Multiple Access Points into Reading Comprehension for English as a Foreign Language Students: Teaching Reading Strategies for Empowerment in the Global Context

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is the ultimate purpose for reading. For many students, however, comprehension is challenging and scholars have identified factors that contribute to successful reading comprehension. Research indicates that effective readers are strategic in their approach to reading, using a variety of strategies to construct meaning. Such findings apply to both native speakers and foreign/second language learners. In this paper, I introduce two reading activities from a college English course in a Korean university designed to teach reading strategies. In college reading, texts become increasingly complex in content, genre, and linguistic form and readers need diverse and distinct ways to access meaning. In conclusion, I propose that explicit teaching of reading strategies is an important skill for foreign and second language learners that positions them as effective consumers of texts. Such an orientation empowers students to become active communicators in the global context where English is lingua franca.

1 Introduction

Comprehension is the ultimate purpose for reading (Smith, 2004). It is a meaning-making process that requires comprehensive and complex management of skills and a good understanding of how texts work. For many students, however, this is a challenging task and scholars have made efforts to identify the factors that contribute to successful reading comprehension. Research indicates that, among other things, effective readers are strategic in their approach to reading, using a variety of strategies and skills to construct meaning (McNamara, 2012). McNamara (ibid.) states that what differentiates proficient readers from struggling readers is their effective use of reading strategies. Reading strategies provide access to meaning in texts and active use of strategies increases comprehension. Such findings are true for both native speakers and second language learners (Geva and Ramirez 2015). This paper stems from research that emphasizes the importance of teaching reading strategies to second language students.

In this paper, I introduce activities in an English course in a Korean university designed to provide students with strategic use of reading strategies. The main effort is to introduce and explain class activities that provide multiple access points into L2 texts. My own observations as a professor of English in Korean EFL university classrooms demonstrate that when students are faced with an English text, they rely heavily on vocabulary to interpret and comprehend meaning. That is, they look up words in the dictionary and piece together the meanings to arrive at an interpretation. Such methods are low level processing strategies in reading comprehension[1] (Alderson, Haapakangas, Huhta, Nieminen, and Ullakonoja. 2015) and they form the basis for understanding a text. However, in college reading, texts become increasingly complex in content, genre, and linguistic form and readers need both low level

and high level processing skills. They need diverse and distinct ways to access texts that use decontextualized   language and require domain specific knowledge as well as world knowledge (McNamara, op. cit.). In other words, they need explicit teaching of reading strategies that contribute to high level processing skills aimed to help monitor one's comprehension and deal with gaps in in textual meaning. The teaching of reading strategies is an important skill for second language learners that positions them as active consumers of texts.

2 Literature Review

2. 1 Reading Research in L2

Much of the research in second language reading is shaped by research on first language readers. First language reading research has a longer history, it has a larger and more stable student population, and it is studied by researchers from various field such as education, psychology, sociology, medicine, etc. and therefore, there is much more research in the area of L1 reading (Grabe 1991). However, reading in a second language is not the same as reading in one's first language and there are some advantages and disadvantages that second language readers face. For instance, second language readers do not have the pool of vocabulary that first language students acquire through oral language. There is an absence of an intuitive sense of the grammar necessary for comprehension and there are cultural approaches to reading and comprehension that may be different in the student's L1 and L2 that interrupt their comprehension in L2 (Grabe 2009). Despite these challenges, second language readers, especially those who are older, also have advantages when it comes to reading in L2. According to Grabe, they have a more well-developed conceptual sense of the world; they have considerably more factual knowledge about the world; and they can make elaborate logical inferences from the text" (ibid: 387).

Second language readers are not 'a blank slate' Geva and Ramirez 2015: 144) and they possess an abundance of resources that positions them to interact with text in deeper ways. Researchers in the field of second language reading call for the need to capitalize on such resources for reading comprehension through the explicit teaching of reading strategies and the trend in reading research for second language learners, especially during the last three decades, reflects the importance of reading strategy instruction (Madhumathi and Ghodesh 2012).

Zhang and Anual (2008) studied students in a Singapore secondary school and found that the students' vocabulary knowledge had limited correlation to their comprehension strategies implying that besides word knowledge active application of reading strategies plays a significant role in text comprehension. Garner (1987) observed ESL students in the United States and claimed that students with sufficient knowledge of vocabulary and decoding skills still had problems while comprehending texts due to a lack of strategic knowledge. She proposes a strategic teaching of reading skills for students learning English as a second language. Second language reading poses challenges that are not evident when reading in a native language and therefore active use of reading strategies that provide multiple access points for reading comprehension is especially important for L2 learners.

