

On Suggestions of Strategy Training in Reading Comprehension

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Abstract—This paper introduces the goals of strategy training and provides kinds of forms that are taken when designing strategy training. Models are firstly listed to make sense of general procedures of strategy training which ensue an approach to integrating strategy training into the regular reading classroom, as a blueprint for teachers to put it into practice.

Index Terms—reading comprehension, strategy training, suggestions

I. INTRODUCTION

It is known that there do exist some differences in the use of learning strategies in reading comprehension between students with different ages, sexes and motivations. Appropriate use of learning strategies in reading comprehension can facilitate reading. Then the evidence leads to the question: Can strategies be trained and taught in order to promote their reading competence? As opinions vary, no unanimous conclusion can be drawn. During the last few decades, many researchers have determined the effectiveness of strategy training through a large number of empirical studies. Stern (1983) argues that it is plausible to assume that failure to learn can be attributed to failure to employ one or the other strategies at a time when its use would have been critical strategy training that leads to overall skill improvement with extensive research documenting the role of a variety of conscious strategies awareness. Therefore training strategy use has become a natural concern of those with a strong belief in the positive effect of strategies on language learning. A wealth of programs and materials research has been developed to train to use effective strategies and extensive effectiveness, many of which have produced favorable findings. Numan (1991) finds learning strategy training does lead to greater sensitivity to the language learning process. Although training research on strategy is proved to be effective, some researchers hold a contrary opinion. Wang Chunming et al (1987) takes a skeptical attitude towards the effect of strategy training and the teaching value. The research on strategy training abroad seems to overemphasize the importance of strategy training. Haastrup, K. (1991) stresses that too much enthusiasm for strategy training should lower the temperature.

We think that denying the effectiveness of strategy training lacks scientific basis and there is no doubt that strategy training can be taught and trained. Learning strategies in reading comprehension have considerable potentiality for enhancing the development of reading competence. Though incompetent readers may play host to the same reservoir as competent readers, the former have no idea about when, how to employ and even why. Poor students can turn out to be better through effective strategy training.

II. GOALS OF STRATEGY TRAINING

In the past few decades, there has been a marked shift from the focus of language instruction, to the needs of individual students in the classroom by attempting to meet their various goals, while at the same time adapting their instruction to meet the students' different language learning needs. In general, Cohen, A.D. (2000) puts that the instruction has changed to one that is more interactive, and less teacher-centered. Implication from this study is that the ability of strategy is a competence for knowing not only what strategy use but also how to use them appropriately and successfully, so what teachers do is help students to know how to use strategy.

The goal of strategy training is for students to become autonomous ones with the dexterity and wisdom to use strategies appropriately in a variety of contexts. However, in the beginning, students should learn when and in what contexts to use particular strategy or require direction and guidance from teachers. In other words, the teachers' goal of strategy training is to teach how, when, what and why strategies can be used to enhance their learning. The first step is to introduce and demonstrate strategies. The aims are to enable students to choose strategies suited to themselves, understand the effectiveness and feasibility of certain strategies, master their concrete operation and thus improve students' competence of applying strategies comprehensively. In the course of first step, we should take many aspects into consideration, for example, the individualization. As we know, students each has their own age, sex motivation, learning style, capacity, personality as mentioned in Chapter three. There is such situation that one strategy is suitable for some students but is not suitable for the others, so teachers should specify a set of strategies which are considered to be good to give students to alternate. The second step is to train students to self-evaluate the efficiency. Through these self-evaluations, students can set up their own evaluation criteria, measure training paces, heighten their consciousness

and train their self-act abilities. In a word, students can learn more correctly and effectively as long as teachers encourage them to self-evaluate and self-direct their learning.

A further goal of strategy training is to improve students' autonomy. The general trend in language education has been seen toward learner-centeredness. No longer does the teacher control every aspect of the process, rather the students are allowed and required to play a fuller, more active and participatory role in learning process, develop strategies and become increasing independent and autonomous in their learning. Furthermore, what's learned at school can't be used throughout one's career at all. It's safe to say that all students need learn to be independent from the teacher. For example, most reading happens out of class that is the main method to obtain information. If students don't form their own strategies of reading, they can't do well. In their spare time, if they can't understand a passage well, how can they ask the teacher? So it's necessary for them to master certain learning strategies in reading comprehension to tackle with the passage while reading by themselves.

The general goal of strategy training is to impart cognitive strategies and to raise metacognitive strategies. Students without metacognitive strategies are regarded as those without direction to monitor their progress. Cognitive strategies exert an operative or cognitive-processing function, because of their operation direct on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning. To sum up, we should make students be knowledgeable about how and when to use strategies. Most importantly, they are capable of assessing particular strategies and developing a repertoire of effective strategies spontaneously without special interventions of teachers.

