



A STUDY OF THE USE OF READING STRATEGIES BY ESL STUDENTS OF SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL IN KANO, NIGERIA

BASHIR MUHAMMAD ABDULLAHI, I.G. MUSTAPHA AND HADIZA LAWAN ISMAIL

Department of English and Linguistics, Federal University, Dutse

Abstract

This study is concerned with the use of reading strategies by ESL students at senior secondary school level in Kano. The study aimed at identifying strategies used by the students when dealing with difficult vocabulary, sentence and

Keywords
Reading Strategies, Second Language Reading, First Language Reading, Reading Comprehension and Reading Difficulties. paragraph in a difficult or confusing text. Six students from Government Girls

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the use of reading strategies by English as second language learners at senior secondary school level when confronted with a difficult text. The paper focuses on identifying the strategies employed by students to tackle difficult vocabulary, sentence or paragraph when dealing with a text that is difficult. Reading competence is defined from different perspectives, such as the cognitive view, the developmental perspective, the reading gear and so on. Psychologically, the term competence according to Koda (2005) is used

College, Kano were responded to oral language. The sampled using simple interview questions respondents used random sampling. A after reading the text. some reading page of three The responses are strategies. The sources paragraphs extracted analysed based on of the strategies from chapter one of Clarke (1980) Short- include their teachers, Aliyu Kamal's Fire in Circuit Hypothesis. their experiences from my Backyard (2004) The findings revealed personal reading and was used as the that the respondents their first language instrument of the have limited control reading strategies. study. The students over the target

exclusively in reference to linguistic knowledge, processing skills, and cognitive abilities. Koda (2005) explains that, although reading competence, which is used interchangeably with reading ability, is conceptualised in several different ways, but all the definitions stem from the same basic assumption that successful comprehension emerges from the integrative interaction of derived text information and preexisting reader knowledge. She expatiates that comprehension occurs when the reader extracts and integrates various information from the text and combines it with what is already known.

From the cognitive view, researchers like Carpenter, Miyake, and Just, (1994), Kintsch (1998) and Perfetti (1994) argue that, reader-text interaction can be subdivided into three processing clusters: *decoding* which deals with the linguistic information extracted directly from print, *Information Building* which covers extracted ideas that are integrated to uncover text meanings, and *Situation-model construction* which deals with the amalgamated text information that is synthesized with prior knowledge.

Gough and Tunmer (1986) and Hoover and Gough (1990) in Koda (2005) suggest a different way of defining reading competence from a developmental perspective. Their contention is that, although learning to read entails the mastery of two basic operations, decoding and

comprehension, they do not develop in parallel. Both reading and comprehension share similar processing requirements, and children amass comprehension skills in the course of oral language development. Although children can transfer their oral comprehension ability to reading, they cannot do so until they attain sufficient decoding efficiency. Therefore, decoding creates a threshold for exploiting the comprehension competence children bring to their reading acquisition processes.

From a functional perspective, Carver (1990, 1997, and 2000) comes up with five reading “gears” serving desperate purposes, on a continuum of cognitive complexity. His conceptualisation is based on the idea that the purposes for which text are read determine the manner in which their information is processed. Elucidating with three goals in text reading, locating lexical information, detecting main ideas and acquiring new concepts, Carver argues from cognitive perspective that reading for lexical information is the least challenging, comparing to reading for basic comprehension which is more tasking involving syntactic analysis for information integration. Acquiring new concepts in learning is the most demanding. Koda (2005) argues that in exploring L2 reading development, these diverse perspectives also need to be incorporated because L2 literacy learning begins at various stages under diverse circumstances, thus considerable variances exist in prior literacy-learning experience. She argues that we cannot access the influence of L1 empirical findings on L2 without reliable basis for determining what has been mastered in L1.

Reading Competence Differences

Reading in unfamiliar language exhibits problems (Koda 2005). These problems exhibit a range of individual differences which creates a long-standing debate over possible variables responsible. Two competing theoretical formulations are commonly used to explain the phenomenon. Alderson (1984) advocated systematic examinations of reading competency differences. Two celebrated questions are credited to this avocation: is second language reading a language problem or a reading problem? Two primary hypotheses and their variants stem from Alderson’s question.

Poor reading in a foreign language is due to poor reading in the first language. Poor first language readers will read poorly in the foreign language and good first language readers will read well in the foreign language.