2.2 Activating Background Knowledge and Monitoring Comprehension

Reading strategies as defined by Manoli and Papadopoulou are 'deliberate actions, plans adopted by the reader in order to achieve a goal, while interacting with written texts' (2012: 819). As the definition suggests, use of reading strategies requires deliberate identification and application of a course of action from the reader that adds to meaning making. Summarizing, questioning, predicting, rereading, visualizing, activating prior knowledge, inferencing, and using graphic organizers are some of the reading strategies popular in reading instruction (McNamara, 2012). Reading strategies help activate the reader's prior knowledge on a topic and aids in monitoring one's comprehension. Both are essential processes necessary for successful comprehension of texts.

There is an abundance of literature in the field of reading that argues for the importance of text related prior knowledge in comprehension (Alderson et al. op.cit.). According to schema theory, reading comprehension happens through active interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). Reading involves connecting new content to existing knowledge and activating existing knowledge creates a mental framework to which new texts, terms, and ideas can be connected and understood. The reader must activate one's prior knowledge and relate the textual content to the pool of background knowledge to understand textual meaning. Carrell and Eisterhold (ibid.) state that not activating prior knowledge is a major source of comprehension difficulty for second language learners in reading. Second language learners in higher education possess far more world knowledge than can be represented by their linguistic skills in the second language (Abraham 2000) and thus activation of prior knowledge is especially an important strategy for this group. It can help students overcome linguistic deficiencies in the foreign language (Hudson 1982).

Another essential process in reading is the ability to monitor one's comprehension. Grabe (op.cit.) states that this process is ultimately what differentiates proficient readers from poor readers. A number of different reading strategies can be used for the purpose of monitoring comprehension. The key is to gain awareness of the different strategies, to slow down the process of reading for application of strategies, and to gain practice with the larger goal of monitoring understanding (McNamara, ibid.). When readers monitor their own comprehension, they are better able to solve comprehension problems, fill in gaps in meaning, and as a result become better readers and comprehenders (McNamara, ibid.).

Reading strategies can be categorized in a number of different ways. One method of categorization popular with practitioners is using the categories of before reading, during reading, and after reading. In this paper, I introduce and explain two reading activities each in the before reading and during reading category. Descriptions and interpretations is an in-class activity designed to teach the before reading strategy of activating background knowledge and annotations helps students monitor their learning process during reading. Below, I briefly introduce each activity and then using student work examples, I detail the process of teaching the strategies.

3 Activities and Strategies
3. 1 Descriptions and Interpretations
Descriptions and interpretations is an in-class small group (preferably groups of 3) activity that uses an image and a chart with two columns each titled Descriptions and Interpretations (See Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptions and interpretations chart

Descriptions	Interpretations
There is a boy and a man in the picture The boy is wearing a red baseball cap The boy is wearing baseball uniform The boy is wearing Nike baseball shoes The boy is not holding a bat The boy and the man are in a baseball field The man is wearing a red top and a red cap. The man is not wearing baseball uniform. The man has his arms on the boy's shoulders The man is leaning down on the boy The man and the boy are looking at each other The boy is standing on base The boy is not smiling. He does not have any facial expressions The man is not smiling either.	I think the boy's team uniform is a red top with a red cap. I think the man is the boy's coach because they are wearing the same color shirt and cap. I think the boy is stressed out and the man (the coach) is trying to calm him down because of the body language of the two people. The Nike shoes lead me to believe that the team may be sponsored by Nike. The boy looks like he is feeling pressured to do well because he has no facial expression and his shoulders are low. I think the man (the coach) is trying to help the boy strategize and make the next move because the boy is standing on base and the man is on the field talking to the boy.

For this activity, I select an image related to the unit of the week and project it on a whiteboard. I ask the students to observe the image for a few minutes and then, in their groups, verbally share the observations that they made. There are two categories of observations, descriptions and interpretations. Descriptions are facts, things that we can see and interpretations are our thoughts, opinions, and ideas that stem from descriptions. This pre-reading activity does two things. First, it activates the students' prior knowledge about a topic, an important strategy in reading comprehension and second the process challenges students to think of and produce terms, expressions, and discourse features relevant to the topic of the reading before reading the text.

The descriptions part of the activity provides students, especially those with a lower level of competency in English, the opportunity to use the target language in concrete yet authentic ways. Everyone can read pictures and it becomes a shared reference point for student discussions. During a week that was devoted to the subject of children's athletic success, I used an image from a public domain image website of a young baseball player with an adult in a baseball field (See Figure 1). The students studied the image for a few minutes, described what they saw, and noted them on the descriptions and interpretations chart (See Table 1).

