Exploring reading and writing strategy use development: A qualitative study in the Tunisian EFL context

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Defining a strategy

- **Definition of a strategy:**

- "A strategy is a **conscious** mental activity, employed in the pursuit of **a goal**, **transferable** to other learning situations and tasks" (Macaro, 2006).

- Recent reviews provided empirical evidence for the effectiveness of explicit strategy instruction in enhancing learners' reading and writing abilities (Hassan et al., 2005; Plonsky, 2011; Taylor et al., 2006)

Insights from research

- **Research on LLS reading instruction**

  Whether SI is teachable is a question that has been explored in a variety of contexts since the 1990s. However, there is less consensus on how we judge the effectiveness of SI.

- Kusiak (2001) sought to integrate MSI into a reading course. The programme produced findings that showed the participants' increased metacognitive awareness and **improved reading comprehension scores.**

- Dreyer and Nel (2003) conducted a reading strategy instruction and the participants were divided into experimental and control groups. Pre- and post-treatment tests were administered to assess both students' reading comprehension as well their strategy use. The findings revealed an increase of experimental groups' **test scores** along with an **increase in strategy frequency**.

SI impact on learners of different proficiency levels

- Research from reading and listening suggest that SI does not impact on **high** and **low** achievers **equally**.
- While some studies reported that only high proficiency learners benefited from the instruction (Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2003), others have found the opposite; only low achievers benefited from SI (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010).

- The concern here is that SI should help all learners regardless of proficiency level.
- A solution would be to implement needs-based and individualised SI.
- Some pre-intervention measurement of learners' current strategy use is required before the design of the training programme.

Developments in LLS research

- The shift away from a focus on the frequency of strategy use (quantity) to an interest in the quality of strategy use.

- Early research associated successful learning to the frequency of strategy use, while recent research diverted to the exploration of how learners deployed strategies within a specified context and while completing a specific task. In other words, it was no longer ***what*** strategies learners are using which make a difference, but rather ***how*** they are using them.

The added value of integrated reading and writing SBI

- Students are often taught in contexts which do not reflect their actual authentic learning situation, where very often read to write and write to read.

- It has the potential to raise learners' awareness of the possibility of strategy transfer across skill areas.

- Designing a strategy training program while focusing on the strategies involved in one skill area, would confine the students to a learning situation restricted by the tasks and strategies related to the skill taught.

- With the aim of overcoming these limitations, and because drawing students' attention to strategy transfer across skills and similar tasks is critical in building students' autonomy, the training programme implemented in this study focuses on two skill areas; namely, reading and writing.

The study

- This study is part of a larger project aiming at exploring the impact of Metacognitive Strategy Instruction (MSI) on learners' reading and writing strategy use and performance.

Research methodology (larger study)

- **The research design:**

  A quasi-experimental mixed method research design

- **The participants**

  143 EFL undergraduate students drawn from six intact classes were randomly assigned to two condition groups

- **The data collection**

  Three-phase study: Pre-Post training programme, and a delayed test.

Objectives of the study

- **It aims at investigating whether MSI can bring about changes in students' strategic behaviour.**
- It seeks to investigate whether MSI can help EFL learners improve their reading and writing performance.
- It aims at eliciting learners' reactions to and attitudes toward the training programme

Research questions

- What are the strategies used by the students before MSI?
- Does MSI have an impact on learners' strategy use?

The Metacognitive Strategy Instruction (MSI) Programme (1)

- The MSI programme extended over a 12-week semester (36 hour lessons)
- Integrated in their regular skill course
- Explicit strategy instruction
- Combination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies
- Standard cycle of instruction: awareness-raising/ modelling, scaffolded practice, gradual scaffolding withdrawal, practice, evaluation.

