Effectiveness of Explicit Instruction in Reading Strategies for Beginner-level Students

初級レベルの学習者に対するリーディング・ストラテジー指導の効果について

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Japanese EFL college students at the beginner’s level and investigates the students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of explicit instruction in reading strategies. It examines the following three research questions: (1) How does the way the students read English change due to explicit instruction in reading strategies?; (2) How does the students’ fluency in reading change due to explicit instruction in reading strategies?; and (3) Do there appear to be any other benefits of explicit instruction in reading strategies?

The participants were 12 college students who took an elective course titled, Academic Reading. While reading the textbook, the students were given explicit instruction in reading strategies for three months. More specifically, scanning, annotation, skimming, taking notes, and summarizing were introduced during the course, and the students were encouraged to repeatedly use these reading strategies and to monitor their use. In order to investigate any changes in their use of strategies and their reading fluency, the same open-ended questionnaire was conducted three times during the course, and the students’ answers were analyzed. The results of this study suggest that explicit instruction in reading strategies is effective in developing Japanese EFL students’ English reading skills. The students reported that their ability to find the necessary information in the texts and to understand the gist had greatly improved. The students also reported a noticeable change in their reading speed. It was also found that explicit instruction in reading strategies can motivate and encourage beginner-level students to read English texts.

KEYWORDS: Reading strategies, Strategy instruction, Beginner-level students

1. INTRODUCTION

In the teaching of English reading, comprehension questions such as T/F questions, pronominal questions, and multiple-choice items are often included in reading textbooks. In fact, according to a survey by Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute (2015), 86.5% of senior high school teachers in Japan answered that they “often” or
“sometimes” use comprehension questions. In other words, Japanese college students are already familiar with comprehension questions when doing English reading.

However, the fact that students are familiar with comprehension questions does not always mean that they effectively utilize the skills associated with these questions and understand the reading materials. Especially for students at the beginner’s level, conversations such as the following are frequent:

Teacher: Question No. 1. Is it True or False?
Student X: False.
Teacher: Good. Why do you think so?
Student X: Huh?

Teacher: Fill in the blank. What is your answer, (a), (b), (c), or (d)?
Student Y: (b)
Teacher: OK. Where do you find this information in the textbook?
Student Y: Eh…where?

From these students’ responses, it can be assumed that beginner-level students may often answer comprehension questions without understanding or even reading the text. Nation (2009) explained the problem of comprehension questions, saying that from the learners’ point of view, the most important information that they will gain from making an error is that they made the wrong choice and their interest will be in discovering what the right answer is rather than is discovering what they should do to avoid a similar error in the future (p. 31).

Teachers usually expect students to answer comprehension questions based on reading a text; however, the actual situation does not always fulfill this expectation, especially for students with low English proficiency. The challenge here is how teachers can encourage students to actually read English texts, to find necessary information, and to understand the content. In order to deal with this challenge, the effectiveness of encouraging reading strategies is worth investigating.

2. BACKGROUND

This study investigates students’ perception of whether explicit instruction in reading strategies is effective for the development of their reading skills. This review, therefore, first concentrates on the reading strategies employed in this study. Several studies are also reviewed in order to examine the positive effects of strategy instruction when teaching reading.
2.1 Reading Strategies

According to Grabe and Stoller (2011), reading strategies are defined as “abilities that are potentially open to conscious reflection, and reflect a reader’s intention to address a problem or a specific goal while reading” (p. 10). Reading strategies include connecting text to readers’ background knowledge, skimming, scanning, guessing the meaning of vocabulary from context, monitoring main-idea comprehension, taking notes, underlining or highlighting, and summarizing (see Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Nation, 2009; Schramm, 2008).

Reading strategies have been considered as important for the development of reading fluency. If EFL students read texts which contain “no unknown vocabulary and grammar” (Nation, 2009, p. 72), a good silent reading speed is around 250 words per minute and a good skimming speed is around 500 words per minute. It is said that less than 100 words per minute is too slow to comprehend the text. In order for learners to read fluently or at a good speed, Nation (2009) and Grabe and Stoller (2011) explained the effectiveness of two reading strategies: skimming and scanning. Skimming means that “the reader goes through a text quickly, not noting every word but trying to get the main idea of what the text is about” (Nation, 2009, p. 70). In other words, readers try to get the gist and identify the main idea. On the other hand, scanning requires readers to search for a particular piece of information such as a particular name or a particular number.

