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Impact of Explicit Teaching of Reading Strategies

Yuko Hirade
Nanzan University

One of the most important functions of reading instruction is to help students develop a set of reading strategies for each reading situation. In this paper I report on a 7-month project in which I analyzed how the explicit teaching of reading strategies affected Japanese 1st-year non-English major university students' reading speed and comprehension, how students changed their reading behavior, and which reading strategies students thought were effective.

リーディングを教える教員の役割の一つに、学生が文章を読む際に様々なリーディングストラテジーを使えるようにするということがある。本稿は、7ヶ月間行われたリーディングストラテジーの明示的指導が非英語専攻の日本人大学一年生の読むスピードと読解力にどのような効果をもたらしたか、その過程において学生がどのように読む姿勢を変えていったか、また、どの様なリーディングストラテジーを効果的だと考えていたかについて分析した結果報告である。

The results of this study illustrate why it is important to learn reading strategies in the university EFL context of Japan and emphasize the importance of giving explicit reading strategy instruction. Previous studies have defined reading strategies as aspects of reading that involve intentional control and deliberate direction of behavior. On the other hand, reading skills are referred to as automatic actions that usually occur without awareness of the components or control involved. Afflerbach, Paris, and Pearson (2008) explained the relationship between the two, saying that "with months of practice on reading strategy, students are able to read quickly and more efficiently. When reading becomes effortless and automatic, the reading strategy has become a reading skill" (p. 368). More concretely, Afflerbach et al. described reading strategies as deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text. They argued that explicit instruction of reading strategies helps students understand how to read efficiently.

The benefits of explicit instruction on reading strategies have been shown in other studies. Barnhardt, Chamot, El-Dinary, and Robbins (1999) stated that strategy-based instruction develops students' awareness of the strategies they use. That is, a teacher's modeling of strategic thinking, students' practice of new strategy use, and students' evaluation of the strategies used are all factors involved in the designing of explicit strategy-based instruction. Zhang's (2008) study indicated that with instructional intervention through teacher–student dialogs within the framework of constructivist pedagogy, reading strategy use can be reinforced, leading to progress in perceived strategy use and reading performance improvement. Likewise, Anderson (2005) stated that successful L2 learners have a wider repertoire of strategies and are able to use a variety of them to accomplish their task of learning a language. Furthermore, Taylor (2006) suggested that a potentially effective intervention in reading classes is to teach the use of reading strategies explicitly to second and foreign language students. Qanwal (2014) also supported the direct and explicit instruction of reading strategy use, saying that

> During their reading lessons they should consciously be made aware of the titles and the effectiveness of the strategies being used at various stages of the lesson. In any reading lesson, everything at the instruction (i.e., presentation), practice and production stages should be made explicit, direct and obvious to the students (p. 1030).

The goal of effective instruction of reading strategies is to increase reading fluency, which is defined by Anderson (2005) as a combination of both reading rate and comprehension. In his approach used in the *Active* reading textbook series, Anderson stated that explicit reading strategy instruction provides tips for reading fluency practice.

In L2 reading, little empirical research has been reported as to whether explicitly teaching reading strategies facilitates EFL reading speed and reading comprehension. Us-

ing a mixed methods approach, I explored how the explicit teaching of reading strategies helps students to read faster and better in this study.

Context of the Study

I have taught reading to 1st-year Japanese university students for 4 years and noticed two common problems regarding students' reading behavior. The first problem is that many students prefer to use intensive reading strategies, particularly by using dictionaries. Students are accustomed to translating passages intensively to completely understand a passage. Many junior high and senior high school teachers still believe in the grammar-translation method, placing heavy emphasis on vocabulary and grammar knowledge for reading comprehension (Sanchez, 2017). This approach has had a strong influence on students' reading habits, making their reading slow. In this study, I assumed that teaching reading strategies in reading classes and giving more practice on different skills such as skimming, scanning, search reading, careful reading at the global level, and browsing for different reading purposes will improve students' reading behavior and make it more effective.