- Poor reading in a foreign language is due to inadequate knowledge of the target language.
- Poor foreign language reading is due to incorrect strategies for reading that foreign language. Strategies which differ from the strategies for reading the native language.
- Poor foreign language reading is due to reading strategies in the first language not being employed in the foreign language, due to inadequate knowledge of foreign language. Good first language readers will read well in the foreign language once they have passed threshold of foreign language ability (1994:4)

Alderson speculates two significant variables: L1 reading ability and L2 proficiency, as the principal factors accounting for L2 reading ability variance. Two well-known theoretical constructs underlie his speculations: The Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis and Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis.

The Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (L1 Reading Ability)

Cummins (1979, 1984, & 1991) proposed what he calls the *developmental interdependence hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis the forms and levels of L2 competence that bilingual children attain are determined largely by the prior L1 capability they developed before intensive L2 exposure occurs. He argues that communication demand varies on two continua-cognitive complexities and contextual support-each of which imposes different requisites. The competency for highly decontextualised communication differs considerably from that necessitated in reading cognitively demanding contents devoid of nonlinguistic contextual embellishment. For Cummins whereas the former is relatively easy to master, the latter is considerably more difficult, requiring not only basic

linguistic knowledge but also a sufficient cognitive foundation for manipulating information without supporting frames of reference. He maintains that the latter competence, once developed in a primary language, serves as base for dealing with similar decontextualised, cognitively complex communication in a second language. He adds that, in the absence of this competence, even though *learning to read* may be possible, *reading to learn* is formidable. The main contention, in short, is that L2 reading success depends heavily on previously acquired L1 literacy competence.

The Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (L2 Proficiency)

It is widely accepted that L2 proficiency is a vital prerequisite to efficient L2 reading. Clarke's *Short-Circuit Hypothesis* (1980) argues that "limited control over the language 'short-circuits' the good reader's system causing him or her to revert to poor reader strategies when confronted with difficult or confusing task in the second language (Clarke's 1988).

Yario (1971) in Koda (2000) also maintains that "the guessing or predicting ability necessary to pick up the correct cues is hindered by the imperfect knowledge of the language." Bernhard & Kamil (1995), Bossers (1991) and Carrel (1991) further demonstrate that L2 reading variance. Therefore, limited L2 knowledge inhibits L2 learners from using their previously acquired L1 skills.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Clarke (1980) Short-Circuit Hypothesis. This theory proposes that "limited control over the language 'short-circuits' the good reader's system causing him or her to revert to poor reader strategies when confronted with difficult or confusing task in the second language (Clarke's 1988).

Statement of the Problem

Reading in unfamiliar language exhibits problems (Koda 2005). These problems exhibit a range of individual differences which creates a long-standing debate over possible variables responsible. Two competing theoretical formulations are commonly used to explain the phenomenon.

Alderson (1984) advocated systematic examinations of reading competency differences. Two celebrated questions are credited to this avocation: is second language reading a language problem or a reading problem? Two primary hypotheses and their variants stem from Alderson's question. Firstly, Poor reading in a foreign language is due to poor reading in the first language. Secondly, Poor first language readers will read poorly in the foreign language and good first language readers will read well in the foreign language.

Objectives

The study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify how the students, deal with difficult vocabulary, sentence or paragraph, and
2. Whether they use their own experience from reading in the first language and the second language, or
3. The solutions are taught to them by the first and second language teacher.

Research Questions

1. How do the students deal with difficult vocabulary, sentence or paragraph?
2. Are they using their own experiences from reading in the in the first and/or second language?
3. Are they thought how to tackle difficult text by your first and/or second language teacher?

Methodology

Six students of SS III from Government Girls College Kano were sampled randomly for the study. A page of three paragraphs extracted from the chapter one of Aliyu Kamal's *Fire in my Backyard* (2004) was used as the instrument of the study. The students were given twenty minutes to read the passage twice after which they attended content questions inform of interview. The content questions were set to test specific content comprehension and lexical information comprehension. They were also given ten minutes to read the text for the third time upon which they also

attended general questions inform of interview. The general questions were set to test general comprehension and summary ability. A qualitative analysis of the participants' responses was presented. The variables of this study are reading strategies and linguistic knowledge.

