

Examinando las estrategias de aprendizaje empleadas por estudiantes aventajados y menos aventajados de EFL en un curso ESP*

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Resumen

Este artículo reporta los resultados obtenidos en la fase inicial de un proyecto de investigación que analiza la manera como los estudiantes en su quinto semestre de entrenamiento docente en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, en una universidad venezolana, responden a las demandas hechas por tipos particulares de ejercicios de comprensión y expresión escrita. La información introspectiva se recogió entre los 5 estudiantes más aventajados y los 5 menos aventajados quienes acababan de terminar un curso de lectura y composición inglesa de 64 horas de duración (un semestre académico de clases). El instrumento de elicitación utilizado en la recolección de la data consistía en la lectura de un texto y en un conjunto de ejercicios idénticos a los tipos de ejercicios usados en el curso de instrucción. Se analizó la data para identificar las estrategias de lectura que los alumnos utilizan para hacer los ejercicios. Los hallazgos obtenidos describen un número más amplio de estrategias disponibles e internalizadas por los alumnos más aventajados comparados con el número limitado de recursos empleado por los estudiantes menos aventajados.

Palabras claves: Estrategias de Lectura, Lectura y Escritura, EFL, ESP, ESL

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Examining the Learning Strategies Employed by Successful and Unsuccessful EFL Students in an ESP Course. 1st Phase.

Abstract

This paper reports on the initial phase of an action research project which will investigate the manner in which students in their fifth semester of EFL teacher training in a Venezuelan university respond to the demands made by particular types of reading comprehension and composition exercises. Introspective data were collected from the 5 more successful and the 5 least successful students who had just completed a 64 hour reading and writing course (an academic semester of class). The elicitation instrument to collect the data consisted of a series of a reading text and a set of exercises identical in type to those used during the course of instruction. The data were analyzed to identify the reading strategies the students employed to complete the exercises. Findings describe the larger number of strategies available and restored to by successful students compared to the limited resources employed by unsuccessful students.

Key words: Strategies, Reading and Writing, EFL, ESP, ESL.

Research notes and discussion

1. Background to the study

Students entering Venezuelan universities in order to train as EFL teachers (of English as a second language) demonstrate a low range of proficiency in English; therefore, they are classed as "false beginners". Part of the responsibility of the English departments of Venezuelan Universities is, consequently, to lead the students to achieve the four skills (reading comprehension and expression, oral comprehension and expression) in the English language at least to the minimum which will permit them to follow and complete their studies successfully and to provide them adequate models, when they, themselves, become teachers for their own students. Many of these trainee teachers will become teachers of adults and teach courses in ESP (English for

Specific Purposes) in the private sector or in the faculties of sciences, medicine, et. of universities.

La Universidad Autonoma del Zulia (LUZ), located north-western Venezuela, has a large and well-established department producing EFL teachers. In 1993, in order both to meet the language improvement needs of trainee teachers and to provide them with an appreciation of some characteristics of ESP teaching and materials, a special course was designed for them by the authors.

The course, "English Reading and Writing I: Canadian Studies" (Mendoza and Mackay in progress) attempts to strengthen their mastery of EFL reading and writing skills using a content which focuses upon Canadian content including geographical, historical and sociologi-

cal topics. The first version of the course was taught by a professor of English in LUZ over a period of 16 weeks and totalled 64 hours of instruction. Twenty-five trainee teachers in their fifth semester of undergraduate studies were enrolled in the course. In addition to teaching the course, it was decided to initiate a modest research project to investigate the language learning strategies used by these students when tackling the exercise types designed to facilitate their learning.

Many ESP projects have focused on simulating the strategies of competent readers. For example, Widdowson (1983) describes a theoretical model of the micro-process employed by competent native (or native-like) language user. This model of effective language use is used to inform the design exercise types which assist the learner in replicating these effective micro-process and so effectively adopting what are assumed to be native-like strategies in reading comprehension and other skills of language use. This type of thinking underlies the activities found in the Focus series (Allen and Widdowson 1974; Mountford 1978; and Gendinning 1980), and in the series Reading and Thinking in English (Widdowson 1980). The theory underpinning this perspective on teaching and learning ESP is discussed most extensively in Widdowson's "Learning Purpose and Language Use" (1983), a volume which the authors believe has been given insufficient attention by ESP practitioners. A somewhat differ-

ent approach is that which raises student's awareness of their reading strategies (possibly linked with other skills) through carefully-designed exercise types.