The second problem is that the students read paragraphs following the Japanese structure *ki* (introduction) *sho* (development) *ten* (turn) *ketsu* (conclusion). They do not know that basic English expository texts are essentially composed of three parts—the introduction, body, and conclusion—and as such are structurally different from Japanese texts. The other difference is the location of important information in the text. In contrast to English text, where the most important information comes at the beginning, in Japanese the most important information comes last. Thus, when reading English passages, students often miss the most important information located in the topic sentence. If students learned how to read English texts using correct reading skills through explicit instruction, they would be able to read faster, grasp the main idea, and understand the passage better.

The Present Study
Research Goal and Questions

The goal of my 1st-year university reading classes is to help students become fluent readers by explicitly teaching them reading strategies. In this study, explicit reading strategy instruction is defined as the teacher's modeling and explaining of what, why, how, when, and where a reading strategy should be used. Fluent reading is defined as being able to read faster with a deeper understanding using a variety of reading strategies (Anderson,

2005). To achieve this goal, reading strategies were first taught explicitly, and then opportunities to practice them were given using speed reading exercises. The research project was guided by the following two questions:

RQ1. How does the explicit teaching of reading strategies affect students' reading speed?

RQ2. How does the explicit teaching of reading strategies affect students' reading comprehension?

Methodology

In this study I employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. To answer the research questions, descriptive statistics were conducted using the SPSS software, and both the average reading rates and comprehension scores for the two groups and the standard deviations were calculated, compared, and presented in the form of figures.

To triangulate the data, qualitative methods were also employed, including a survey questionnaire and interviews. Students in the treatment group were asked which reading strategies they used during the exercises. The students were told to write down all the reading strategies they used on their answer sheets.

Interviews were conducted in Japanese with eight volunteer students from each group (four students each) for approximately 15 minutes at the end of the research period. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Two interview questions were asked: "How did you feel about speed reading exercises?" and "What would you do if you don't understand a word, a phrase or a sentence when reading an English passage?" The aim of the first interview question was to explore how the explicit instruction of reading strategies affects students' reading speed and comprehension. The second question was asked to explore how the students have changed their reading behavior to become more fluent readers.

Research Participants

The participants in the present study were 46 first-year non-English majors in two English reading classes at a private university in Nagoya. They were given an English placement test at the beginning of the program in April 2015, and the students in both classes were allocated to the same intermediate-level classes.

Speed Reading Exercises

Opportunities to practice using reading strategies were given through speed reading exercises. Participants in both classes met once a week for 90 minutes with the same teacher. The data collection period was about 7 months from May to November 2015. The students did speed reading exercises 18 times: seven times in the spring semester and 11 times in the fall.

There were two main components to the speed reading exercises: time-measured reading of a newspaper article of about 250 words and 10 multiple-choice questions. Reading materials (see Appendix A) from the online site *Breaking News* (http://www.breaking-newsenglish.com) were used for both groups for two reasons. First, newspaper articles are a valuable tool for students to practice finding a topic sentence, specific information, and so on. Second, *Breaking News* has six different levels of difficulty. In the previous year, when the easier levels (such as 4 and 5) along with multiple-choice questions were tried as a pilot study, the results revealed that most students achieved 9 or 10 out of 10 points, and these levels were judged to be too easy. Based on the social constructivist concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), in which Vygotsky (1934/1986) argued that learning takes place at a level just beyond the competence of the learner, the most difficult level (Level 6) was selected to allow students to practice using various reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and using prior knowledge. Multiple-choice questions, along with the newspaper articles, were chosen for this study (see Appendix B).

Six reading strategies were presented on the screen each time speed reading exercises were conducted. Only the treatment group had explicit instruction on the reading strategies. No instruction on reading strategies was given to the control group. Japanese explanations were added to make sure students completely understood the meaning of each reading strategy.