The Metacognitive Strategy Instruction (MSI) Programme (2)

- A goal-setting based approach
- A process-based approach to reading and writing instruction.
- Promoting awareness-oriented discussions and cultivating self-questioning and self-reflection.
- Encouraging strategy orchestration and strategy transfer
- Providing many practice opportunities
- Promoting group discussions and collaborative activities

Research methodology

- **The participants**

  12 EFL undergraduate students

- **The data collection instrument**
  - Retrospective protocols
  - Coding scheme

Participants

	Experimental group		Control group	
	High	**Low**	**High**	**Low**
Pre-course Retrospection	3	3	3	3
Post-course Retrospection	3	3	3	3
Total number	**12**		**12**	

Retrospection procedure

- Pre- and post-intervention RP sessions
- Training subjects on verbalising their thought
- Subjects were encouraged to use any language they prefer (Arabic, French, or English) or code-switch.
- Their reading-writing test was provided as a support.
- All RP sessions were video-taped

Data analysis

Qualitative analysis : Retrospective protocols

- Coding scheme development
  - ✓ The design of the coding scheme was informed by theories of reading and writing, LLS literature and previous studies (Dhieb-Hnia, 2003; Sasaki, 2004; De Silva & Graham, 2015)
  - ✓ The coding categories were also inspired by the strategies emerging from the collected data

- All the RP were video-taped, then transcribed.
- The inter-coder reliability rate as calculated as 0.83.
- The intra-coder reliability rate was calculated as 0.91.

Strategies

- Setting a purpose:

  The instances where the reader or writer established purposes before or while undertaking a learning task were coded as setting a purpose.

- Monitoring

  Monitoring in this study was defined as the instances in the protocols which showed that the reader or writer was regulating his learning process.

  When readers and writers monitor their comprehension, they check and evaluate whether they are on track making sure that they understand what they read or write. Monitoring strategies were categorised into sub-strategies; namely, problem identification, **comprehension monitoring,** and **content monitoring.**

Setting a purpose

- Experimental group (High achievers)

Time 1	Time 2
Reading skill « I usually read the text first many times because I usually do not understand it from the first reading" **[ExpH1]**	"I thought about what I need to do first. I was talking to myself and asking questions" **[ExpH2]**

- The experimental group participants appeared to be more setting up purposes before reading at post-test.
- They were more metacognitively aware of the benefits of the strategy as they were articulately describing how, when, and why they were using it.

- Experimental group (Low achievers)

Time 1	**Time 2**
« Each time I needed to answer a comprehension question, I had to re-read the whole text again » [**ExpL1]**	"To answer comprehension question four, I knew that I have to go to paragraph number three because I have already noted on the margin "drug legalization" [she shows her test copy]" **[ExpL2].**

- Control group (High achievers)

Time 1	**Time 2**
“While reading, I try to understand all the text carefully, otherwise I could not answer the comprehension questions” **[ContH1]**	« I start by taking in mind the comprehension questions so that I can easily find the answers » **[ContH2]**

Summary of findings

- At Time 2, most of the instances of setting a purpose strategy use were reported by high achievers in the experimental groups.
- A qualitative analysis of the post-test data showed more frequent and effective use of the strategy by the experimental group than by the control group.
- The participants in the experimental groups used more **self-questioning**, and **reflecting** before performing a reading and/or a writing task. This was illustrated and pervasive in their reported thoughts.

Continued

- The qualitative analysis of the control group at Time 1 and Time 2 did not show a perceived variation in the learners' setting a purpose strategy use.
- Besides, the control group participants reported to be reading for the unique goal of answering comprehension questions.
- This important finding suggested learners' belief that the ultimate goal of reading a text was to answer "correctly" the comprehension questions.
- This finding lent further support to previous research conducted in EFL contexts, where readers seem to see reading comprehension as an activity rather than a skill in its own right (Aghaie & Zhang, 2012; Dhieb-Hnia, 2003; Zhang, 2008; Zhang & Wu, 2009).

Continued

- This belief might be a reflection of the local educational system, which motivated learners to be more concerned with the results of their learning (i.e., answering the comprehension questions) rather than the process.
- Aghaie and Zhang (2012) conducted a study in an EFL context and found that their “summative educational system” which distracted students from the authentic goal of reading (i.e., meaning construction) to a more exam-bound end which confined the aim of reading to providing the right answers to the comprehension questions.

- Likewise, Zhang and Wu's (2009) findings revealed that EFL readers seemed to be using "test-taking strategies", which are different from reading comprehension strategies as they were not sufficient for helping them improve their meaning-making process (p. 49). They attributed learners' ineffective reading strategy use to the "comprehension-testing model" adopted in reading instruction in their local context.

Monitoring

- Comprehension monitoring

  The instances where the reader regulated his or her understanding of the text, signaled the need for fix-up strategies to remedy his or her comprehension breakdown, and confirmed that he or she is on track were coded as comprehension monitoring.