While some attention has been given to close study of what students actually do while performing reading exercises (e.g. Hosenfeld 1976, 1977, 1984); however, to our knowledge, this kind of investigation has not been used to examine how adult students involved in ESP-type courses interact with and respond to specific sets of materials of exercise types.

This project, at La Universidad del Zulia, has been undertaken in order to examine how adult learners in an ESP course respond to the demands made upon them by special purpose materials designed to promote their reading (and to a lesser extent writing) skills within the broad field of Canadian Studies.

Canadian studies in this case, refers to a course the content of which focuses upon topics dealing with Canadian geography, history, economic and other topics. The eventual purpose of such a project would be to confirm whether or not the exercise types expressly designed for the students have the teaching/learning effect intended and thus can be considered effective teaching-learning tools. Such "classroom research" would serve to focus the attention of teachers and materials writers on the logic underlying the employment of par-

* See Hutchinson and Waters 1982 and 1987, pp 106-127 for a discussion; and for examples see the International edition of the University of Malaysia English for Special Purposes Project (UMESPP) materials, Morais (Ed.) 1980; and Glendinning and Holmstrom 1992.

ticular exercise types and to send some

light on the effectiveness of the exercise types themselves.

2. Procedure of data collection and analysis.

2.1. The student sample

Of the 25 students who participated in the reading and writing course, verbal data were collected from 10. The 10 students selected by the researchers to provide data in this phase of the research represented the 5 most successful and the 5 least successful students in the course as determined by the final course grades obtained.

The researchers felt that a purposeful sample representing the two extremes of students performance on the course (Patton 1990, p 169) would, at the exploratory stage, permit richer data to be collected than that from a random sample of students. A comparison between the language learning (reading and writing) strategies of the least successful and most successful students would be especially enlightening. Purposeful sampling (as opposed to random sampling) has a strong tradition in second language research (Stern 1975; Carroll 1981; Gillete 1987) and there is substantial evidence that the scrutiny of extreme cases is capable of providing insights which are relevant to the design and improvement of second language programmes for more typical students (Naiman et al 1975; Hosenfeld 1976, 1977).

2.2. Data collection

The data, in this phase of the research, were recorded on audio cassette. They were obtained by means of an elicitation instrument in the form of a pedagogical unit identical in nature to those

materials used during the course of instruction. Thus the students were completely familiar with the type of reading text and types of reading comprehension and writing exercises which followed it.

The data were collected in the form of individual students' oral responses to the 7 tasks in the written elicitation instrument. The oral responses included both the response to the tasks and the students' verbal commentary on the strategies they were using or had just used in order to complete the task.

The operational definition of "strategy" in this study follows that employed by Cohen (1987, p 92), "those thought processes that learners consciously choose to use in accomplishing learning tasks."

This method of data collection involving introspection and self-observation on the part of the students, with or without prompts from the researcher, is an empirical instrument which is gaining ground as a means of investigating the strategies used by students while performing learning tasks in a foreign language (Hosenfeld 1977; Cohen and Hosenfeld 1981; Mann 1982; Fearch and Kasper 1987; Cohen 1987). We believe that it would also be an appropriate way of examining Widdowson's theoretical model of language referred to above (Widdowson, 1983).

The data for this study were collected from one student at a time by the senior author. The procedure took an average of about 30 minutes per student.

At the beginning of each individual data-collection session the researcher gave each student a copy of the elicitation instrument. The researcher informed the student that he/she was being asked to complete the 7 numbered exercises (including the reading comprehension text) and that he/she should explain the strategies that they were employing to complete the exercises as they were actually doing each of them or immediately after they had done each. The students were not asked to name the strategy used, but to inform the researcher the processes which took place in their minds while doing the activities. They were asked to say aloud whatever they were doing and how they were completing each activity. Each student was free to provide whatever information he/she believed clearly represented his/her experience.

