

Developing Metacognition in the L2 University Classroom

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By keeping a daily reading journal and a daily image notebook, the author's students in English reading and writing classes at a medical university in Taiwan have learned to take on the responsibility for their own learning in reading and writing of English short stories. In this learner-centered curriculum, student products, as well as the cognitive processes leading to the products are examined to provide insights into the successful metacognitive strategies student learners used and to put the theory of writing-reading connection into practice.

毎日日記をつけたり心に浮かぶ事をノートに書いていくという作業を続けてる事によって台湾医大の私のクラスの英語のリーディングとライティングの学生たちは、英語の短編のリーディングとライティングの学習過程で自分で責任を持って勉強に取り組むようになりました。試験の結果この学習者中心のカリキュラムで学生たちの創作した作品は、その創作にいたる認識の過程とともに学生たちに自分たちの使った再認識という戦略が素晴らしいものであるという理解を与えているという事がわかりました。またその読み書きの関係の理論を実践に移したのです。

To develop L2 university students' metacognition in both reading and writing, the author has designed a learner-centered short story project in which learners managed their own learning in various reading-for-pleasure activities and later created their

own stories. Metacognition involves thinking about the process of learning, planning and skills monitoring, as well as self-evaluation after the learning activity. It begins with student learners' conscious self-management in reading and writing. Learner autonomy and higher levels of comprehension were achieved because the student learners' intrinsic motivation was elicited, which then led to improved reading capacity. Finally the student learners were able to create their own short stories (of up to 20 pages) by the end of the semester.

An extensive reading approach and its rationale

As Bamford and Day (1997) have argued, "The primary consideration in all reading instruction should be for students to experience reading as pleasurable and useful. Only then will they be drawn to do the reading they must do to become fluent readers. And only then will they develop an eagerness to learn new skills to help them become better readers" (pp. 6-8, 12). Therefore, in this project, the author has intended to induce student learners' intrinsic motivation by using extensive pleasure-reading activities. Research has shown that extrinsically motivated readers tend to read only at a surface level. Given that students were to read a text and then take a comprehension test immediately after, they would definitely feel nervous and tend to read for details, instead of reading for the general sense of the text or the main idea, or how the text relates to other

texts. Therefore, intrinsic motivation serves as a thought opener to open up the student readers' world of reading. Once they were turned on, they could better appreciate the beauty of the literary world and hence be motivated intrinsically to read more in quantity and quality, which is vital in bringing about fluent reading. As they acquired more vocabulary knowledge and read more fluently, their levels of comprehension increased as well. This has been proven true in both L1 and L2 contexts.

Grabe (1991) has pointed out that fluent readers need a massive vocabulary that can be "rapidly, accurately, and automatically accessed" (pp. 375-406). The metacognitive skills he has proposed include: recognizing the more important information in text; adjusting reading rate; skimming; previewing; using context to resolve misunderstanding; formulating questions about information; and monitoring cognition, which includes recognizing problems with information presented in text or an inability to understand text. Self-regulation strategies like planning ahead, testing one's own comprehension, and being aware of and revising the strategies being used, are also regarded typical reading strategies of fluent readers. Without this type of vocabulary knowledge, the ESL students will have great difficulty in becoming fluent readers. Therefore, extensive pleasure reading can help achieve this goal easily because reading is an interactive cognitive process in which much interaction occurs among the writer, reader, and text.

Methods

Integrating metacognition into the reading instruction

To encourage her student learners to read happily out of their intrinsic motivation, the author has created a supportive and happy atmosphere in the reading and writing classroom, with the setting up of a bookshelf in the corner. The classroom has been developed into a small reading and writing community where students felt relaxed and comfortable in doing all the learning activities.

Many things relative to the cognition of both reading and writing were happening simultaneously when the student writers read various short stories of their choice, such as *The Elephant Man*, *The Secret Garden*, etc. Less proficient student readers preferred to read short stories as they are easier to comprehend, especially in vocabulary. The structure of detectives or mysteries is formulaic and is easy to master, both in reading and writing—nobody can resist the suspense in this type of stories and stop in the middle of reading. Therefore, the author has decided to let her students read them. She wanted them to read on and on so that cognition could begin to take place.