Monitoring

- Experimental group (comprehension monitoring) (Low achievers)

Time 1	Time 2
"I did not answer comprehension question number five because I could not find the answer in the text. I thought I could come back to finish it later, but I did not have enough time" **[ExpL1]**	"When dealing with comprehension question number four, I went to paragraph three and tried to understand it, but it was complicated (difficult). I tried to focus on linkers such as "further and "finally". I underlined them and it helped me organise the ideas in the paragraph" **[ExpL2].**

Findings of the experimental group

- In the two extracts, the low achievers were **aware of their comprehension problem (problem identification)**, effectively **sent a message to their monitor** informing it of the occurrence of a comprehension breakdown, deliberately **picked up** a strategy **to remediate** the problem, and articulately reported their mental thoughts confidently.
- However, their intervention was focused on the **lower-level** (i.e., **the text-level).**
- When analysing the high achievers' protocols, the picture was different as can be seen from the following extracts:

Experimental group (High achievers)

Time 1	Time 2
"Whenever I encounter a word or an extract that do not understand, I skip it " **[ExpH1]**	"Whenever I do not understand a word, I try to understand its meaning from context or pay attention to the prefix and suffix." **[ExpH2].** "If I do not understand a word, I try to analyse the word to see how it is formed. You know (...) its stem, prefix and suffix. Sometimes I also read the sentence before and after. Usually, I always finish by understanding even if it is not the exact meaning. I manage to work with an approximate guess because what is important is to understand the ideas in the text" **[ExpH2].**

- The above protocol data underscored the strategic behaviour that characterised the high achievers.

- Specifically, it clearly displayed their metacognitive knowledge which enabled them to identify task demands, and to act accordingly by consciously selecting an appropriate strategy in order to undertake a learning task.

- Control group (Low achievers)

Time 1	Time 2
“I found many difficult words in the text. I tried to understand their meaning….. I lost a lot of time” **[ContL1].**	“I read the text once. Then I re-read it because I could not understand the vocabulary. I know that I need to improve my vocabulary” **[ContL2].**

Summary of findings

- The experimental groups' verbalisation at Time 2 on their comprehension monitoring differed according to their proficiency level.

- Although both high and low achievers benefited from monitoring strategy instruction, **more proficient learners showed more affirmed strategic behaviour and more appropriate use of comprehension monitoring**.

- High achievers developed at post-test a **greater sense of control** over their comprehension processes and an increasingly effective use of monitoring strategy use to address their comprehension breakdowns. Besides, they reported allotting more concern to meaning rather than linguistic knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) reflecting a global consideration of text comprehension.

- The experimental group low achievers showed more monitoring strategy use at Time 2 than at Time1 and used the same strategies than the experimental high achievers, but seemed to over emphasise the importance of linguistic knowledge over meaning comprehension.

- A possible interpretation may be that despite the low achievers' increasing metacognitive awareness of the benefits of strategy use, **their linguistic knowledge seemed insufficient to allow them to gain all the benefits from their strategy use.**

- As for the **control group at Time 2,** they did not deploy appropriate remedial strategies to address the comprehension problems they had identified.

- His focus on basic language processing is indicative of low achievers' text-bound processing of a reading task, and their over-reliance on decoding words rather than using comprehension-oriented metacognitive strategies to compensate for a reading problem.

- This finding signaled a lack of metacognitive awareness of the effective strategies that may compensate for a comprehension breakdown, and a deficiency in activating one's monitor to regulate comprehension and use appropriate remedial strategies when the need arose.

To sum up

The experimental group

- After strategy instruction, the experimental group was using strategies effectively according to task demands.
- More metacognitive strategy deployment mainly with high achievers.
- More instances of strategy orchestration and clustering

- Strategy choice was more goal-oriented (with the aim of achieving a learning task).
- More confidence when verbalising on their learning processes.
- A more articulate description of their learning processes

- Experimental high achievers seemed to benefit more from the training programme than the low achievers mainly with metacognitive strategy use.

- While the high achievers considered meaning as the paramount concern when comprehending a text, the low achievers appeared to be narrowly focused on linguistic proficiency as the only contributing factor to affectively comprehend the reading text.

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