding of the language learning process. The focus was on the learners' contribution to the process, thus, shifting attention from the teaching dimension to the learning dimension which had been neglected in the past. This was largely due to the assumption that the learning process could not be altered by the learner. Expert learners were believed to have an innate talent for learning whereas less effective learners were considered unfit for the academic environment.

However, findings in cognitive psychology have contributed to the development of a different perception of the role played by the learner. Within the perspective of cognitive theory, a successful learning approach is not necessarily dependent on naturally acquired skills. As a matter of fact, learners are perceived as capable of changing the course of their learning through the actions they take and the choices they make to internalize new information. Their efforts are seen as deliberate and goal oriented. Learners may manipulate the materials in different ways using a variety of learning strategies to cope with task demands. Learning strategies are conscious steps taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, and more effective (OXFORD, 1990). Successful learning requires an active approach characterized by frequent adjustments to cope with the task at hand. From this standpoint, learners are responsible for their learning and should be encouraged to adopt effective learning strategies.

In the cognitive perspective, the characteristics of successful learning, generally attributed to expert learners, can be promoted and encouraged by instruction and

materials so that less successful learners have the possibility of enhancing their performance. An instructional program sensitive to learner needs should provide an environment conducive to the development of effective learning behaviors. However, prior to any attempt to implement instructional programs and teaching practices geared to the needs of the less effective students, it is necessary to identify the strategies learners currently employ and the patterns that account for variation in performance.

In line with this idea, this paper proposes to find out how learners are coping with the demands of specific foreign language tasks for an accurate assessment of instructional priorities. In other words, the aim of this paper is to provide an assessment of the learning strategies students use spontaneously in their attempts to execute learning tasks in order to diagnose strengths and weaknesses in their approaches. Therefore, the informants had not previously received strategy instruction of any sort. Strategy training programs should be developed only on the basis of the findings of such a preliminary investigation.

For practical purposes the scope of this paper is limited to the discussion of two strategies reported by the informants: resourcing and elaboration. These strategies were selected especially because of the noticeable variation in their usefulness to the students. Resourcing and elaboration are illustrated with excerpts of the recorded reports provided by the informants as they attempted to understand texts from EFL textbooks. Therefore, the representative samples provided in this study are real instances of strategy use. The informants were EFL students enrolled in the Curso de Letras (fourth, fifth, and sixth semester) at the Universidade Estadual de Londrina.

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2 – METHODOLOGY

The verbal protocol technique was the method used for data collection. Students were requested to think aloud as they performed the tasks and were instructed to report everything that went through their minds while they were doing the exercises (concurrent verbal reports). The individual interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed in detail for a qualitative analysis. Portuguese, the students' native language, was used during the interviews to avoid difficulties in communication.

3 – DISCUSSION: RESOURCING AND ELABORATION

First this section discusses the students' use of resourcing; a discussion of the use of elaboration is presented last. The segments of the students' reports, presented as illustrations of strategy use, consist mostly of text translated from Portuguese into English. Text expressed in English is transcribed in bold type.

Resourcing consists of referring to different types of materials to find out information needed for task completion. However, the occurrence of resourcing in the data referred almost exclusively to the use of the dictionary for word meanings. Overall students tended to overuse the strategy which was most often disruptive, time consuming and more importantly ineffective. This was especially true in the case of those learners with deficient vocabulary, for whom comprehension tended to break down frequently. The example below illustrates this point:

St: I found 'burglar' yes, right. A person who breaks into a building... in order to steal...

Int: A person who enters into a building who breaks into a building to, to what?

St: There's an e-s-p here and a little dot and I don't know what this is; esp., a little dot, in order...

Int: Especially.

St: Ah, okay. Especially in order to 'steal'.

Ah, 'steal' I don't know either. I'm going to look 'steal' up. I know-I've already seen this word. I know it must be something simple but I don't... know.

Ah, steal, stole, stolen, [laughing] I didn't know... take property dishonestly...

property dishonestly. Wait a minute, but here 'steal... especially in order of 'steal'.

Int: To steal.

St: To steal. Especially in order of dishonesty?

Ah, I don't know! Something to do with a person who... who... break, already...

This example shows how ineffective the strategy was for some students who were unable to obtain the clarification they were looking for due to their difficulty to understand the explanations provided by the dictionary or to identify among the explanations offered, the meaning suitable for the context they were dealing with. Some of them showed a great deal of determinism in their attempts; a great deal of

time and effort was expended on the decoding of the text at the word level. Unsuccessful attempts such as the example above often exhausted the students' processing capacity and certainly detracted them from focusing on integration of ideas in the text. The students' overreliance on the dictionary is illustrated by the following remark made by another student:

St: Usually, when I find an unknown word it disturbs me. When I skip the word, it's... I feel guilty of not attempting to learn... I feel I'm missing out learning; [despite the fact that] the more I look for the meaning of the word and soon forget it but it seems as if I'm missing out learning...

This excerpt shows that the learner insists on using a strategy that she recognizes does not yield satisfactory results as it fails to ensure retention of the word meaning. Her observation seems plausible as the procedure involves receptive language use and does not promote active manipulation of the target language.