Since the author is teaching at a medical university, students there naturally chose stories such as *The Elephant Man* because it's about the difficulties this type of patients encounter and it reveals the doctor-patient

relationship, in which the medical students are greatly interested. This is one way of relating student needs or interests to their learning of English and a wonderful way of motivating them to read.

With clear purposes in mind, the student writers began their journey of reading. They set out to read for pleasure, and meanwhile learn the successful writing skills of the writer and the interesting elements in writing. Finally, they could imitate the style in their own future creation of short stories. They monitored their developing understanding of text, and they prepared in advance for how to read as well as attending to text selectively. These metacognitive strategies are clearly relevant to reading, and students were able to learn more by putting these strategies to use.

Integrating extensive reading into creative writing

In-class and out-of-class reading and writing trainings were designed to empower students to create their short stories successfully. The in-class training includes reading skills for making predictions and inferences, as well as writing skills for descriptive, narrative, and academic writing. The writing training covers narrative, descriptive, and academic writing. The out-of-class training consists of extensive reading of mysteries or detectives, or longer novels of students' choice, and the keeping of a daily reading journal and an image

notebook. The process of reading is silent, internal, and private. In addition, through writing in their reading journals, the student writers learn to interact with the writer of the story. They summarized what they read that day, made inferences, and asked questions about why things in the story were happening that way. They also wrote about the connotations of colors and why the writer uses certain colors in creating some special effects or atmosphere. In the reading journal, they also predicted how the story would develop next. Finally, they evaluated their own predictions to see if they were logical. The student writers also kept a daily image notebook in which they learn to describe the images of people and things around them by using their five senses to make the descriptions real. This training has proven to be most helpful in students' later creations. It was a delight to read the lively descriptions they created.

Developing audience awareness through peer reviews and student-teacher conferences

Meanwhile, they have also developed audience awareness through extensive reading and writing as well as peer-reviewing and student-to-teacher conferencing in which their works were reviewed critically. They got a feel for what it is like to be writing in English and meanwhile writing for the intended readers. Several students reflected that they have come to realize how to become successful writers through their extensive

reading of mysteries and detectives, and that from then on whenever they wrote, they would always keep the audience in mind. This audience awareness has certainly helped to activate a great deal of knowledge they have obtained through the extensive reading and writing activities.

Results

Successful facilitation of learner autonomy

Wonderful results can be found from the reading journals and image notebooks, in which the student learners exhibited high levels of learner autonomy facilitated by intrinsic motivation. When the learners were motivated intrinsically, wild flights of imagination started, and they began to feel the urge for writing! Once the autonomy has been facilitated, the learning would become as easy as pie! After student learners became well versed in reading and writing, these skills develop more like motor programs than cognitive ones. That is, these capacities have become procedural knowledge for them. As they reflected in their final learning assessment, they were able to “write down what they think in English automatically without worrying about grammar or things like that.” Most important of all, the English they used is correct and natural because before they knew it, the input of authentic written English has already turned into “intake” for them during the extensive reading process.

Better memory of collocations achieved

To enhance the students' memory of the words, phrases, idioms, and collocations they encountered in the stories, the author told them to write about what they read daily in the reading journals. When the words and sentences are learned in context, and students reflected and wrote them in their journals, better memory was achieved due to great semantic engagement. This is helpful to students' cognition because they were able to absorb more knowledge of the English language from the keeping of reading journals. As Anderson (1995) puts it, "people enjoy better memory if they can recreate the elements that were associated with the memory" (p. 312). Because of the nature of this type of short story genre, vocabulary was learned in a very natural way in this project, and students can remember the vocabulary better through the keeping of reading journals. They were learning real-life English in great quantity and quality from the tremendous amount of authentic written language they were exposed to in mysteries, detectives, or novels of longer length.