III. MODELS OF STRATEGY TRAINING

In order to heighten students' autonomy and teach them how to use strategies efficiently, strategy training has undergone many kinds of professionals' exploration. There are models designed to raise students' awareness as to the purpose and rationale of strategy use, to give students chances to practice the strategies that they are being taught, and to help them understand how to use the strategies in new learning contexts, at least four different models are worth elaborating.

A. *General Study-strategy Courses*

General study-strategy courses help students to develop general learning strategies, to clarify their educational goals and values and to diagnose individual learning preferences. Students can be encouraged to participate in these courses which can be transferred to the process of learning a second language, such as using flash cards, overcoming anxiety and developing good grouping strategy. These kinds of programs are especially helpful to more motivated students who are experienced in transferring learning strategies and assisting students in the development of a general awareness of the learning process. However, general study-strategy courses may be insufficient training for the task demand of learning a second language, even though they are not provided with contextualized practice in language setting.

B. *Awareness Training*

As we all know, awareness training is as consciousness rising or familiarization training. After training, students can become aware of and familiar with the general idea of language strategies and help them to accomplish various language tasks. Oxford (1990) describes awareness training as a program in which students become aware of and familiar with the general idea of language learning and the way that strategies can help them to accomplish various language tasks.

In the course of awareness training, it consists of separated lectures and discussions, short workshops and peer sessions. As we all know, awareness training is as consciousness rising. By increasing consciousness, students tend to use more strategies and know how to approach the new raw materials and how to monitor or assess the learning process. Holec H (1988) describes peer tutor system as a direct language exchange program. Though mutual monitor and direction, students exchange views about the kinds of learning strategies that they typically use. The advantage of this system for students is to experience lower stress than in a formal class instruction.

As an example of awareness training in learning strategies in reading comprehension, students can exchange ideas on the reading habits, reading problems, strategy use and so on and so forth. The teacher guides their discussion on such issues as what strategies are used? When and how? Attention is particularly paid to those strategies selected strategies for training. In the next step, the teacher explains the selected strategies in detail and demonstrates how to use them to solve reading problems. For example, when training the learning strategies in reading comprehension: predicting and inferencing, the teacher first explains to the students what predicting and inferencing are and why and when use such strategies. The teacher tells students that reading is an activity involving constant guesses and predicting those later sentences, relying on a number of words or cues to get an idea of what information. Then the teacher facilitates students to understand. One of such examples is predicting and inferencing the content of a passage by the title and the first paragraph, and lastly, students should do some exercises to consolidate the use of the strategies. The aim is to raise the students' awareness of their reading process and strategy use that can lead students to read better.

C. *Insertion of Strategies into Language Textbooks*

Sometimes the rationale for strategy training is only explained in the teacher's manual and the teacher doesn't have

sufficient training to explain the strategy's importance or value as learning tools. At other times, a strategy may be described briefly in English, but the strategy is not subsequently reinforced through other activities in the textbook. But now many foreign language textbooks have begun to immerse strategies overtly or covertly into the assignments and thus into the language curriculum. Because of this, strategy training actually does take place since students are reminded of how and when to use strategies. Of course we can not ignore teacher's role, the teacher has to explicitly debrief student about the strategies and reinforce those that appear in the textbook, making sure that the students are aware of the purpose of systematic strategy use.

There are a few advantages of using textbooks with explicit strategy training and reinforcement, the most obvious of which is that contextualized practice provided by textbook guides and encourages students to transfer language strategy to other similar language tasks because the strategies are already included as part of the regular language course. In addition, these textbooks reinforce strategy use across both tasks and skills, and thus encourage students to continue to apply the strategies and finally form a repertoire of individualized strategies.

D. Strategy-based Instruction

Strategy-based instruction (SBI) is a learner-centered approach to teaching that extends classroom strategy training to include both explicit and implicit integration of strategy into the course content. The aim of this instruction is to help students to learn most effectively, enhance their own comprehension and production of the target language and assist them in learning on their own. There are many means available for strategy instruction: such as general study-strategy course, awareness training, insertion of strategy into language textbook, peer tutoring, short workshops, and so on, but strategy-based instruction is one of the most effective means. Although it may seem that in class strategy training takes valuable time away from teaching the language and content, teachers' using strategy-based instruction has reported that their students become more efficient in completing language training tasks, take more responsibility for self-directing their learning outside class, gain more confidence in their ability to learn and use the target language and have opportunities to share own preferred strategies with other students. Furthermore, the teacher can individualize the strategy training, after valuable feedback on the effectiveness of an integrated strategy approach, suggest language specific strategies, and reinforce strategies at the same time that they are presenting the regular course content.