The researcher was at liberty to prompt the student if he/she was having difficulty explaining the strategies being employed, or in order to break an inordinately long silence. The researcher (referred to as "R" below), however, limited her interventions to indirect rather than direct prompting in order to avoid "leading" the students (referred as "S" in the example below). For example :

- S. Whenever I do an exercise which involves reading, I read the passage about 8 times. (Silence).
- R. Explain to me the process you follow to do this kind of activity.
- S. I go back to the passage. (Silence).
- R. You go back to the passage again...?
- S. I look first at the main idea. If I have the main idea, I try to develop this

main idea. I use a lot the dictionary to change words...etc., etc.

Following Hosenfeld (1984, p 233) interventions by the researcher were worded in such a way as not to constrain or lead students' responses. The above example offers an illustration of a typical intervention by the researcher.

To summarize, the data were collected orally by the teacher from one student at a time, in a private room outside the class, at the moment the student was engaged in performing each of the 7 tasks and recorded. There was a low degree of formality of elicitation with no constraints imposed by the researcher but interventions were made in order to encourage students to explain and elaborate upon their responses. (See table 1).

2.3. Data analysis

The data, originally in the form of audio-recordings of each student's thinking aloud protocols and including all interventions made by the teacher, were transcribed onto paper to ease of handling.

For each student group, i.e. successful and unsuccessful, the total number of different strategies mentioned for attacking the 7 exercise types were identified and listed as an inventory by researchers. The inventories for both the successful and unsuccessful students are presented in table 2.

No attempt to list the strategies either in order of frequency of occurrence nor in any order of importance has been attempted given the small number of students.

Table 1 Summary of Type of Data Collected and their Descriptors

Type of Data	No. of Participants	Context	Recency	Mode: Elicitation/ Response	Degree of External Intervention
Introspection Self - observation	Individual plus researcher	In privacy, outside of class	Immediately upon completing each reading and writing task	Elicitation - written Response - oral	Low to moderate

Table 2 Inventory of Strategies Reported by Successful and Unsuccessful Students

Successful Students	Unsuccessful Students
Re-read the text.	Re-read the text.
Read in order to make sense of units larger than the sentence.	
Identify relationships of grammatical cohesion.	
Identify relationships of rhetorical coherence.	
Look for "natural" patterns of discourse organization.	
Make use of the context to deduce the meaning of a word.	
Make use of knowledge of the word.	
Attempt to get the "gist" or overall meaning of the text.	
Make successful use of the dictionary.	Underline unknown words and look them up in the dictionary.
Re-read in order to reduce uncertainty about the meaning of a piece of text.	
Make use of previous experience of patterns of organization within text.	
Remember what has been read.	
Employ phonological knowledge in order to identify units of meaning within text (i.e. reading aloud).	Employ phonological knowledge in order to identify units of meaning within text (i.e. reading aloud).
Recognize markers of time and tense.	

3. Discussion and conclusions

From this very preliminary and tentative piece of classroom research, we were able to confirm that the methodology used to obtain the data is relatively easily mastered by both researchers (although increased practice will improve the quantity and quality of the data collected) and subjects, and it is practicable in terms of the time that it demands both in the collection and analysis stages. Since it involves students in learning-like activities, it is not perceived by them to be irrelevant to their purposes and so they are not unwilling to participate.

The data were less in quantity and also less qualitatively rich than the researchers would have wished. One of the reasons was believed to be the newness of the data collection methodology to both researcher and students. In an attempt to avoid being over-intrusive, the researcher tended to under-use prompts and so quantitatively, the data were less than anticipated.

Some students, in addition to being somewhat self-conscious about expressing their thought processes, found it an increased burden to do so in English. English had been chosen as the medium of the think-aloud protocols because it was most compatible with the general practice of conducting all teaching and learning in the target language. However, this put weaker students at a double disadvantage; not only did they have more trouble with the exercise, they also had more troubles explaining the researcher what the nature of the trouble was. These limitations will provide the re-

searchers with guidance in the future phases of the study.