The six reading strategies introduced to the students were

1. previewing,
2. predicting,
3. skimming,
4. scanning,
5. guessing from context, and
6. using prior knowledge. (see Anderson, 2005)

Procedures of Speed Reading Exercises

Control Group

One class was designated to be the control group and was not given explicit teaching of reading strategies when the students completed the speed reading exercises.

The procedures of the speed reading exercise for the control group were as follows:

- Step 1. As a prereading activity, the students were given only the title of the article and were given 1 minute to predict possible words and contents.
- Step 2. Six reading strategies with Japanese explanations were shown using PowerPoint, and the students were encouraged to use these reading strategies as much as possible in their exercises. No demonstration was given as to what and how strategies were to be used when reading.
- Step 3. The students were told to read *Breaking News*, measure their reading time using their cell phones, and record the time spent on reading.
- Step 4. The students answered 10 multiple-choice questions in 3 minutes. Then they checked their answers in pairs.
- Step 5. The students recorded the results of their reading rate and scores from multiple-choice questions.

Treatment Group

In contrast, explicit instruction on reading strategies was given to the treatment group, including how, when, and why to use certain reading strategies. The exercise procedures were essentially the same as those for the control group, except for Steps 2 and 4:

- Step 1. As a prereading activity, the students were given only the title of the article and were given 1 minute to predict possible words and contents.
- Step 2. Explicit instruction on reading strategies was given. Specifically, after the six reading strategies were introduced using PowerPoint, the text from the newspaper article read in the previous week was shown on the screen. Using this text, the teacher modeled, described, explained, and scaffolded appropriate reading strategies. For example, she searched for the main idea in the text and thought aloud to demonstrate her reasoning for each sentence and idea. She also described the differences between the main idea and the supporting details in her discussion.
- Step 3. The students were told to read *Breaking News,* measure their reading time using their cell phones, and record the time spent on reading.

- Step 4. After the students finished answering the multiple-choice questions and checking the answers in pairs, they were told to record the reading strategies they used in their exercises. The aim was to find out how conscious they were of the reading strategies they were using.
- Step 5. The students were told to record the results of their reading rate and scores from the multiple-choice questions.

Results
Reading Rates

Figure 1 shows the results for RQ1. Five tests were chosen to benchmark the progress (Tests 2, 6, 10, 14, and 18), and their results are shown in Figure 1. The results indicate that both the treatment group and the control group made progress in their reading rate over 7 months. However, the treatment group had a larger standard deviation than the control group. This suggests that the control group did not necessarily improve their reading rate more than the treatment group did. For example, the most improved student in the treatment group increased her reading rate much more than the most improved student in the control group at test 18.
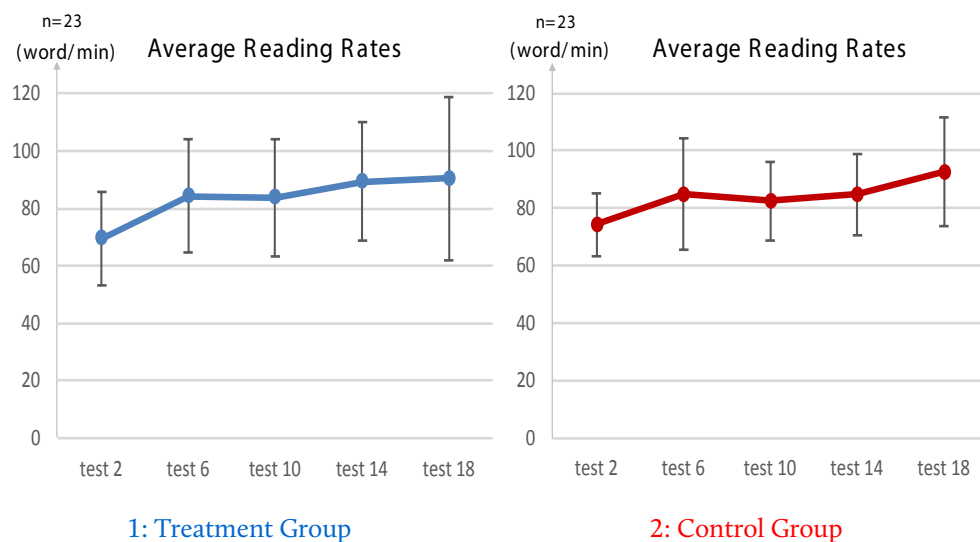
The statistical difference between the two groups regarding the reading rate on Test 18 was also examined. As the data did not satisfy parametric assumptions, a Mann-Whitney Test was conducted and the results show that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups (Asymp.Sig. [2-tailed] = .385).