What's teacher's role in strategy-based instruction? Rubin, H (1987) states that the most important teacher's role in foreign language teaching is the provision of a range of tasks to match various learning styles. Therefore teachers should learn about their students including ages, sexes, motivations, learning styles, etc. help individuals discern which strategies are most relevant to their goals, aid students in developing orchestrated strategy use, analyze their textbooks to see whether the textbooks include language strategies, etc. How do teachers conduct SBI? Cohen, A.D (2000) claims the sequence is as follows.

- (1) set the goal for SBI
- (2) describe, model, and give examples of potentially useful strategies
- (3) elicit additional examples from students based on their own learning experiences
- (4) lead small-group/whole-class discussions about strategies
- (5) encourage their students to experiment with a broad range of strategies
- (6) integrate strategies into every class materials, explicitly and implicitly embed them in the language tasks to provide for contextualized strategies practice

To sum up, strategy training should be applied systematically and continuously and complemented with each other in order to avoid training at will and in no planned way. Strategy training should also be explicit, overt and relevant and provide practice and evaluation of their progress according to their own differences.

E. A Three-step Model of Strategy Training

Strategy training is playing an important role in the field of SLA, we are putting more eyes on how to practice the SBI and we should pay more attention to all kinds of elements. When we design an overt strategy training, we should take many aspects into consideration, we are about to describe a strategy training program that can be applied in the reading comprehension class. There are three steps: before-training, while-training and post-training.

1. Step 1-----before-training

At the beginning, it is very crucial for teacher to draw up a training plan, choose training materials, study students' factors and training methods. This step is for students and teachers to prepare strategy instruction that can be compared to a foundation of constructing a building. Thus, it's indispensable to any successful strategy instruction. It encompasses studying student factors and motivating them for strategies.

The training plan should be suited to students' current language levels and the training forms should be various. Unified training, decentralized training and individual coaching should be integrated with each other. To different students with different age, such as mentioned in the case study, the teacher can take different training forms. The older adult students are experienced in cooperation with others, so the teacher can use short workshop to train their reading. The younger adults are rarely use social/affective learning strategies in reading comprehension, so the teacher should stimulate them to discuss with peers or teachers.

After having determined the plans, the teacher should choose the suitable materials according to students' language levels, strategy types and textbooks, which should be analyzed to see whether they already embrace learning strategy in

reading comprehension training. Perhaps upon careful observation, you will be surprised to find out many learning strategies incorporated into the teaching materials. If not, you may look for other teaching materials or just design a new material where strategies overtly are immersed. For example, College English published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (2001) incorporates “learning strategies in reading comprehension” exercises that highlight learning strategies in reading comprehension and encourage students to use them in reading tasks. One example like Lesson One “How to Improve Your Study Habits” is just an instruction about metacognitive learning strategies.

The effect of students’ factors on strategy instruction can’t be overemphasized nor ignored. It has been elucidated that individual differences may have an impact on learning strategies in reading comprehension. Factors such as age, sex, motivation and learning style, etc. may be key to the receptiveness of students to learning strategies training and in their ability to obtain new learning strategies. Motivation is probably the most important characteristic that students bring to a learning task. O’malley and Chamot (1990) claim that learning strategy training will be most valuable for students who are not successful. Students indicate they are not good at language or don’t have an ear for language and therefore may not consider it worthwhile to make an effort to improve their own language learning. Learning strategy training can help reluctant students over the initial hurdle of learning to use new strategies. Once students begin to experience success in using strategies, their attitudes about their own abilities may change and they can increase their motivation. Therefore, letting students know when the strategy is used affectively is one of the keys to motivating them.

Teachers need consider their training methods and overall instructional style and they should also well decide whether the training style student-centered or teacher-centered, whether strategy training is explicit or implicit and whether the style of instruction of strategies is prescriptive or descriptive.

Before designing strategy training program, it is very important for teachers to diagnose the strategies students already used so that the strategies selected are not in students’ repertoire but are potentially to them.

2. Step 2-----While-training

In this step, the teacher should present and model the strategy. The teacher should give a clear definition of the strategy, as well as some of the benefits of learning the strategies excluding the strategies used in preparatory step. The teacher should also describe the rationales for use of the strategies, the characteristics of the strategies and identify real assignments in specific classes what and when the strategies might be used. After describing the strategies, the teacher models the use of the target strategies. For example, the teacher can demonstrate to make predictions based on the title, guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from context, monitor rhetorical structure and evaluate how competent students have been in learning from the text. How can the students master such strategies? The teacher should grasp the usefulness and compatibility of the strategies and then train the students to strengthen their awareness of strategy use. The teacher can ask students to recall the strategies they used and encourage them to discuss the appropriateness of using the strategies. This model helps students visualize their working successfully on a similar strategy.