These limitations aside, the data collected were examined. Successful students reported using a wider variety of strategies than unsuccessful students. (See table 2). Successful students reported some facility in selecting an appropriate strategy to assist in resolving a particular difficulty. Unsuccessful students, on the other hand, reported fewer strategies to call upon and a less pragmatic approach to their use. Whereas successful readers reported encountering difficulties and actively calling upon one of a wide repertoire of strategies, unsuccessful students reported encountering difficulties and being overwhelmed by them. Given the preliminary and exploratory nature of this study and the limited data obtained, the researchers felt that it would be inappropriate to attempt to rank the strategies identified in any way, such as frequency of occurrence or relative difficulty. It was sufficient at this point to simply identify and list all of the strategies employed by the two groups as exemplified by the data.

The explicit appearance of strategies in the data will inevitably depend upon a number of factors. One is each student's ability to introspect upon and articulate clearly the process he/she employs in performing any reading or writing task. This factor must be mitigated by offering students the choice of thinking aloud either in their mother tongue (Spanish) or in the target language (English).

Another factor is the researcher's skill in prompting students to introspect

and describe their process. Experience will provide the researchers with a clearer understanding of where the boundary lies between "leading" the student and "prompting" in order to encourage enhanced reflection. In this first pass, it was felt that the researchers erred on the side of caution thus allowing the students to demand less of themselves in terms of the time and sustained effort they put into the task of reflection.

A third factor is the exact nature and form of the exercise types used to elicit student introspection. Initially, the researchers had anticipated that the data would clearly illustrate that different exercise types required different strategies and micro-processes of the students. However, the data obtained from the think-aloud protocol associated with each exercise type tended to be disappointingly uniform. This finding may change along with the two issues above. Additionally, any future elicitation instrument could be designed to contain fewer exercise types and incorporate greater fundamental difference between types. For example, the instrument might contain only four exercise types, two designed to practice procedural ability and two designed to practice interpretive procedures (Widowson 1983, p 40). Such a design would increase the potential for discriminating between reading strategies employed and linking them more directly with the theory from which a particular exercise type draws rationale.

At this point in this very exploratory process, a number of additional questions to inform future research practice come to mind:

1. How can unsuccessful learners be

lead to acquire the learning strategies of successful students?

2. Do particular exercise types promote the use of particular reading or writing strategies and processes which are particularly appropriate to the successful resolution of these exercises?
3. Can exercise types be designed in such a way that they actively facilitate the acquisition of particular problem-solving strategies which promote language learning?

Future passes in this project will attempt to focus on these questions.

A single, striking piece of evidence from the data leads us to be optimistic about the utility of this line of research. This piece of evidence was provided from the verbal protocol of one of the successful students. It is a suggestion that exercises can indeed be designed to provide practice in particular strategies which promote foreign language acquisition as opposed merely to testing whether or not it has occurred (Mackay et al 1975).

R. ... what do you do to find out the answer?

- S. I have to read the passage again and again and try to look for the information and try to understand clearly what the passage deals with and find out what they are talking about. **Teacher, there is something very important, sometimes I don't understand the whole passage until I don't do most of the exercises. In other words, the exercises help me to understand the meaning of the passage.** At the beginning, I just have a general idea of the passage. For example, might

be that when I read for the first time, I didn't realize what "it" meant, but now I do.

This successful student is reporting the facilitating effect of particular exercise types. She confirms ("until I don't do" is a transfer error from the student's mother tongue, but it has the value of the affirmation "until I do") how she is conscious that performing a pedagogic task actually contributes to comprehension and language learning as opposed to merely confirming that it has occurred. This, of course, is the

principal intended role of consciously designed pedagogical materials, but the effectiveness of most has never been confirmed empirically. While experienced ESP practitioners may consciously design exercise types on the basis of first-hand experience of their effectiveness which provides a clear "theory of action" (Patton, 1990) or rationale for the characteristics of the resultant materials, other less experienced may select exercise types in a more arbitrary and less rational manner.

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