Data Presentation

The thrust of the study is to conduct a research on the Short Circuit Hypothesis (Clarke 1980) with SS III students on using reading strategies when confronted with a difficult or confusing text. Six students of secondary school participated in the study. The students responded to a one page of three paragraph text extracted from Aliyu Kamal's *Fire in my Backyard*(2004). The test contained two sections; one for content questions and the other for general questions. Each section contained 10 questions. Although question 1 is an open question, testing whether the respondents understand the role of Umar Faruq who is the central character in the text, only one got it right. Question 2 and 3 seek to identify whether the respondents can identify the two referents phrases, *grassland ecologist* and *future environmental campaigner*, used in the passage to refer to the central character. Four respondents got the former right while one got the latter. Question 4 is almost similar to question 2 and 3 but it is not referring to the central character. One out of five respondents got it correct.

The second section of the test deals with general questions concerning the text meaning construction and reading strategies. There are 10 questions all together in this section. Questions 11, 12, 13 and 14 all tested the general comprehension of the three paragraphs in the passage. All the respondents failed questions 11 and 12. Four respondents got questions 13 and 14, the remaining 1 respondent did not respond. Question 15 is set to test the vocabulary of the respondents. There are five words and one phrase tagged a, b, c, d, e, and f, under the question. The participants were asked to explain the meaning of the selected words and phrase as used in the passage. All of them failed question a, d, and c, two answered questions b and e and one got question f correct. Question 16 is a *yes* or *no* question, asking whether the participants understood the passage. They all answered *yes*. Questions 17, 18 19 and 20 were set to identify the difficulty

encountered by the respondents concerning vocabulary, grammar and sentence and how they solved the problems. They were also asked to explain how they learned to solve the problems. All the respondents concurred that the passage contained difficult words. Three participants asserted that the grammar is not difficult while two said it is difficult. Three participants believed that the sentences are not difficult but the remaining two complained about long sentences.

Concerning how they solved the problem of difficult vocabulary, two respondents said they resorted to reading the whole passage again. Two referred to reading the associated words while the remaining one used L1 translation and translate back to English. On the question of how do they learn all these strategies, all the respondents confirmed that they were being taught by their teachers. Four participants added that they also learned more reading strategies through personal reading especially reading for pleasure.

Discussion

It was stated earlier that the focus of the study is to investigate reading strategies used by students at senior secondary school level when confronted with a difficult text. The text used to identify these strategies is extracted from Aliyu Kamal's *Fire in my Backyard* (2004). The passage appears to be difficult to the students based on the data analysis above. According to the respondents, the text contained long sentences, complex sentences and difficult words. From the analysis, the respondents have limited control over the target language and read poorly. Alderson (1984) argues that, poor reading in a foreign language is due to inadequate knowledge of the target language. In the words of Clarke (1988) the readers are 'short-circuits' and this caused them to revert to poor reader strategies when confronted with difficult or confusing task in the second language (Clarke's 1988:120). Yario (1971 in Koda 2000:23) also maintains that "the guessing or predicting ability necessary to pick up the correct cues is hindered by the imperfect knowledge of the language." However, the respondents, in an attempt to tackle the difficulties encountered, resorted to some reading strategies. Some of these strategies were borrowed from their first language reading strategies. The difficulties

encountered by the respondents in this study include vocabulary, grammar, and sentence and paragraph complexity. In most studies, L2 proficiency is often operationalised as knowledge of vocabulary and/or grammar, while reading is construed as an ability to understand major text ideas (Koda 2005). The respondents have limited vocabulary; this is evident in the case of question fifteen, which was set to test knowledge of vocabulary, where all the respondents failed all the six items under the question. However, the respondents used, reading strategies such as guessing the meaning of difficult vocabulary from context and re-reading strategy to handle confusing sentences and paragraphs. This answered research question 1: *How do the students deal with difficult vocabulary, sentence and paragraph?* The respondents also employed their personal reading experiences in L1 and L2. In this case, the text has no title but the opening topic sentence serves as the title of the text. The respondents read the topic sentence several times in an attempt to get the general idea of the text. Most of the respondents in an attempt to answer question eleven, which asked the respondents to summarised the main idea of the text in one sentence, they copied and presented the whole topic sentence as the answer. They also presented the same topic sentence in an attempt to answer question eleven which asked, why Umar Faruk was desperate to meet his host? This answered research question 2: *Are the students using their own experience from reading in L1?* The topic sentence is short and precise. All the students concurred that they were taught reading strategies in class and they also learned more strategies through their own extensive reading. This also answered research question 3: *Are students been taught how to tackle difficult text by their teachers?* From the data analysis above, it is evident that the students have more problem of language than of reading; they have mastered some good reading strategies but very limited in the knowledge of the target language. This confirmed the argument of one of the two celebrated questions that is credited to Alderson (1984), is second language reading a language problem or a reading problem? The data analysis also revealed that the students performed better in tackling lexical information questions than comprehension questions. This is relevant to the argument of Carver (1990, 1997 and 2000) who argues from cognitive perspective that reading for lexical information is the least

challenging, comparing to reading for basic comprehension which is more tasking involving syntactic analysis for information integration.

