I Didn't Learn to Read Strategically Until I Acquired English: The Effect of Second Language Reading Instruction on Reading in the First Language

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on an experimental investigation that examines the backward transfer of reading comprehension strategies from English language learners' second language to their mother tongue, i.e. Persian. The study was carried out at Islamic Azad University of Shahrekord, where 63 English majors took their advanced reading comprehension course in two intact experimental and control classes. At the very outset of the term, both classes sat for an L1 reading comprehension pretest which aimed to ensure their homogeneity concerning L1 reading ability. Teaching reading comprehension in English then commenced. The experimental group underwent a strategies-based instruction of reading comprehension in which such strategies as previewing, inferencing, skimming, scanning, and guessing the meaning of unknown words were in focus, while the other group was involved in a conventional reading comprehension class where the instructor underscored vocabulary learning and answering comprehension questions. At the end of the term, both groups took an L1 reading comprehension posttest, the results of which indicated that the experimental group had strikingly outperformed the control group. Moreover, stimulated recall interview sessions with 8 learners from the experimental group corroborated the fact that they had transferred to their L1 the reading strategies they had acquired in their L2.

KEYWORDS: Reading comprehension, Backward transfer, Reading strategies, Second language, First language

INTRODUCTION

Reading Instruction

Reading instruction, be it in one's first or second language, is an issue of paramount importance since most of what we can learn appears as printed materials (books, articles, magazines, newspapers, websites, etc.). Besides being the central means for learning new information, reading can also serve as the foundation for synthesis and critical thinking skills.

Having recognized the significance of reading, educators have used a variety of approaches and techniques to provide effective instruction. Surveying these approaches, one might notice that, not unlike other language skills, there has been a noticeable shift of paradigm in reading instruction over the last decades, with more emphasis being put on learners and learning processes rather than on teachers and teaching practices.

A learner-centered approach is contrasted with a teacher-centered one in that the former gives rise to paying more attention to the learners' needs, their awareness of their language development, not to mention their self-directive role in the learning process.

This shift also brought about a change in language learning research. Researchers embarked on taking a closer look at learner variables like gender, motivation, self-efficacy, self-esteem, inhibition, intelligence, background knowledge, aptitude, learning styles, language learning strategies, etc. [1].

Like other learner variables, language learning strategies have received a lot of ink. The term *strategy* has been variously defined by different authors and there is still no consensus over its definition. However, one of the most comprehensive definitions is the one put forth by Griffiths [2]: "strategies are activities consciously chosen by learners to regulate their language learning." (p. 87).

In SLA literature, strategies have been categorized in numerous ways. A distinction is often made between three types of strategies: production, communication, and learning [3]. Considered from another perspective, strategies could be categorized into one of the four groups according to whether they are cognitive, metacognitive, affective, or social [4, 5]. Finally, strategies can be grouped according to the skill area to which they relate [6]. The receptive skills, listening and reading, and the productive skills, speaking and writing are the four basic skill categories. There are,

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however, other skill areas as well. For example, there are strategies associated with vocabulary learning which cross-cut the four basic skills. Cognitive reading strategies are the focus of attention in the present study.

Reading Strategies

To obtain a desirable outcome out of a reading course, a great many conditions have to be met. In addition to providing (access to) appropriate materials and motivating the learners, EFL teachers take advantage of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies for their reading instruction. The following are among the most commonly taught cognitive reading strategies: vocabulary building, activating background knowledge, making predictions, skimming, scanning, and asking questions that call for critical reading [7].

There is a plethora of research articles and tutorial resources on the teaching of such strategies, and a lot of experts have corroborated the effectiveness of teaching them [8, 9, 10, 11].

There are still authors who contend that teaching students an inventory of cognitive reading strategies does not help the students become competent readers. Successful cognition, they argue, must be directed by higher levels of cognition called *metacognition* or thinking about thinking. What counts in reading is not just what strategies to use and how to use them, but when to use them and for what purpose [7]. Carrel [12] and Raymond [13] taught both cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies and proved their effectiveness. Phakiti [14] examined the relationship between cognitive and metacognitive strategy use and their effects on EFL reading achievement test performance. His results indicated that the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies had a positive relationship to the test performance, and that highly successful test-takers reported significantly higher metacognitive strategy use than the moderately successful ones who had in turn used more of these strategies that did the unsuccessful test-takers.

Transfer of Reading Strategies

Language transfer has long been a center of attention for EFL researchers. The basic contention of this notion is that previously acquired knowledge may hinder or facilitate the acquisition of any further material. A large number of studies have revealed that various aspects of L1 are transferred during L2 production [15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20]. Research on transferability of reading strategies, however, has only recently been given due attention. Research in this area has been dominated by two divergent perspectives: the presupposition that reading procedures are universal across all languages, and the conviction that reading necessitates language-specific processes [21].

Earlier research in transferability of reading processes featured adherence to the former framework, whereas later investigations argued that there was little room for doubt about the implausibility of the latter perspective. In fact, taking an unbiased stance, one could postulate that because reading involves both text-information processing and conceptual manipulations, the former could be language-specific while the latter could be universal.

