READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES & MOTHER TONGUE USE IN EAP COURSES IN ISRAELI ACADEMIA

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is two-fold. First, we outline the various reading comprehension strategies employed in teaching EAP courses in Israel, and discuss challenges faced by students- native speakers of various Semitic languages (Hebrew, Arabic, and Amharic). Second, we advocate the use of L1 in our L2 classrooms and explore the contexts in which this practice is most beneficial for the learner.

The ultimate goal of an EAP course in Israeli academia is to equip students with tools for coping with academic texts in English, thus rendering a central role to teaching a wide array of reading comprehension strategies (cf. Raftari, Seyyedi, & Ismail, 2012; Rraku, 2013 for similar views). Proficient readers need to employ a variety of reading strategies (Anderson, 1991, 2005; Block, 1986, 1992; Carrell, 1998; Hock & Mellard, 2005), including word-, sentence-, paragraph-, and text-level strategies. In order to achieve high level of proficiency, reading strategies are explicitly taught and practiced by means of authentic academic texts of varying length and structure/complexity.

The need to teach and train students in the various text-coping techniques brings us to the second challenge: the use of L2 vs. L1 in our EAP classrooms. Efficient teaching involves imprinting reading strategies in the students' metacognition (Carrell, 1998; Farrell, 2001; McNeil, 2011; Song, 1998; Winograd & Hare, 1988), hence the importance of students' understanding of the teacher's explanations. In this context, the use of the students' mother tongue (L1) in EAP instruction gains higher importance. Numerous advocates of L1 in ESL/EFL classrooms have outlined a comprehensive list of efficient uses of L1 (Atkinson, 1987; Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; Schweers, 1999). We strongly believe that, especially in the case of weaker students, the use of L1 will facilitate their understanding and internalization of various reading comprehension strategies. To this end, we advocate presentation of (some of) text-coping techniques using the students' L1, as well as initial exemplification of these techniques using an authentic academic text in the students' mother tongue.

Keywords: EAP/ESP; reading comprehension strategies; L1 in L2 classroom.

EAP REQUIREMENTS IN ISRAELI ACADEMIA

In Israel, all students in higher education are obliged to reach an exemption level of English. This can be achieved by means of either a psychometric test or by studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses in college.

Students in Israeli colleges are native speakers of Hebrew, Arabic and Amharic (the language spoken in Ethiopia) - all Semitic languages, as well as native speakers of Russian and French. Hebrew is the lingua franca - the main official language of the country, and students usually exhibit high mastery of it. The students' level of English at the entrance level is usually low, and students have to take three annual courses to reach the exemption level: beginners, intermediate, advanced.

At the exemption level, students are expected to answer questions following an academic text in English which is 3,000 words long. Thus, the ultimate goal of EAP courses in Israeli academia is to equip students with tools for coping with academic texts in English, thus rendering a central role to teaching a wide array of reading comprehension (RC) strategies (cf. Raftari, Seyyedi, & Ismail, 2012; Rraku, 2013 for similar views).

READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE
Proficient vs. Non-proficient Readers

Before we outline the different types of RC strategies, let us discuss their relevance for successful coping with academic texts. It is well established that *proficient* readers need to employ a variety of reading comprehension strategies (Anderson, 1991, 2005; Block, 1986, 1992; Carrell, 1998; Hock & Mellard, 2005, to mention just a few, and Brantmeier, 2002, for a comprehensive review of earlier research). What distinguishes *more proficient* readers from *less proficient* ones is the ability of the former to use appropriate strategies in a given context and to "orchestrate" the use of various strategies rather than using one at a time (Anderson, 1991; Carrell, 1998).

"*Novice readers*, by contrast, often focus on decoding single words, fail to adjust their reading for different texts or purposes, and seldom look ahead or back in text to monitor and improve comprehension. Such cognitive limitations are characteristic of young novices as well as of older, unskilled readers" (Carrell, 1998). McNeil (2011) argues that **low proficiency** is due to, among other things, deficiencies in lexical and syntactic knowledge. This brings us to the need to teach lexical and syntactic strategies explicitly, along with higher-order strategies, including paragraph- and text-level ones. The latter are supposed to bootstrap the weak lexical and syntactic knowledge. Numerous studies on the topic point out that reading comprehension strategies *can* be taught and their successful application *will* improve reading comprehension (Carrell, 1998; Farrell, 2001; McNeil, 2011; Rraku, 2013; Singhal, 2001; Song, 1998).

Let us now outline the groups of reading comprehension strategies that we teach in our classes throughout the academic year, lead by the belief that these are necessary for student success.

