The Correlation Between Reading Strategies and Failure

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Feryal Cubukcu

Dokuz Eylul University
fcubukcu@deu.edu.tr

Abstract *It has been proposed that not only the knowledge and use of learning strategies are essential for learning and achievement but that various individual characteristics of learners influence their ability to be self-regulated and to act strategically during learning. Prior achievement, domain-specific knowledge, performance and regulation of tactics and strategies, and other cognitive and motivational individual differences are factors that affect learners' strategic behaviors and their monitoring and control processes (Alexander et al., 1998; Pressley & Hilden, 2006). The present study aims at investigating the reading strategies of 30 underachievers in the English language teaching department. Moreover, it is intended to examine the pattern of relations between the strategic behaviors and subsequent performance in reading English plays. This study examines the the strategic behaviors "in action" qualitatively as they are easily unfolded during students'engagement in reading tasks, including self-regulatory processes observed by two independent raters.*

Keywords: **reading strategies, self regulation, underachievers**

1. Introduction

Several studies have consistently shown that students' application of various categories of strategies facilitates engaged, self regulated learning and this may be directly related to their academic performance. There is powerful evidence from previous studies of the causal relationship between comprehension strategy use and comprehension (Gourgey, 2001; Pressley, 2002). Regarding students' cognitive and metacognitive skillfulness, it has been claimed that this skillfulness makes a significant contribution to the development of students as learners and to their academic achievement (Alexander et al., 1998; Gourgey, 2001; Pressley, 2002; Pressley & Hilden, 2006).

2. Self Regulation

More specifically, before reading, a good reader is able to plan his activities from the beginning, the subgoals of action, the means, etc., through which he will increase the possibilities to achieve his ultimate goal. This means that good readers think and act metacognitively in advance. Once actual reading begins, skilled readers are able to distinguish important information or to skip

information that is not relevant to their reading goals, to predict what is coming up next, and to analyze and combine activities and information (Gourgey, 2001). Skilled readers while reading might also activate prior knowledge, generate questions, and pay attention to confusing or inconsistent points (Pressley & Hilden, 2006).

When good readers make it through a text once, they evaluate themselves to confirm that they understand and remember what they have read (Horner & Shwery, 2002). When the reader
senses that something is missing from his understanding, this can motivate additional reading of the text and he might decide to read more slowly, deliberately reflecting on the text. Skilled reading is massively strategic, involving metacognitive processes and relating ideas of a text to prior knowledge (Pressley & Hilden, 2006). Good readers are skilled, active, and self-regulated before, during, and after reading using the repertoire of their skills and strategies to the full.

On the other hand, students' failure to control and regulate their learning and problem-solving processes and limited strategic skillfulness have been associated to poor performance and learning problems (Butler, 1998; Gourgey, 2001; Jacobs & Paris, 1987; Oakhill & Cain, 2000). Several studies on good reader–poor reader differences in text processing suggest that poor readers fail to (a) conceptualize reading as a search for meaning, (b) monitor their comprehension to ensure that they are deriving meaning, (c) engage in strategic behavior to bring meaning when there has been a breakdown in comprehension, and (d) modify their choice of strategies to meet the varying demands of reading (Horner & Shwery, 2002). Furthermore, poor readers do not clarify adequately the relationships among the facts of the problem and they detect errors less often while reading in comparison to good readers (Jacobs & Paris, 1987). Poor readers tend to focus on a handful of strategies they use regardless of the particular reading situation and they have difficulties monitoring whether these strategies are working and evaluating their outcomes and the achievement of their reading goals (Gourgey, 2001).

Reading comprehension in a self-regulated fashion involves internal processes, such as strategic thinking, and more observable, behavioral indicators (Zimmerman, 1999), such as verbal and nonverbal indications of strategic action. An example is self-monitoring of reading; e.g., by interrupting the reading process, examining more closely the text, and deciding to reread it. Students' overt behaviors during learning and problem-solving might be used by microgenetic methods to infer internal self-regulatory and thought processes (Siegler, 2006), such as the use of self-regulatory skills and strategies.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

30 (4 boys and 26 girls) students who failed in Drama lesson at the English Language Teaching Department participated in the study.

3.2 Design

Interviews, think-aloud protocols, informal observations, and document analyses were utilized during this three- week study by the two raters whose reliability was found to be .82. Paris and Paris (2001) reported that key strategies in reading are to make inferences, to answer content questions, to elaborate the meaning from the text, and to identify main ideas. On the basis of this literature, the participant students were examined in the following tasks: activating the background knowledge (one task), pinpointing the key words in the text (one task), characterization (two tasks), answering content questions (three tasks), literary devices(one task), recognizing the flaws of the hero (one task), comparing the characters (one task), discussing the theme (two tasks), and finally cross-cultural discussion of a theme (one task),. The maximum score that one could obtain by summing up performance in the above tasks was 26 points. For the purposes of the present study, only the quantitative data were taken into account.