Fig. 1. Young baseball player with adult in baseball field. Retrieved from https://pixabay.com/en/baseball-little-league-pitcher-1396886/. No attributions required to use picture.

When the group has exhausted their resources for descriptions, they move on to the interpretations of the image. The students now discuss what they think about the picture. These are opinions. When I introduce this activity in class, we briefly discuss how interpretations are different from wild guesses. They are both thoughts and opinions but a wild guess does not have to be based on information or knowledge whereas an interpretation must be supported by facts and other forms of viable information. An interpretation may or may not be true but it must be backed up by evidence from the descriptions category. I provide students with two sentence starters to keep them on track.
A.   I think _ (interpretation) _ because of _ (description) _
B.   _ (Description) _ leads me to believe that _ (interpretation) _.
Below is an example of students discussing their interpretations of the image (Figure 2) .
S1: I think, the boy is a pitcher and he is stressed because he is, maybe he is, he, right now the other team just did a homerun.
S2: Ohhhhh. I think so too. He looks very very sad and he is stressed and now he doesn't want to throw because, no, he can't because he is too, how do you say that (says the word in Korean)?
S1: Scared? Or nervous?
S2: Yes! He is nervous. Too much stress. Look at his face, his body. Looks like he will cry.
S3: I think if you are a child and you are too young, and it is hard to control that stress in a game. I think if I am him, I would cry.

S2: Can we write down? I think the boy is stressed because his face looks like he is going to cry?

This pre-reading strategy draws energy from the student discussions and the students' sharing of ideas. The use of an image anchors their conversations which keeps them on track for meaningful discussions. It also encourages students with low level oral proficiency to participate in the activity. This activity is an excellent way to open up a unit and to introduce a theme. Many of the words and expressions that are a part of the unit and the ideas that are central to the unit's theme emerge naturally as a result of the activity. More importantly, the image of the young baseball player and the coach (Figure 1) lends itself to discussions in which the students discuss some of the major themes in the upcoming unit on young children and athletic success. The picture activates the students' prior knowledge about the subject and they share their schema related to the topic with others in the target language and as a result it broaden the boundaries of their existing schema and sets them up for active interaction with the text.

3. 2 Annotations
According to Porter-O'Donnell, annotating is 'a visible record of the thoughts that emerge while making sense of the reading' (2004: 82). It is active reading and it positions the reader for deep conversations with the text. Annotating a text brings into action many different reading strategies that provide multiple access points into for comprehension. The main purpose of annotations is to slow down the process of reading for self monitoring of reading comprehension.
I use two texts to introduce annotations to the class in the beginning of the semester. I photocopy the passages or the text to be annotated and hand it out to the class. Before, I start talking about methods of annotations, I give the students the first text and ask them to take a few minutes to read and comprehend the article. I ask them to do what they normally do when they read an English text.   With these directions, students naturally ask if they can use their digital dictionaries (smartphones) to which I answer that they may. Once students are finished reading the text, we come together as a group and discuss what they did with the text. My university EFL students do primarily three things when faced with comprehending a text in English.
A.   Look up unknown English words in the dictionary and write the meaning of English words in their native language (in this case Korean)
B.   Translate sentences into their native language (Korean)
C.   Make marks (circle, underline, etc.) around words, phrases, and sentences.
As the analysis shows, the dictionary is a major tool in text comprehension. Students' main method of comprehension in L2 involves translation of unknown English words into Korean. In addition, many of the students make numerous marks on the text without indicating what the marks mean or what relationship they have with the overall meaning of the text. Students responded that they circle or underline words and sentences that they think may be of importance to the main idea.
After this activity, I then ask the students what they would do if they did not have a dictionary available to them. Some students respond that they would not be able to understand the text and others comment that they would not be able to make more than a few marks on the text in the absence of a dictionary. At this point, I talk to them about

alternative ways to access meaning in texts using a number of different strategies. I share the Annotations Guidelines (See Table 2) with the class and we skim through the different strategies listed on the chart. The strategies represent high level processes to access meaning and monitor comprehension.