Comprehension Scores

Figure 2 shows the results for RQ2. Most of the students obtained high scores ranging from 8 to 10 out of 10 points throughout the research period. There was almost no score difference between the two groups. Any score difference might have been caused only by topic familiarity.

In addition, Kendall's tau correlation coefficient was conducted to determine whether there was a significant correlation between the average reading rate and comprehension score. The results show that the correlation between the two was weakly positive and thus not statistically significant ($r = .110$, $p < .001$).
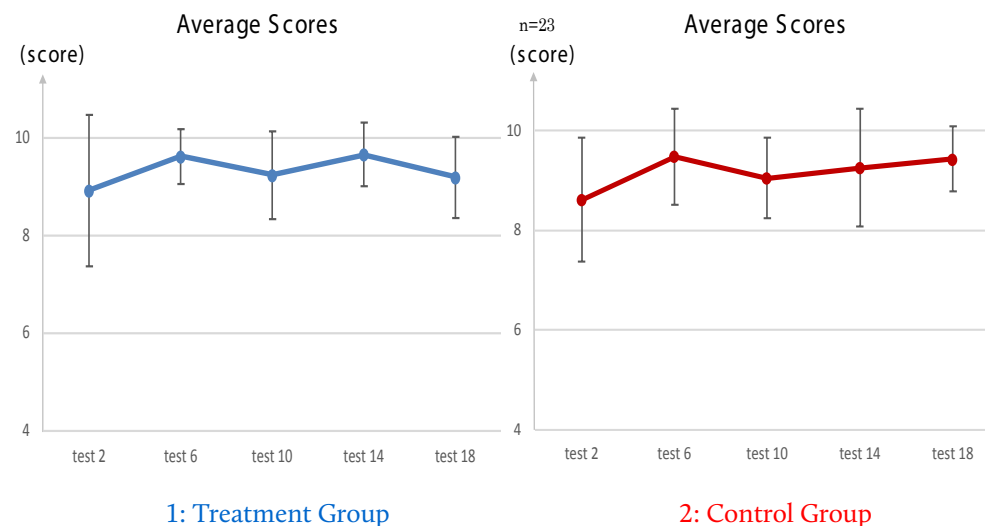

Figure 1. Average reading rates.

Figure 2. Average comprehension scores.

Frequency of Reading Strategies Used by the Treatment Group

Figure 3 displays the frequency of the six reading strategies used by the students in the treatment group. Each time they completed a reading exercise, the students were asked to record the reading strategies they had used, to determine their perceptions of the reading strategies. This survey was necessary because I assumed that more frequent use of reading strategies would lead to more fluent reading, measured by an increase in reading speed and comprehension.