More vocabulary acquired

Vocabulary processes are vital in ESL instruction, and metalinguistic awareness plays an important role in L2 learning. In this project, students were told not to use dictionaries at all in their pleasure reading because it would kill the fun of reading and that it is helpful to

guess from context. They also had to effectively utilize morphological relationships to facilitate vocabulary growth, which is another aspect of metalinguistic development relative to the acquisition of a second language. Learner automaticity in word recognition, syntactic process, and semantic process, as well as faster reading speed, and higher levels of comprehension were achieved through this continuous reading activity.

Successful facilitation of learner creativity

Students absorbed naturally lots of input material and were enabled to create their own stories later by using the descriptive skills they learned from the in-class training and the out-of-class extensive reading. What is more, ninety per cent of the students' creations were graphed artistically. The student learners had a fun time not just creating their own short stories but also designing or inserting beautiful or memorable pictures into their works. Finally, they took great pride in accomplishing their artistic works!

Discussion

Extensive reading of detectives and mysteries has provided greater interest and empathy than that of non-literary text. Hence, student readers were able to respond more personally with the literary than with the non-literary text. This explains why several of them have decided to put their own personal, their fathers', or

even their pets' stories into their creations. One student wrote about an interesting imaginary story that she and her younger sister had created together when they were very young. These student learners have been inspired by the stories they read in this project, and so they decided to put their own experiences or adventures into their creations. Most of them inserted beautiful pictures into the stories. One of them even included the pictures of his beloved dead pet dog in the story he created. He said he felt so much better after he completed the story. He used to indulge in sadness whenever he thought of her, but now he feels as if she were still alive because she is right there in his story. So this creative writing project healed his heartaches.

As the students read, they paid attention to elements that make the stories interesting, and how the writers successfully begin the stories to catch readers' attention and arouse their interest. This selective attention exhibits students' development of metacognition. Hosenfeld (1987) has identified contextual guessing to be an ability that distinguishes successful from unsuccessful L2 readers (p. 24). She has also identified a metacognitive strategy when readers evaluate the appropriateness of the logic of their guess. Hence, when the student learners in this project encountered difficulties in reading, they were told not to use dictionaries because it would interrupt their flow of reading. Instead, they were taught to make contextual guesses by paraphrasing what they had

understood to see if it fits into the meaning of the text, or to deductively analyze the structure of a paragraph in order to clarify the author's intention. These strategies have proven to be effective metacognitive strategies for the overcome of comprehension difficulties.

A number of insights about the teaching of metacognitive strategies were found from viewing reading and writing as interactive cognitive processes. When self-monitoring and self-regulating strategies are taught in advance, student learners tend to have a much easier time learning to read and write effectively and efficiently. In Kintsch's (1998) approach of the *Construction-Integration Theory* (CI theory), cognition is examined in terms of "separate levels of representation and distinctive processes operating on these levels" (p. 423). Among the four types of mental representations he has categorized, the narrative oral representation has a linear structure, "and information processing at this level is analytic and rule-governed, as in semantic memory, propositional memory, discourse comprehension, analytic thought, induction, and verification... Stories are narrative mental models that allow us to learn about the world" (pp. 15-19). Hence, when the student writers in this project wrote about the stories in their journals, there was a social component to this type of narrative learning. Furthermore, journal writing induces student learners to reflect on what they have read in the detectives or mysteries, and to ask questions, make

predictions and inferences, etc. Overall, the six levels in Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* were fully reflected in these learners' journal entries: knowledge; comprehension; application; analysis; synthesis; and evaluation.

In a nutshell, the enjoyable reading process has not only provided the student learners larger vocabulary knowledge and transformed them into fluent readers, but also enlightened them on how to become successful creative writers. This memorable learner-centered reading-to-write experience definitely has had a

tremendous impact on them. They have hence learned to manage their own learning in both extensive reading and creative writing successfully. Isn't that the greatest joy an English teacher can have?

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