Of course, it is no use reading faster if readers cannot understand the content of a text. Nation (2009) suggested that, while developing fluency reading, readers are expected to score 70 percent of comprehension questions correctly. Therefore, when teaching these two strategies - skimming and scanning - for fluency development, students’ comprehension was also paid much attention and regarded as important.

2.2 Effects of Strategy Instruction

It is generally considered that good readers can utilize various reading strategies (Chamot, 2008; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Nation, 2009). Since this study focuses on Japanese EFL college students with low English proficiency, this review concentrates on the previous studies whose participants were at the beginner’s level and learned target language as a foreign language.

Macaro and Erler (2008) provided reading strategy instruction for 14 months to young-beginner learners in England who were learning to read French as a foreign language. They focused on the strategies which learners can employ when they face unknown words or phrases in a text; for example, scanning for familiar words and using them to guess the meaning, skipping a text, looking up many words in a dictionary, and using background knowledge. Comparing the participants’ change before and after the strategy instruction, they concluded that “strategy instruction improved comprehension of both simple and more elaborate texts, brought about changes in strategy use, and improved attitudes toward reading” (p. 90).

As for Japanese college students, Adachi and Oishi (2017) provided strategy instruction for three months to Japanese college students who took a reading class. They used a reading textbook, Making Connections 3 (2013, Cambridge University Press), which focuses on reading skills and strategies. In their strategy instruction, they encouraged
the students to understand paragraph structure, guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases from the context, and their background knowledge. Before and after the course, the students took a reading test, which was prepared by the researchers and extracted from the reading comprehension part (Part VII) in the TOEIC test. The researchers pointed out that strategy instruction improved the scores of the reading test. They also suggested that “students with lower and middle-level proficiency could grasp the text better as a whole as a result of strategy training” (p. 57).

Based on these studies, it appears that strategy instruction is beneficial for developing students’ reading skills. If really so, the teaching of reading strategies to students, especially those with low English proficiency should be highly recommended. However, it has also been pointed out that research on the effects of strategy instruction is not enough. Grabe and Stoller (2011) suggested that “research on reading strategies in L2 contexts is surprisingly limited, despite many discussions of the importance of reading strategies to improve students’ reading abilities” (p. 112). Chamot (2008) also concluded that “while we have learned much about the usefulness of including the kinds of strategies used by good language learners in target language education, much still remains to be investigated” (p. 276). More research is needed on the effects of reading strategy instruction.

2.3 Research Questions
Based on the previous studies, this study focuses on students’ perceptions and investigates whether strategy instruction can be beneficial in developing the English reading skills of Japanese EFL students, especially those at the beginner’s level. Through the students’ perceptions of their own English reading, this study examines the following three research questions:

(1) How does the way the students read English change due to explicit instruction in reading strategies?
(2) How does the students’ fluency in reading change due to explicit instruction in reading strategies?
(3) Do there appear to be any other benefits of explicit instruction in reading strategies?

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants
The participants were 12 Japanese college students who took an elective course called “Academic Reading” of which the researcher was in charge. All of them were non-English majors, and their English proficiency was at the beginner’s level. More specifically, most of them neither passed nor even tried to take Grade 3 of the “EIKEN” English Proficiency Test in Japan, which corresponds to A1 level of the CEFR. At the beginning of the course, they commonly reported to the researcher that they were not confident in reading English. Prior to commencing the study, all the participants gave informed consent to the researcher.
3.2 Procedure

The researcher conducted the lessons as the teacher of the course. The textbook used during the course was *Select Readings, Pre-Intermediate* (Oxford University Press, 2011) whose CEFR level is A2. The textbook was chosen by the researcher. Each chapter includes an article of approximately 400 to 600 words with comprehension questions.

While reading the textbook, the students were given explicit instruction in reading strategies for three months. The students read one article every week, except in the weeks for the reviews, mid-semester and final exams. In order to investigate the changes in their use of strategies and their fluency in reading, the same open-ended questionnaire was conducted three times during the course, and the students’ answers were analyzed (see Table 1).