Table 2. Annotations guidelines

Methods of Annotation	Explanation	Framing Questions
Predictions	Using the title to think about the text's content Predicting what will come next in the text	What do I think this text will be about? What will the author discuss next?
Questions	Asking questions of the text Questions may be clarifying questions, rhetorical questions, or probing questions about the content	Do I have a question about this word/sentence/paragraph? Do I have a question about this content?
Text-to-self connection	Making a personal connection to the text using one's own experience	Do I have a personal experience related to this part of the text?
Text-to-text connection	Making a connection to another text	Does this content relate to another text/ visual/ movie that I have read or seen?
Text-to-world connection	Making a connection to the larger world - social, cultural, political, etc.	How does this content relate to what is going on in the world both past and present?
Visual representation	Making a visual representation of the content when appropriate (i.e. charts, diagrams, illustrations)	Will drawing a picture or diagramming help me understand and summarize the content more effectively and if so how might I do that?
Paraphrasing	Put into one's own words content that is important to remember	How can I say this in my own words?

I select three strategies and using a different text to the one that they just read, I demonstrate the three strategies. For instance, in the first lesson we start with predictions, questions, and personal connections. I start by handing out strips of paper with only the title

of the reading listed (See Figure 2). One of the themes in our textbook, *Q: Skills for Success* (2014, Ward & Gramer) is about making a good first impression in job interviews. The unit's reading is titled 'Job Interview 101' and it talks about important things that one must remember to make a good impression during a job interview.
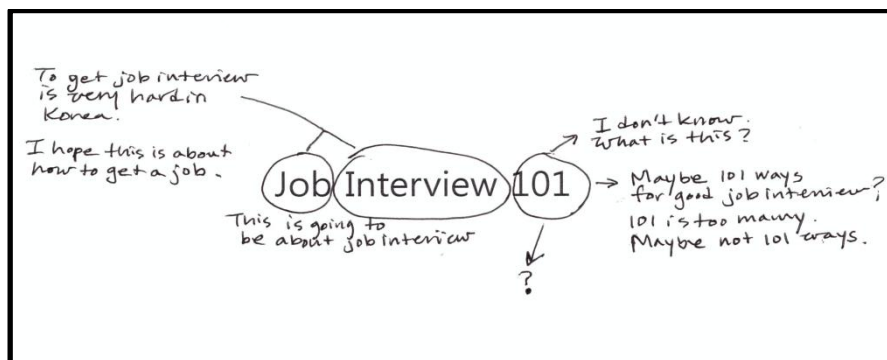

Fig. 2. Title annotations example

I introduce the concept of predicting by stating that predicting means asking oneself the question, 'What might this article be about? It is important to work with just the title of the text when introducing this strategy as it puts the students in a position in which they truly do not know the content of the text. In the case of the title 'Job Interviews 101', students predict that this text may be about interviewing for a job. I prompt them further by asking what the number 101 may mean. Their responses vary. 'I think it's about 101 ways to do a good interview'; 'Maybe it's about interviewing tips from 101 people'; 'It's short for one on one'. I encourage students to write down what they think next to the title and using a document camera, I also write down some of their predictions next to the title to demonstrate what this may look like. Then, I state that we have just made a prediction.

When I do this activity in class, a common initial response from my students is a sense of confusion. 'Is that all?' 'What is the answer?' or to be more precise, 'What is the right answer?' This sense of confusion lasts for a while but I focus the students' attention on writing down what comes to their mind and not on what may be right or wrong. The main purpose of making predictions is to create a state of anticipation for the text that they will be reading. Pondering with the idea of what the article may be about is the main purpose of this strategy. The act of creating forethoughts about the content based on one's prior knowledge places the reader's mind in the reading before reading the text. The mind is now mentally prepared to engage with the text.

We move on to further discuss the title. I ask them what kinds of connections they have with job interviews. This may be a personal story, a second-hand experience, or something that they read or saw in other texts or in the media. I tell them that I have a personal anecdote related to job interviews. Many years ago, I walked into an interview and I was so nervous that I unknowingly took a seat on the interviewers' side of the table. One of the interviewers kindly directed me to a seat on the adjacent side of the table and reminded me that I came to be interviewed not to interview. I state this is a personal connection to the text. Students

also make personal connections and talk about their experiences with job interviews some that were painful and others that led to a successful hiring.