Finishing the first half part of this step, students have the opportunity to practice the learning strategies in reading comprehension with an authentic reading comprehension. So, in this step, materials appear very important when creating and selecting materials for this step. This practice will frequently take place during collaborative work with classmates. For example, a group of students might read a story, describe the images of the story, discuss unfamiliar words encountered, and infer meanings through contextual cues, and take turns to summarize the main points of the story. This contextual practice fosters students’ autonomy to independently regulate their reading process. When the teacher finds students use metacognitive strategies and social/affect strategies, he/she should remind them of the use of cognitive strategies. When the teacher finds students perform cognitive strategies but rarely use metacognitive strategies and social/affect strategies, he/she should encourage them to use the latter. The goal is attained when the students are able to use strategies from consciously to unconsciously.

Another competent of the practice is to collect feedbacks. It’s critical for the teacher to give students advice on their strategy use when the teacher helps students learn how to use strategy effectively and how to change what they are doing if a particular approach is useless. How can the teacher know the students’ effectiveness of their strategy use? Through collecting feedbacks, the teacher can understand in time how students use strategies, put right the incorrect operations and then can monitor the training speed. For instance, boy students always translate the passage into Chinese to understand and can’t paraphrase some sentence, then the teacher knows that boy students has used learning strategy in reading comprehension: Translation. When the teacher explains the use of Translation strategy, he/she needn’t spend much time on it.

In this step, the teacher should remember to motivate the students to take active part in strategy training, just as Oxford et al. points out that if students have gone through a strategy assessment step, their interest in strategies is likely to be heightened; if the teacher explains how to use good strategies students can learn language easier, students will be even more interested in participating in strategy training. Haastrup, K. (1991) thinks some inducements such as extra credit may substantially increase enthusiasm in the college classroom.

It’s necessary to mention that at the beginning of language strategy training, the practice step is usually focused on a simple strategy, after strategy training has progressed to the point where students have a repertoire of strategies, the students can practice the complex strategies. That is to say, the practice is conducted step by step.

3. Step 3-----after-training

In the last step of training, teachers’ reflection and students’ self-evaluation are a necessary link. It is useful for

teachers to reflect on their own positive and negative experiences in teaching reading which is in accordance with what Graham (1985) suggests that those teachers who have thought carefully about how they learn a language about which strategies are most appropriate for which task are more likely to be successful in developing strategic competence in their students. In addition to teachers' own reflection, it's essential to encourage students to self-evaluate after the reading classes. Students need to find out which language strategies work best for them for certain tasks, and why they work, and why they are not effective. Through such self-evaluation students consciously monitor these effective and ineffective strategies that refine their individual repertoire of strategies. Some methods of encouraging students' self-evaluation of their language strategies include the following: language strategies checklists, learning logs, diaries and journals on strategy use or other means. Checklists may focus on one particular task, or they may refer to strategy use over time. For example, students may be asked to check off how many times within a week they used the strategies inference. Similarly, logs, diaries and journals can be used on a daily basis to record strategy use and its effectiveness and to communicate with the teacher. As mentioned above, the older adult students with integrative motivation use more self-evaluation than the younger adult students with instrumental motivation, so in the course of strategy training, we'd pay more attention to the younger use of self-evaluation.

This step completes the learning phase of strategy training and serves as a transition to application of the strategies. Thus students prepare for generalization of the strategy use into classroom and other educational situations.

IV. CONCLUSION

Reading comprehension is an active mental process and in a sense, it is a kind of strategy learning. Teachers should consider strategy training as a necessity in reading teaching. One feasible means is to arouse the students' awareness of the reading process and make strategy knowledge explicit to them, followed by a training instruction integrated into the routine teaching activities. One important goal of reading teaching should help students become more effective and strategic ones according to their own factors. Teachers should provide students with a large range of strategies and leave students to make decisions of their own on when and how they should employ strategies and what strategies they need to enhance reading comprehension.

The importance of learning strategy in reading comprehension training includes: first, strategies help students to improve reading comprehension; second, strategies also help students enhance efficiency in reading; third, strategies help students process the text actively and monitor their comprehension. Most of important, teachers should be good at motivating students to participate in strategy training. Also, there are some reports of unsuccessful strategy trainings abroad. The reason why strategy training fails sometimes is multi-faceted including teachers' professionalism about learning strategies in reading comprehension, students' factors, social context, etc. After all, students' lack of success in learning may be far more complex and the teaching of more learning strategies may not be the only answer. SBI is only designed to improve students' independent learning and enhance their ability to perform future tasks of the same kind.

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