RC Strategies - an Outline

For the ease of categorization, we divide all the strategies into four subcategories:

- **Word-level strategies:** parts of speech, suffixes and prefixes, specific terminology, vocabulary enrichment, synonyms and paraphrasing, guessing from context;
- **Sentence-level strategies:** sentence structure, including phrase structure (which differs in English vs. Semitic languages), noun phrases, verb tenses, active vs. passive, compound and complex sentences, reference words, connectors;
- **Paragraph-level strategies:** paragraph structure, topic sentence, connectors, main ideas vs. supporting details, inference, prediction;
- **Text-level strategies:** topic, main idea, introduction, subheadings, development of the argument, author's opinion, conclusion, types of texts, background knowledge.

Given the necessity of mastery over a great deal of reading comprehension techniques, we devote a prominent portion of our classes to teaching and practicing reading strategies of all levels.

How a Strategy is Taught

Winograd & Hare (1988) outline five key elements in teacher's explanation for successful strategy training, as follows:

- What the strategy is
- Why the strategy should be learned
- How to use the strategy
- When and where the strategy should be used
- How to evaluate use of the strategy

Our course books comprise a comprehensive collection of reading strategies of different levels (i.e. from word-level to text-level), followed by extensive practice at all levels. Our course book explanations usually follow the same pattern. First of all, a strategy is briefly explained and examples are provided. The explanation and example

are followed by practice exercises of rising levels of complexity: first, the strategy is practiced on a sentence level using sentences corresponding to the course level, followed by practice on a paragraph level, with paragraphs taken from authentic academic texts, and finally on a text level - when the relevant strategy is encountered in an academic text, it is pointed out by the teacher and practiced within its context.

This way we ensure maximum exposure to the strategy taught with maximum training provided.

THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN EAP CLASSROOMS

The need to teach and train students in the different text-coping techniques brings us to the second challenge: the use of L2 (target language, in this case English) vs. L1 (students' mother tongue or dominant language) in our EAP classrooms.

As teaching involves not only presentation of the strategies, but also making them part of the students' metacognitive knowledge (Carrell, 1998; Farrell, 2001; McNeil, 2011; Singhal, 2001; Song, 1998; Winograd & Hare, 1988), the importance of the students' understanding of the teacher's explanations should be stressed. In this context, the use of the students' mother tongue (L1) in teachers' explanations gains higher importance.

The students' L1

Part of the uniqueness of Israel is that we have a high rate of immigrants. The majority of our students speak Hebrew as their mother tongue, but there are also native speakers of other Semitic languages, such as Arabic and Amharic (language spoken in Ethiopia), as well as speakers of other languages, such as Russian and French. Hebrew, the dominant language of the country, is the lingua franca for all and one and the students are usually fluent at it.

Technically Hebrew should be called the students' DL (dominant language), and English - their TL (target language). For convenience, we will continue referring to English as L2 and to Hebrew - as L1.

Native language (L1) versus English only (L2) in an EAP classroom

The "native language (L1) versus English only (L2) in an EAP classroom" debate is not new. For the past thirty years, language teachers and researchers have been gaining insights into the importance and unavoidability of L1 in the classroom. The somewhat "purist" L2 approach to language teaching has given way to the use of L1 both by students and teachers. In order to understand the need of L1, we first need to understand why and when students use their L1 in the classroom.

The Use of L1 by Students and Teachers

Why

A number of possible reasons for L1 use in the classroom have been outlined. First and foremost, the L1 is ever present in the minds of our L2 learners, whether we want it to be there or not (Cook (1992) in Seng & Hashim, 2006). Translation into L1, both conscious and unconscious, is a powerful technique which is widely preferred by the students themselves (Atkinson, 1987; Harbord, 1992; Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; Schweers, 1999). Moreover, L1 is part of the students' culture and identity and gives them a sense of security (Schweers, 1999).

When

Numerous advocates of the use of L1 in EAP classrooms have outlined a comprehensive list of possible occasions for the use of mother tongue:

- Eliciting language
- Checking comprehension
- Giving complex instructions
- Co-operation among students
- Discussions of classroom methodology
- Presentation of language structures
- Checking for sense via translation
- Testing
- Development of useful learning strategies

(Adapted from Atkinson (1987))

We strongly believe that, especially in the case of weaker students, L1 is an invaluable resource. The use of the students' L1 will facilitate their understanding and internalization of the various reading comprehension strategies. To this end, we advocate presentation of (some of) text-coping techniques using the students' L1, as well as exemplification of these techniques using an authentic academic text in the students' mother tongue. The latter possibility will be outlined in the concluding part of this paper.