Structured Observation Form For Strategic Behavior

A structured observation form was used to assess students' strategic behavior during reading comprehension. This is an instrument that includes the assessment of different behaviors as indicative of students' thinking and employment of problem-solving strategies. Most of the strategic behaviors assessed were proposed by Zimmerman (1999) The behaviors tapped cognitive aspects of strategic behavior (behaviors 1–3, $\alpha = .92$), metacognitive aspects (behaviors 4–7, $\alpha = .97$), and regulation of motivation (behaviors 8–11, $\alpha = .95$),

1. Concentration—Perceives external stimuli but is not distracted by them
2. Analyzing and combining activities—Joining small parts resulting from previous activity to make a meaningful whole
3. Choosing between main and trivial—Methodically selects the substantial elements, ignores the trivial ones
4. Planning—Working with a clear plan, using time effectively
5. Monitoring of the activities—Examines closely the solution process, selects appropriate next step

6. Evaluating (in the discussion after the solution)—Offers evaluations after observing the outcome
7. Awareness of errors, adjusting intermediate aims—Is aware of errors and tries to correct them
8. Initiative (starts action on his own)—Shows initiative and high levels of self-activation, decides next step with no need for intervention
9. Working autonomously—Works autonomously, needs no intervention or reinforcement by the experimenter
10. Persistence—Works persistently in face of difficulties till finding a solution
11. Maintaining motivation—Effectively motivates himself and retains interest for the activity

4. Results

The means and the standard deviations for each behavior employed by the students are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Low Reading Comprehension Achievers

Strategies	Means	Std dev
Comprehension	11.40	3.31
Concentration	3.05	.57
Analyzing character development	1.82	.49
Choosing main and trivial themes	1.85	.43
Planning the study of the plan	1.72	.51
Monitoring	1.81	.57
Evaluating	1.80	.41
Awareness of errors	1.89	.45
Initiating discussions	2.88	.66
Working autonomously	1.75	.59
Persisting	1.26	.41
Maintaining motivation	2.15	.46

Except for the awareness of their errors and having the ability to distinguish the most important themes from the trivial themes /subplots in the plays, students showed almost similar tendencies in the strategic behaviors such as focusing on the characters and literary devices (analysis), monitoring, initiating discussions, taking the thread and pursuing it. When they started to lose track, they showed demotivation and quitted giving their attention and concentration.

Table 2. Correlations Between Performance in Drama Reading Comprehension and Employment of Strategic Behaviors

Strategies	r
Comprehension	.60
Concentration	.55
Analyzing/combining activities	.70
Choosing main and trivial	.60
Planning	.66
Monitoring	.63
Evaluating	.60
Awareness of errors	.92
Initiative	.55
Working autonomously	.75
Persistence	.72
Maintaining motivation	.78

5. Discussion

One aim of this study was to investigate the profile of strategic behaviors during reading comprehension in low achievers. The results of the study showed that, in general, students were relatively able to use a repertoire of skilled and strategic behaviors during their efforts to understand the given text, corroborating recent research that documents that students can be strategic at least to a degree in their school life (Perry, 1998; Siegler, 2000; Whitebread et al., 2005).

Low achievers, on the other hand, although they regulated adequately their motivation to the tasks at hand, they insufficiently employed the metacognitive and cognitive strategic behaviors to perform and regulate their efforts to comprehend the material. This finding is in line with previous literature on good reader–poor reader differences in text processing (Horner & Shwery, 2002; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Pressley & Hilden, 2006).

As McCormick (1994: 59) suggests, students are often overwhelmed or intimidated because they may lack access to the cultural, historical, literary, or theoretical discourses that would enable them actively to construct meaning from the text. Yet students can be equally overwhelmed when teachers simply

"give" them the background knowledge they supposedly need to read and "comprehend" a text. Both ways of teaching can mystify texts by encouraging students to believe that they themselves are incapable of reading, understanding, and certainly analyzing texts, which appear to contain secret and specialized knowledge. It might be easy and comforting to blame students' difficulties entirely on these misconceptions and bad habits, but while they clearly contribute to the problem, we must also take responsibility for disrupting these patterns. We need to provide alternative models of reading and writing, in part by making our own cognitive processes more visible to students, but as my discussion of students' assumptions and habits suggests, we also need to guide students through the reading and research process more carefully. This will not only make the process clear, but it will also force students out of habits that hinder their learning. We can tell tudents over and over that the process is complicated and open-ended, but until we change what we ask students to do, they will fall back on those same habits.

We need to develop strategies to make our own and our students' thinking processes visible. Students need to be able to hear and even see how we access, think about, and organize information, pose questions, and explore possible interpretations. But we also need to be able to see our students' thinking, in order to provide appropriate feedback. This means that we should begin observing and responding to students' work in progress long before they have written a draft of a paper and that our attention should focus not only on what they have to say but on how they develop their ideas. At the same time, students need to become aware of their own thinking processes. They need to learn to evaluate how well an approach works and adjust their thinking as they work—to reframe questions, to try another strategy for locating sources, to revise a conclusion in light of new ideas. Finally, we need to provide scaffolding, in the form of overt instruction, lists of activities, strategies practiced in class, or short assignments to guide students through the process. We cannot assume that students know how to develop a good question about a cultural text, or how to locate, select, and synthesize critical or cultural materials to help them explore answers. We need to engage students in the multiple steps of critical cultural reading as the course moves along, instead of expecting them to produce a finished essay in the middle of the semester, or even at the end, without teaching them how to do it. Further, we need to provide guidance and support to help them with the early steps, to help them refine their cognitive strategies and gain the confidence to work not only independently but also proficiently. Structuring students' work in this way would also disrupt some of the assumptions and habits that limit students' learning (Linkon, 2005: 258).

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution, since they concerned a limited number of students belonging to a particular age group examined using a text with a specific content and structure and in a limited number of comprehension tasks. The limited number of participants also did not allow us to document thoroughly the reliability and validity of all the assessment instruments. The aims of the present study led us to develop our own instruments since it was not easy to find appropriate instruments to assess reading comprehension and use of strategies in a non-English language. Therefore, this study is best described as a pilot study in the domain of reading comprehension. Further research is needed with larger samples of various age groups and using a variety of reading comprehension tasks. It is also important that, in future studies, educational context variables, text variables, and student variables should be taken into account, such as texts with various structures and information level, students' decoding and memory skills, prior knowledge, and level of verbal and general intelligence.

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