At the beginning of the course, the expression to indicate the location in the reading text, “Paragraph X, Line Y,” was introduced. Then, in the first three weeks, the students followed the following sequence:

1. Read the comprehension questions first.
2. Don’t try to translate every single word. Instead, look at the text, and search for a particular piece of information (scanning).
3. Underline or highlight the sentence (annotation).
4. Answer the comprehension questions, and at the same time, answer where the information was found using the expression “Paragraph X, Line Y.”

Using the above procedure, when the students answered T/F questions for example, they had to (1) read the statement written in the textbook, (2) search for the sentence or phrase which supports or denies the statement, and (3) underline or highlight the sentence. Then, the students had to (4) answer the questions as follows.

Teacher: Question No. 1. Is it True or False?
Student X: False.
Teacher: Good. Why is it F? Where did you find the information?
Student X: “Paragraph X, Line Y.”

In the fourth and fifth weeks, the students were encouraged to explain what is stated in each paragraph either in English or Japanese. In order to do so, skimming and summarizing were additionally introduced. Before looking at the questions on the textbook, the researcher let the students read each paragraph and take notes to explain what is written in each paragraph. The students were also encouraged to take notes or annotate in the margin.

From the sixth week on, the students were encouraged to repeatedly use scanning, skimming, summarizing, annotating, and taking notes. At the end of each lesson, the students were also encouraged to reflect and monitor which strategies they had used while reading the textbook.

As for the reading speed, from the first week on, the researcher let the students know every five minutes while they were reading the textbook. Students were encouraged
to write a slash mark ("/") or any mark in the textbook so that they could trace how many sentences they could read within every five minutes. As mentioned in 2.1, it is said that a good silent reading speed is around 250 words per minute (Nation, 2009); however, because the beginner-level students lacked enough vocabulary and grammar, it seemed to be reasonable to set a moderate goal so reading fluency was monitored every five minutes, not every minute.

Table 1
Schedule of the Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (in 2019)</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>Strategy Instruction</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 April 11</td>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>Scanning, Annotation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 April 18</td>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>Scanning, Annotation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 April 25</td>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>Scanning, Annotation 1st time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 May 9</td>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>Scanning, Annotation, Skimming, Summarizing, Note-taking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 May 16</td>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>Scanning, Annotation, Skimming, Summarizing, Note-taking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 May 23</td>
<td>Review (Chap. 1-5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 May 30</td>
<td>Mid-semester Exam</td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 June 6</td>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>ALL, Monitoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 June 13</td>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>ALL, Monitoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 June 20</td>
<td>Chapter 8</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>ALL, Monitoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 June 27</td>
<td>Chapter 9</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>ALL, Monitoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 July 4</td>
<td>Chapter 10</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>ALL, Monitoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 July 11</td>
<td>Chapter 11</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>ALL, Monitoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 July 18</td>
<td>Review (Chap. 6-11)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3rd time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 July 25</td>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for the medium of strategy instruction, not only English but also Japanese (the students’ L1) was used based on what Chamot (2008) suggested.

Beginning level language students do not yet have the proficiency to understand explanations in the target language of why and how to use learning strategies. However, if learning strategy instruction is postponed until intermediate or advanced level courses, beginners will be deprived of strategies that can
make their language learning more successful and increase their motivation for further study (p. 274).

It was true that explaining in Japanese was necessary for the first three weeks, but gradually, the students became able to understand English-only explanations. This is partly because of their development of English listening skills, but more than that, it can be considered that the students came to be familiar with reading English texts while using reading strategies.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As noted in 3.1, the same open-ended questionnaire was conducted three times during the course (see Table 1). The questionnaire was conducted in the students’ L1 (Japanese)\(^1\), and consists of the following three items.

(1) Do you feel that there has been any change in the way you read English before and after taking this course?
(2) Do you feel that there has been any change in the speed of your reading English before and after taking this course?
(3) Do you have any other comments about this course?

4.1 Students’ Perceptions of Their Use of Reading Strategies

First, regarding the research question (1) How does the way the students read English change due to explicit instruction in reading strategies?, 100% (all 12 students) answered that their ways of reading English had changed. The students reported that, instead of translating every sentence, their ability to find the necessary information in the texts and to understand the gist was highly improved. In other words, they became able to use scanning and skimming. Several students showed noticeable changes in their comments as follows (emphasis was added by the researcher):

Student A (male, 2nd year)
Before: “I translated every English word into Japanese and tried to understand the content.”
After 14 weeks: “I can **pick important parts** from the text.”