The Uses of Hebrew in an EAP Classroom

Our observations show that Hebrew is used in our EAP classrooms mostly for:

- Classroom management
- Revoking background knowledge
- Presentation of grammar rules
- Presentation of RC techniques

- Assessment of comprehension
- Group and pair work

Whereas the uses outlined above are self-explanatory, we would like to discuss two of them in the context of teaching reading comprehension strategies, i.e.:

- Presentation of grammar rules
- Presentation of RC techniques

Grammar Rules and RC Techniques

The students' L1 is crucial in presentation of word-level and sentence-level reading strategies, both in terms of deeper comprehension and **comparison between languages**. Language and grammar points can serve as points of **comparison and contrast** between the learners' L1 (mother tongue) and L2 (target language). In this connection, Harbord (1992: 354-5) writes about using L1 to facilitate learning of L2:

> This final category will be concerned principally with the evaluation of strategies which aim specifically at aiding L2 acquisition through comparison with L1. These strategies have two purposes: the first is to make students aware of the dangers of translation and teach them to exercise a conscious check on the validity of their unconscious translation; and the second is to teach them ways of working towards what Danchev (1982: 55) calls 'functional translation' (i.e. transferring meaning into L2) rather than the word-for-word translation that occurs when the learner's unconscious need to make assumptions and correlations between languages is ignored.

Similarities and Differences Between Languages

Points of similarity and divergence between languages are numerous. Rather ignoring these points, we decided to teach them explicitly, employing the students' L1. In what follows, we provide a number of examples.

- **Connectors - similarity between languages:**

One point of similarity among different languages is **connectors**. Every language has ways to indicate transitions such as cause-and-effect, exemplification, addition, similarity, contrast, etc. We first try to elicit as many connectors as possible in the students' mother tongue, before moving on to teaching them in English.

- **Sentence structure – similarity & difference**:

Sentence structure is another issue at point. Whereas the basic sentence structure -

i.e. subject-verb order - is generally similar among the languages spoken in our classrooms, phrase structure presents a point of divergence and thus deserves special attention and explanation. One example of such divergence are noun phrases.

- **Noun phrases: structure & comprehension**

Consider the following noun phrase (and a title of one of the academic texts we teach):
Bilingual children's mother tongue

In English, the head word (the main word of the noun phrase) comes last, whereas in Hebrew it comes first. So, translation of noun phrases into Hebrew should be done backwards: starting with the last word and moving to the first one:

      4   3   2   1
Bilingual children's mother <u>tongue</u>

- **Vocabulary**

Homonyms: Same sound, different meaning, often different parts of speech - can be exemplified using translation into the students' mother tongue. Examples: ***present*** (n.), ***present*** (adj.), ***present*** (v.); ***abstract*** (adj.), ***abstract*** (n.), ***abstract*** (v.)

Another point of divergence between languages that should be stressed are so-called "false cognates" or "false friends" (Laufer, 1997):

False cognates ("false friends"): words that sound similar/the same in different languages, but have a different meaning in each language.

Example: ***factor*** in academic texts in English usually means "cause"; ***faktor*** in Hebrew is usually used as a mathematical function, e.g. adding bonus points to a test grade.

Example: ***effect*** in academic texts in English usually means "influence"; ***efekt*** (pl. ***efektim***) in Hebrew is usually used to describe special features, e.g. in a movie.

Other examples of "false friends" would be:
Sympathetic in English - ***simpati*** ('nice') in Hebrew (Laufer, 1997)
Tramp in English - ***tremp*** ('lift') in Hebrew (Laufer, 1997)
Severe in English - ***savir*** ('reasonable, plausible') in Hebrew
Actually in English - ***aktuali*** ('relevant, topical') in Hebrew

These differences are pointed out and repeatedly stressed in our EAP classrooms, using comparison between the students' dominant language and the class' target

language.

TEACHING STRATEGIES VIA AN ACADEMIC TEXT IN HEBREW

To conclude, instead of avoiding L1 in the classroom, trying to direct our students solely to L2 - a mission destined to failure - we adopted a hands-on approach and decided to face the L1 issue. The first class in our courses at all levels starts with an analysis of an authentic academic text in **Hebrew**. It's usually a short text, one page long, which follows the rules and structure of academic writing and has academic vocabulary. Lead by the belief that text-coping techniques are stronger in the student's dominant language, we demonstrate how these can be used with an academic text in their L1/DL.

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