To make this line graph, the data collection period was divided into four parts: the first half and the latter half in the spring semester and the first half and the latter half in the fall semester. The results for the first batch of tests show that the most frequently used reading strategy was predicting. This suggests that the prereading activity worked effectively. On the other hand, the least frequently used reading strategies were scanning, skimming, and using prior knowledge. At this point, it seems that the students were still not able to understand the roles of skimming and scanning. In the second batch of tests, the use of previewing, predicting, skimming, scanning, and guessing from the context increased. Only *frequency of using prior knowledge* did not change over time. The third batch of tests shows that the frequency of scanning and previewing increased, but the frequency of predicting, skimming, guessing from context, and using prior knowledge decreased slightly or stayed almost the same. The results for the final batch of tests show that the frequency of all the reading strategies increased compared to the first batch of tests, although there is variance in the frequency of use. The results reveal that by the end of the research period, most students were able to consciously use various reading strategies.
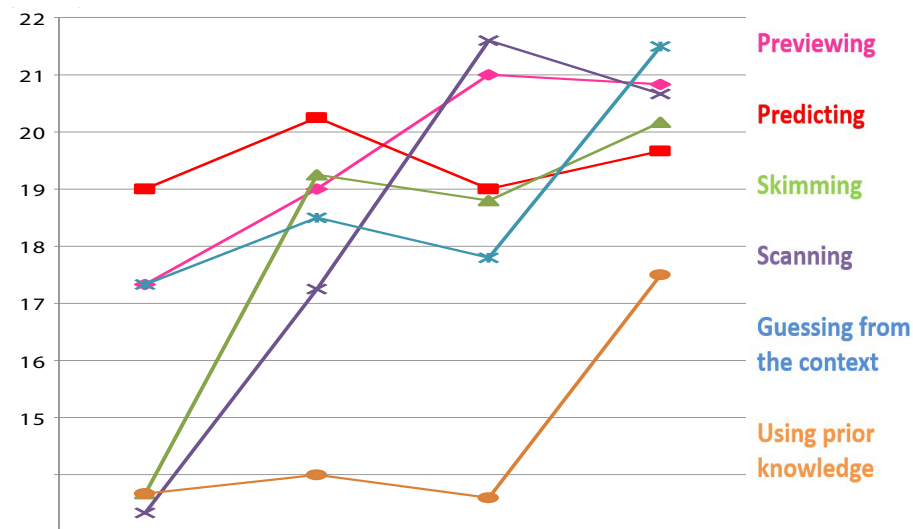

Figure 3. Frequency of reading strategies by treatment group (*n* = 23).

Interviews

Interviews were conducted, and two interview questions were asked: (a) "How did you feel about speed reading exercises?" and (b) "What would you do if you don't understand a word, a phrase, or a sentence when reading an English passage?" These questions were asked so as to explore (a) how the explicit instruction of reading strategies affects students' reading speed and comprehension, and (b) how the students have changed their reading behavior to become more fluent readers.

As for the first question, the results show a positive effect on students' attitudes towards reading. For example, all the students reported that their reading speed had increased. This report is also supported by the reading rate data, which shows that the students achieved the fastest speed at test 18.

As for the second question, the results suggest that the students had started to change their reading habits and tried to read the texts using reading strategies. For example, seven students said that they had noticed that both the first and the last sentences were important. Three students said that skimming and scanning were more difficult to use

than previewing and predicting. Furthermore, one student in the treatment group voluntarily explained how to read a passage from an English perspective quite well.

Discussion

The research focus of the present study was on how the explicit teaching of reading strategies affected students' reading speed and reading comprehension. As the results show, the reading rate averages increased over time in both groups. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups. The fact that the treatment group had a larger standard deviation than the control group might have negatively affected the result. Indeed, the stronger students in the treatment group performed better than those in the control group.

As for the reading comprehension scores, the results do not indicate any significant differences between the two groups. The students in both groups continued to achieve high scores ranging from 8 to 10 out of 10 points throughout the exercise period.

Although this study has some limitations, the overall results indicate that the students who received reading strategy instruction started to change their reading behavior little by little over time. As the interviews showed, the students started to view the introductory paragraph or topic sentence as an important part of the passage, although they still maintained the habit of intensive reading. In other words, they started to realize that grasping the content of a passage was more important than translating each sentence. From the interviews, I also understood that the students found it difficult to use skimming and scanning in a time-controlled situation. The students may have felt pressure from the time limit; however, if they were to continue the speed reading exercises in their 2nd year, they may have become accustomed to time-controlled situations and would be able to read faster with better comprehension. In that sense, I think the speed reading exercise is a useful way for students to practice using reading strategies. If too much time is given, the students may simply read a passage slowly and carefully again.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In this study, I sought to explore how the explicit teaching of reading strategies affects students' reading speed and reading comprehension to become more fluent readers. The comprehension scores imply that the method used to measure comprehension could be a problem and needs to be modified. The multiple-choice questions from *Breaking News* did not seem to match the research aim in several ways. Ten questions for a 250-word passage seemed to be too many. Students had to read the passage pretty intensely to answer the 10 questions. Most of the questions focused more on recall of specific information than on understanding the overall message, the writer's intention, or both. As a result, I came to feel that multiple-choice questions are not an appropriate test format to encourage students to use various reading strategies. It might have been better to set a few simple open-ended questions to assess global comprehension.