Student B (female, 3rd year)
Before: “I could not read or understand an English text at all.”
After 7 weeks: “I became able to pay attention to and **focus on the gist** while reading.”
After 14 weeks: “I feel I became able to read an English text. I became able to infer the meanings of unknown words from the context.”

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\(^1\) Questionnaire items and students’ answers cited in this paper were translated from Japanese to English by the researcher.
Student C (male, 3rd year)
Before: “When I found unknown words, I stumbled and stopped reading, which affected my reading comprehension negatively.”
After 3 weeks: “I became able to get the main idea of what the text is about.”
After 7 weeks: “I became able to identify the subject of each sentence.”
After 14 weeks: “I can identify the important parts in each paragraph. This helps me understand the gist of the story without translating every sentence. Understanding the gist helps me understand detailed information.”

4.2 Students’ Perceptions of Fluency Development
Secondly, regarding the research question (2) How does the students’ fluency in reading change due to explicit instruction in reading strategies?, all 12 students (100%) answered that their speed of reading English had become faster (see Figure 1). After three weeks, four students answered that their speed had become “faster,” six students answered, “a little faster,” and two students answered that their speed did not change. However, after 14 weeks, no student answered that their speed did not change while four students answered that their speed had become “much faster.”

![Figure 1. Students’ perceptions of their change in reading speed](image)

The students’ questionnaire also showed some reasons why their reading speed increased. First, they stopped translating English into Japanese. By skimming which is the strategy they newly acquired, the students found it possible to comprehend the basic ideas in texts without translating every sentence. Secondly, through summarizing each paragraph, they became able to grasp the main idea of each paragraph so that they were not confused while reading even long sentences.

Student D (female, 2nd year)
Before: “I could not comprehend texts unless I translated every English word into Japanese. Because of this translation, it took a long time.”
After 14 weeks: “I can make inferences and guess meaning from the context. I am happy that I became able to read fluently.”

Student E (female, 2nd year)
Before: “While reading, I often got lost and wondered where I was in the text, and I had to read the same part again and again.”
After 14 weeks: “By reading each paragraph, I can reflect on and organize my comprehension in mind.”

4.3 Positive Influence on Motivation
Finally, regarding the last research question, (3) Do there appear to be any other benefits of explicit instruction in reading strategies?, the students’ comments showed that explicit instruction in reading strategies can encourage and motivate beginner-level students to read English texts. Below are some examples of their comments.
- “I believed I was poor at reading English, but now I don’t feel like that.”
- “I gained confidence in reading English.”
- “I realized that even I can read and understand English. I gained confidence.”
- “I really enjoyed reading long sentences in English.”
- “My resistance to English reading disappeared. I want to try to read the English translation of Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood.*”

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined students’ perceptions and investigated the effectiveness of explicit instruction in reading strategies in the development of students’ reading comprehension. First, explicit instruction in reading strategies can have a positive effect on the development of Japanese EFL students’ English reading skills. Above all, the students reported that their ability to skim and scan the texts improved greatly. Secondly, explicit instruction in reading strategies can contribute to fluency development. All of the students (100%) perceived their development in reading fluency. Finally, it was also found that explicit instruction in reading strategies is effective for the enhancement of beginner-level students’ motivation to read English texts.

It cannot be denied that this study has several limitations which should be examined in a follow-up study. First, this study had no objective comparison between an experimental group with strategy instruction and a control group without it. Also, the number of participants was exceptionally small. Due also to the limited time available to conduct an objective reading test before and after the course, this study could not provide objective data which confirms students’ subjective self-perceptions. In the follow-up study, “accuracy in students’ reading,” which can be measured by a reading test, and “fluency in students’ reading,” which can be measured by timed-reading and word count, are necessary to be examined. Finally, all participants were taking an elective English course “Academic Reading”; therefore, there is the possibility that they were more motivated than the average Japanese college students at the beginner’s level.

In spite of these limitations, the results of this study showed that explicit instruction
in reading strategies can be a useful means of developing English reading skills in EFL contexts. Above all, for beginner-level students, strategy instruction is very beneficial because it encourages them to actively read, find necessary information to answer comprehension questions, and comprehend texts. Strategy instruction also contributes to fluency development in reading and brings positive influences on motivation. By introducing strategy instruction, comprehension questions also appear to work more effectively and efficiently in teaching reading.

REFERENCES