On the other hand, elaboration, was an effective process that promoted students' involvement with the target language. Elaboration skills entail the ability to make meaningful associations between textual material and previously acquired knowledge. The process, considered one of the most powerful learning strategies, is believed to enhance comprehension and promote retention of learning material (WEINSTEIN, 1978; COHEN & APHEK, 1981). Instances of elaboration were more rarely found than resourcing.

The following example is an illustration of an elaboration produced by one of the students during the decoding of the text. This is what she said about the word 'slapped' soon after guessing its meaning from the context:

St: And this... is a verb... onomatopoeic? Is this what it's called?

Int: It may be. Yes.

St: Because of its noise, right? They try to approximate as much as they can to the noise. I remember that once one of my teachers told me... that there are certain verbs that they try to approximate as much as they can to the sound that it makes, right?

Int: You think that this one is similar to its noise.

St: I think so, slap, right? Slap.

The student made a sound association: she observed that 'slapped' could be one of those verbs that were spelled to sound as much as possible like the noise produced by the action the verb expressed, an information she remembered from previous classes.

Despite the scarcity of elaborations, the data contain a few examples that are noteworthy. They provide valuable insight into the potential use of elaboration to enhance learning outcomes. This is particularly true when a student can be seen using a cluster of strategies including elaboration, inferencing, and transfer and successfully

deriving meaning from the text, based upon use of the strategies. Using such a cluster approach is often the distinguishing feature of the effective learner (CHAMOT et al. 1988). When confronted with a comprehension problem, the effective learner deploys as many strategies as are necessary for solving the problem. For instance, the following example was produced by a student while trying to figure out the word 'tinkle' in the sentence: "I heard the tinkle of broken glass downstairs".

St: *This I'm going... this word that I don't... know I'm assuming what it may mean.*

Int: *What are you assuming?*

St: *I think this is noise.*

Int: *Very well. You reached that conclusion, how...? That it is noise.*

St: *Well, first, because... look, she heard something of glasses breaking, broken, downstairs; so... I... it would be sort of specific noise, like, when you... you are... making a toast you say tin tin; then this could be like the specific noise of the glasses.*

The learner used the context to infer the meaning of 'tinkle'; she said that 'tinkle' expressed the specific noise made when glass was broken. The use of the expression 'specific noise' and not just 'noise' reveals her assumption that the word is onomatopoeic. The inferential process became intertwined with elaboration when she associated 'tinkle' with 'tin tin' in Portuguese; the student explained that 'tinkle' was probably the specific noise of broken glass as well as the colloquial expression in Brazilian Portuguese, *tin tin*, referred to the specific noise of glasses being hit in a toast. In addition to elaboration and inferencing, the process involved transfer as the student provided an illustration of a comparable expression in the native language.

The illustrations above indicate that while using elaboration the student gets involved with the language reworking the material to reconstruct meaning.

4 -- CONCLUSION

The evidence in the data provides support for the idea that learning strategies are not equally effective. The use of the dictionary was often an inefficient technique that failed to engage the learners in the active manipulation of the target language. As a matter of fact, one student's observation that the use of the dictionary fails to ensure retention of learning material no matter how often she resorts to this strategy, raises a critical issue regarding strategies that involve merely receptive language use since retention seems to be achieved through manipulation of the target language. On the other hand, the use of associations promoted integration of ideas in the text and, consequently, the students' interaction with the target language.

In their investigation of second-language vocabulary learning, COHEN & APHEK (1981) found that whenever some associational pattern was used, the words were retained successfully over time. Obtaining meaning through the use of the dictionary involves receptive language use as compared to reconstructing meaning through procedures such as drawing associations or generating hypotheses based on logical relationships. These techniques enhance the meaningfulness of the text making it more memorable.

The findings in this study indicate that the students who resorted to the use of associations performed more efficiently than those who relied excessively on the dictionary. It is the learners' responsibility to select learning strategies that are optimally effective in meeting specific task demands. However, an educational environment sensitive to the learners' needs should provide help to those learners who have not been able to develop an efficient learning approach on their own. Educational goals should include the development and refinement of an autonomous learning. Instructional programs and materials should help those learners improve their overall performance by encouraging them to capitalize on more sophisticated processes.

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RESUMO: *Este estudo apresenta uma discussão de duas estratégias de aprendizagem empregadas por alunos de inglês durante a execução de exercícios de compreensão de textos: o uso do dicionário e o uso de associação. A primeira estratégia consiste do uso do dicionário para descobrir o significado das palavras desconhecidas. A segunda consiste do uso de associações entre elementos do texto e conhecimento adquirido previamente com o objetivo de resolver problemas de compreensão. Os dados encontrados indicam que, de modo geral, o uso do dicionário foi uma técnica dispersiva e ineficiente. Por outro lado, a associação foi um processo produtivo que promoveu a interação na língua alvo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Processo de Aprendizagem; Estratégias; Associação; Língua Alvo; Compreensão de Textos.*

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