Among other scholars, Clarke [22], Kern [23], Hardin, [24], Schoonen, Hulstijn, and Bossers [25], and Alderson [26] have shown that L1 reading strategies can be successfully transferred to and utilized for L2 reading tasks. They are of the opinion that certain requirements have to be fulfilled for this transferability, though.

What has gone unnoticed in this area is the transferability of reading strategies from L2 to L1, (i.e. backward transfer of reading strategies). The present study is an attempt to unveil the effect of L2 knowledge on L1 reading tasks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The positive effect of strategies-based instruction has been show for listening [27], speaking [28], reading [29] and writing [30]. As it was previously mentioned, some scholars have examined the transferability of reading strategies from L1 to L2. Clarke [22] conducted a study with Spanish speaking EFL learners. He reached the conclusion that in order for EFL learners to transfer their reading strategies from their L1 to English, they need to be at a threshold level of language proficiency. In other words, language proficiency is a determining factor in transferring reading abilities. Hudson [31] however claims that this kind of transferability is not solely dependent upon language proficiency and many other factors are involved in it.

Following the same line of argument, Kern [23] considers learner variables, in addition to language proficiency, as the factors influencing this kind of transfer. Alderson [26] also argues that text difficulty as well as language proficiency plays a part in transfer of reading strategies.

In all the studies mentioned above, the center of concern has been the transferability of reading strategies from the learners' mother tongue to their second language. Backward transfer of reading strategies (i.e. transfer from L2 to L1) has only been studied by Salataci and Akyel [32] and Levine and Reves [33]. In the former study, the researchers found that teaching English reading strategies had a positive effect on the learners' mother tongue (Turkish) and on their foreign language. Levene and Reves [33] also showed that reading strategies can be transferred from L2 (that is English in their study) to L1 (Hebrew). Interesting and inspiring as it is, their study does not tenable results since they have failed to utilize robust statistical procedures.

Accordingly, no study has yet examined the transferability of reading strategies from English to Persian in Iranian learners' interlanguage. This study thus is an attempt to unearth the answer to this question by testing the following hypothesis: Teaching reading strategies in English affects Iranian EFL learners' performance on Persian Reading passages. To put it differently, reading strategies transfer from English to Persian in the wake of a strategies-based reading comprehension course in English.

METHOD

Participants

This study was carried out at Islamic Azad university of Shahrekord where 63 English majors took their advanced reading comprehension course in two intact classes. The participants were male and female Iranian EFL learners with roughly the same language abilities. One of the classes (including 30 students) was randomly chosen as the control group and the other one (comprising 33 students) as the experimental group.

MATERIALS

Instructional Materials

To teach reading strategies to the experimental group, the book *More Reading Power* by Mikulecky and Jeffries [34] was selected. The first nine chapters of the book were covered during the course. These chapters included the following reading strategies respectively: previewing, scanning, skimming, using vocabulary knowledge for effective reading, making inferences, finding topics, discovering topics of paragraphs, understanding main ideas, identifying patterns of organization. The book includes lots of exercises which lend themselves to strategies-based reading instruction.

The same reading passages were excerpted from the same book and taught to the students in the control group where the students were entertained mainly by vocabulary exercises and comprehension questions.

Persian Tests

Since the main objective of this study was to see whether the L1 reading skills of Iranian EFL learners was affected by a strategies-based reading comprehension course in English, a pretest and a posttest of Persian reading. Each test comprised 4 passages, each followed by 5 comprehension questions (i.e. 20 test items altogether). The passages were chosen from academic geology, economics, archeology, and animal science texts. To ensure the reliability of the tests, measures of internal consistency were calculated via cronbach alpha formula. The obtained coefficients were 0.84 and 0.79 for the pretest and the posttest, respectively.

Procedure
Instructional Procedure

For the purpose of teaching reading strategies, the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) Model [35, 36] was chosen and used. This model recommends teaching strategies in the following six steps:

-Preparation: Teacher identifies students' current learning strategies for familiar tasks.
-Presentation: Teacher models, names, and explains new strategy; asks students if and how they have used it.
-Practice: Students practice new strategy; in subsequent strategy practice, teacher fades remainders to encourage independent strategy use.
-Self-Evaluation: Students evaluate their own strategy use immediately after practice.
-Expansion: Students transfer strategies to new tasks, combine strategies into clusters, develop repertoire of preferred strategies.
-Assessment: Teacher assesses students' use of strategies and impact on performance.
In this way, the experimental group underwent a strategies-based reading comprehension class, whereas the control group was exposed to placebo (i.e. reading while focusing on vocabulary learning and comprehension check exercises).

Data Collection Procedure

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered via L1 pretest, L1 posttest, and stimulated recall interview sessions to test the hypothesis put forth in this study. Before the program began, an L1 pretest was administered to ensure the homogeneity of the two groups prior to the experiment. And after the intervention ended, an L1 posttest was given to the learners to spot any possible difference between the two groups regarding their L1 reading ability. Both the pretest and the posttest were administered under the time limit of 30 minutes.