Findings

1. The students have limited control over the language.
2. The students use some reading strategies when confronted with difficult text.
3. The students applied L1 reading strategies on L2.
4. Students at senior secondary school level are taught reading strategies by their teachers.

Conclusion

The study seeks to identify and explain reading strategies used by students at senior secondary level. The study is limited to examine strategies used when dealing with difficult vocabulary, sentence or paragraph in a text. Although the respondents have limited control over the target language which short circuits the students from using good reading strategies, they used some reading strategies. Some of these strategies were taught to the students by their teachers. They also used their own personal experiences in L1.

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Appendix I
INTERVIEW
CONTENT QUESTIONS

PARAGRAPH I

1. Who is Umar Faruk?
2. Who is the grassland ecologist?
3. The future environmental campaigner is.....
4. "The personage had finally come out..." who is the personage?
5. The synonym of "depart" is ... (a) leave (b) sit (c) stay

PARAGRAPH II

6. "That article of clothing, along with his non-too-clean jeans", means Umar Faruk is
 - (a) Not well dressed
 - (b) In a very clean jean
 - (c) Impressive and neatly dressed
7. In sentence 4 second paragraph, the word "gaudy" can be replaced with...
 - (a) Colour (b) garish (c) dark
8. What is the grammatical name of "dark-grey" in paragraph 2, sentence 3.
 - (a) Verb (b) Adverb (c) Adjective

PARAGRAPH III

9. Why Umar Faruk was desperate to meet his host?
10. Why did Umar Faruk try not feel impatient with the new plaster-work which he found too overpowering to him?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

11. In one sentence, state the main idea of the passage.
12. Explain how the idea is developed or expanded by subsidiary statements.
13. What is the setting of the passage?
14. Why Umar Faruk wants to meet his host?
15. Explain the meaning of the following words and phrases as used in the passage.
 - (a) Personage
 - (b) Soil
 - (c) Host
 - (d) Precarious
 - (e) Bright earth-work
 - (f) catastrophe
16. Have you understood the passage?
17. What difficulty did you encounter in reading the passage?

18. What problems have you encountered concerning vocabulary, grammar or types of sentences?
19. How do you solve the problems?
20. How did you learn to solve such problems?

APPENDIX II

Chapter extracted from Kamal's *Fire in my Backyard*

Chapter One

Umar-Faruq Adam couldn't leave without meeting his host. The grassland ecologist shouldn't go away even though, looking at his watch as he tried to make himself comfortable on the mats spread against the wall, he had now been waiting for over half an hour. The future environmental campaigner wouldn't depart only to be told afterwards that the personage had finally come out minutes after the jeans-clad young man had taken the opportunity to cut short the lengthy wait. He rubbed a nervous finger on the wall, wondering whether the local red-earth plaster, now that, a few minutes short of half-past-ten, it had already begun to get hot, would soil his white short-sleeved shirt.

That article of clothing, along with his none-too-clean jeans, would not make a good impression in his host. It could not in rural Rumbu, Kano, northern Nigeria – a close-settled zone inhabited by subsistence farmers leading a precarious life, which didn't provide them with gainful employment the year round. He nonetheless admired the bright earth-work; it was in stark contrast to the bare, dark-grey floor. He fanned himself vigorously with the straw fan he had found on the gaudy mats and, every now and then, stared outside, into the hot allbrightness, taking note of the passers-by and the usual sheep and goats, which brought them to his attention.

The cool entranceway, set off by the vaulted roof, offered him relief from the mundane exploration of the thoroughfare outdoors; which latter dazzled his eyes, which former adjusted his sense of vision, so that he could start looking out all over again. He found the odour of the new plaster-work much too overpowering; yet he tried not to feel too impatient out of the fear that he would risk painting a less than horrifying picture, to his host, than the stark one, he reminded himself, that he had come in especial to unveil. The facts he would divulge he had been collecting and was still amassing. It was his civic duty to reveal his research findings piecemeal, as it were, to the leader of a group of people whom he looked forward to working with, in the immediate future, in an effort to avert what could be a catastrophe of the greatest proportions. (*Fire in My Backyard* (2004) by Aliyu Kamal)