We work through the different methods of annotations in class using a short section of a longer text from our textbook (See Figure 3) and I ask the students to annotate the remaining part of the text using the annotation methods learnt as that day's assignment. In the following class, students share their annotations with a partner and then a few students share their annotations with the rest of the class using a document camera. In my class, annotations is a weekly assignment.
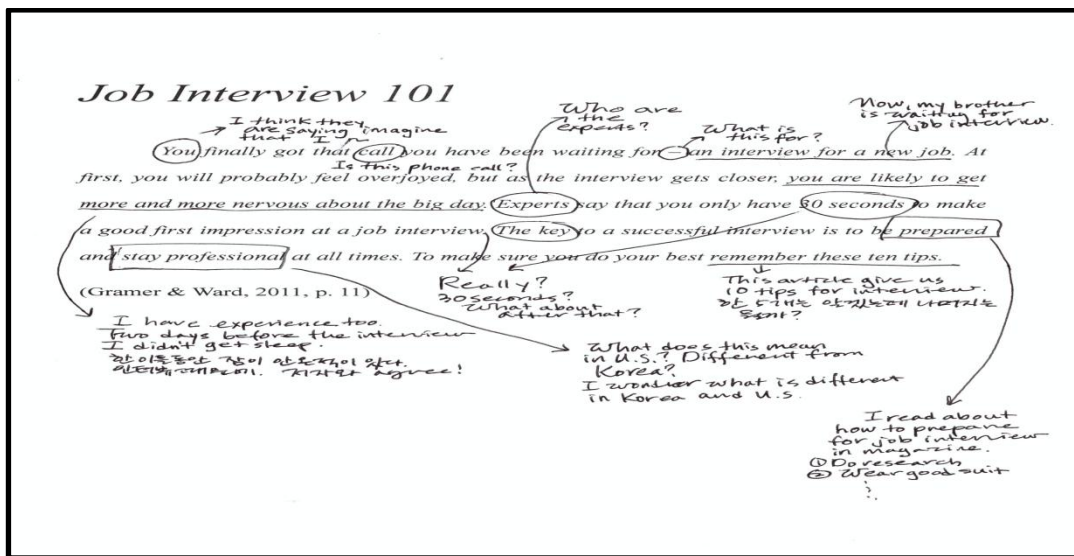

Fig. 3. Annotations example

Annotating a text is not an automatic process for the students. The benefits of reading strategies depends on the readers' active and continued use of the strategies rather than mere knowledge of what it is (Brantmeier 2002) and thus it requires
instruction, discussion, and continued practice throughout the semester as well as a conscious effort on the part of the instructor to bring it to the forefront of text comprehension.

4 Conclusions

ESL/EFL students in the university context are faced with multiple challenges when reading in English. They face the challenge that all second language learners encounter when reading and writing in a foreign language; namely they lack semantic, syntactic, pragmatic skills and knowledge in the target language. Second language learners in secondary and higher education face another challenge rooted in the academic and complex nature of the texts that they deal with. As Alderson, Haapakangas, Huhta, Nieminen, and Ullakonoja (2015) point out reading in a second language is a complicated process and students need metalinguistic and metacognitive reading strategies in order to comprehend content-dense texts with academic vocabulary and multiple viewpoints.
As evidenced through my observations of EFL students in Korean university classrooms second language learners rely heavily on low level processes such as decoding and

translations of words to comprehend texts in English. Such observations are supported by research in other parts of the world among university students learning English as a foreign language (Zhang and Anual (2008; Madhumathi and Ghodesh 2012). However, text comprehension is an interactive process that requires both low level and high level processes. Relying on vocabulary meaning and translation alone is ineffective for all text comprehension but especially so for accessing meaning in college level texts that are content-dense, decontextualized, and use academic discourse. Educators must help students broaden the spectrum of means to access meaning in texts. Providing multiple access points into reading comprehension for second language students is an important and much needed point of instruction that has the potential to position students as active consumers of texts, something that many L2 students may not have experienced as readers in a foreign language. To become active consumers of text, students must be immersed in learning and using reading strategies that enables them to access and interact with text in a multitude of ways. In this way reading becomes a two way process between the reader and text and no longer is the reader being dictated meaning by the text but is in constant interaction with the text where meaning is created.

Learning how to understand written text is a form of communication that is especially important in the academic context. English is an important language in the international context as English is lingua franca in business, politics, media, education, and research. As such, institutions of higher education in almost all countries (if not all) involve some form of English education or education in English to prepare their graduate to be competitive in the global world. The methods shared in this paper are highly applicable to ESL/EFL classes besides the Korean university classroom where English is taught or used as a medium of instruction. Ultimately, the teaching and learning of reading strategies suggested here is means of empowering ESL/EFL students to become proficient communicators in the global context.

Notes

1 There are two kinds of processes in reading, low level processes and high level processes. Low level processes refers to decoding, word recognition, and understanding of basic grammar. High level processes involve strategies such as predicting, questioning, making connections, inferencing, etc. that contribute to meaning making (Grabe, op.cit.). Scholars agree that active reading involves both processes.

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