Stimulated recall interview sessions were also held with 8 learners of the experimental group to provide more evidence for the quantitative results of the study. During the sessions, which were held individually in order to obtain more accurate responses, the posttest exam sheets were given back to the learners and they were asked to

ponder the metal processes they used while taking the test. They were simultaneously interviewed by the researchers to extract their opinions regarding the usefulness and effectiveness of the intervention.

RESULTS

To compare the performance of the two groups on the pretest, an independent-samples t-test was run. The mean scores for the control group and the experimental group were 14.70 and 15.36 respectively. Table 1. displays the outcome of the t-test.

Table 1. Independent-Samples T-Test Results for the L1 Pretest Scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
PretestScores	Equal variances assumed	.581	.449	-1.803	61	.076	-.66364	.36817	-1.39985	.07257
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.794	58.731	.078	-.66364	.36996	-1.40400	.07673

T-test results reveal no significant difference in scores for these groups, t (61)= -1.803, p= 0.076 (two tailed). The two groups, as such, were shown to be at roughly the same level of reading ability in Persian.
Another t-test was conducted to compare the results of the L1 posttest for the two groups. The mean scores for the control and experimental groups were 15.53 and 16.33 respectively. The results of this t-test are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Independent-Samples T-Test Results for the L1 Posttest Scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
PosttestScores	Equal variances assumed	2.878	.095	-2.443	61	.017	-.80000	.32748	-1.45484	-.14516
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.414	54.793	.019	-.80000	.33135	-1.46410	-.13590

In this Table, the probability value equals 0.017 (with t (61) = -2.443) which is smaller than the specified level of significance (i.e. 0.05), indicating a statistically significant difference between the scores of the two groups. Hence, the experimental group (M=16.33) outperformed the control group (M=15.53) in the posttest, which implies the effectiveness of the intervention. The estimate of effect size, using eta square formula, was found to be 0.08, which indicates a moderate effect, based on the guidelines proposed by Cohen [37].
During the stimulated recall interview session, the posttest exam sheets were given back to the learners and they were asked to contemplate on the processes they had in mind while taking the test. At the same time, they were asked a number of 7 questions, whereby their perceptions regarding the strategies-based reading comprehension course were elicited. Table 3. presents a neat summary of the questions and their responses in terms of frequency and percentage.

Table 3. The Results of Stimulated Recall Interview Sessions

Questions	No. of positive responses	Percentage of positive responses
1. Do you think the reading comprehension course in English ameliorated your Persian reading abilities?	8	100%
2. Do you use different reading methods for different kinds of texts?	7	87.5%
3. Did guessing the meaning of unknown words help you become a more skillful reader in your L1?	4	50%
4. Do you think previewing paved the way for you to encounter the task of reading more purposefully?	7	87.5%
5. Compared to the past, can you read faster now that you know how to skim, scan, and identify patterns of paragraphs?	7	87.5%
6. Do you think such reading strategies as previewing and skimming help you understand more of a text?	6	75%
7. Do you think previewing and skimming can help you save your time by reading selectively?	6	75%

Illuminating as they are, the results of the stimulated recall interview sessions lent more support to the results obtained by the L1 posttest, i.e. the strategies-based reading comprehension course in English has led to an upswing in the learners L1 reading abilities.

DISCUSSION

Like other research studies on strategies-based instruction [8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14], the results of this study provide further support for the effectiveness of this approach towards reading instruction.

As far as transferability of reading strategies are concerned, like the studies by Clarke [22], Kern [23], Hardin [24], Schoonen, Hulstijn, and Bossers [25], and Alderson [26], the results of the present study demonstrated that reading strategies can be transferred from one language to another, the only difference being that in their studies, the learners transferred the strategies from their L1 to their L2, but in the present study, the direction of the transfer is reverse, i.e. from L2 to L1. This is also in agreement with Salataci and Akyel [32] and Levine and Reves [33] wherein their participants were found to make advantage of L2 reading strategies in their L1 reading tasks.

Transferability of reading strategies in the above-mentioned studies, and the present study as well, underpin the notion that reading procedures are universal across languages (in this case, at least, across English and Persian). This contention has to be made with a word of caution: it is likely that not all reading strategies can be transferred from English into Persian, but on the whole, this transferability was observed in this study. Further investigations of this type can focus on transferability of individual reading strategies from one language into another.

Moreover, the results of this study implied that: (1) since reading strategies are not systematically taught in Iranian educational programs, the students have impoverished reading abilities even in their own mother tongue. However, the beauty of it is that they can learn a great many useful techniques and strategies in their English classes. (2) Although some reading strategies like guessing the meaning of unknown words were not useful enough for L1 reading (as shown in Table 3.), such strategies as previewing, skimming, and scanning were widely welcomed by the learners. (3) The intervention exerted a massive refreshing change in the perception the learners had of reading comprehension. This change was so promising that one of the learners in the stimulated recall interview session asserted that "I didn't learn to read strategically until I acquired my L2".

Acknowledgement

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