In spite of this limitation, the interviews showed that explicit strategy instruction had a positive effect on the students' reading behavior. In the interviews, the students reported that their reading speed had increased. In addition, they reported that skimming and scanning were more difficult to use than previewing and predicting. This suggests that the students made an effort to use various reading strategies. It also shows that the students learned how to use reading strategies on their own. If more practice on reading strategy were given continuously, students would perhaps be able to read faster and more efficiently.

Research can play a significant role in exploring the use of reading strategies. If data were collected for a longer period of time and the test format were modified, more useful performance test data could be obtained to observe how students change their reading behavior. To better understand strategy use, more research is required on how strategy use changes over time.

Bio Data

Yuko Hirade has been with Nanzan University since 2012. Her research interests are paragraph reading and cooperative and collaborative learning. <yukotokelly@yahoo.co.jp>

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Appendix A
Speed Reading ③
Millions of Workers Live With Parents

Almost two million young workers in the U.K. have to live with their parents because they cannot buy a house or rent a room. Newspapers in Britain call them the "clipped wing generation" because they are like birds who have had their wings cut. House prices in the U.K. are now so high that many young people cannot afford to buy one. This means a quarter of young adults have to live with their parents or grandparents. A poll found that 48 percent of the people said the biggest problem was housing costs. Britain has a long history of young people moving away from the family home when they start working. Rising house prices are now making this more and more difficult to do.

 A 32-year-old woman said she has been saving money for over ten years to pay the deposit for a new apartment. She said it was very difficult because the more she saves, the more house prices go up. She is worried about the future if she can't buy her own home. She told reporters why she didn't want to leave the family home and rent, saying: "If I move out now, the reality is I'll be stuck paying expensive rents for the rest of my life.... The thought that I'm going to be living like a teenager into my late 30s or even 40s is really disheartening." A charity for homeless people said Britain's government needed to build more homes and sell them at a price that is low enough for younger people. (257 words)

かかった時間:＿＿＿＿分＿＿＿＿秒　　　　WPM: words / minute

Appendix B
Speed Reading ③
Millions of Workers Live With Parents

Multiple Choice - Quiz

1. How many young workers cannot afford to buy a house?
    a) just over two million b) almost 2,000,000 c) around 200,000 d) three million
2. Who called the young people the "clipped wing generation"?
    a) an expert on birds b) a bank manager c) a house builder d) a newspaper
3. What percentage of young people live with parents or grandparents?
    a) 45% b) 35% c) 25% d) 15%
4. What did nearly 50% of people say was the biggest problem?
    a) housing costs b) finding a job c) saving money d) finding a house for sale
5. What do young British people have a long history of ?
    a) saving money b) leaving home c) building their own house d) eating bad food
6. For how long has a young British woman been saving?
    a) ten years b) ten months c) 12 years d) 32 years
7. What happens to house prices the more the woman saves?
    a) they increase by $100 b) they get stuck c) they go up d) they double
8. What might the woman have to do for the rest of her life?
    a) pay expensive rents b) live with her parents c) save money d) be a teenager
9. What does the woman not want to feel like?
    a) rich b) a builder c) bad d) a teenager
10. Who said Britain's government should build more homes?
    a) Britain's leader b) a homeless person c) a charity d) a bank manager

 Quiz Score: ＿＿ / 10