

Building Awareness of Discourse Structure Through Teaching Reading Strategies in English for Legal Purposes Class

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Abstract: Research has been carried out for several decades on what makes some students more successful in foreign language reading than others. It was established that good readers possess greater awareness of discourse structure, meaning they are able to recognize the signalling mechanisms which give clues to the ways the text is organized (Grabe, 2009). Discourse structure awareness is seen as a type of metalinguistic awareness which also includes knowledge of reading strategies and their appropriate use in order to resolve reading problems and properly interpret text information.

Our research was based on the following hypothesis: explicit teaching of reading strategies in English for Legal Purposes class will enhance students' awareness of discourse structure as well as reading comprehension. The data was collected through the SORS (Survey of Reading Strategies) questionnaire (Mokhtari & Sheory, 2002), a reading comprehension test developed for this research and a semi-structured interview to check how students perceive the reading process and discourse structure before and after strategies instruction. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures and the results fully confirmed our hypothesis: the subjects (N=20) achieved better results on the reading comprehension test and reported easier identification and interpretation of discourse markers.

Key words: reading strategies, English for Legal Purposes

Introduction

In times of increasing globalization, free flow of goods and work force and especially Croatia's accession to the EU, Croatian lawyers find themselves in great need of foreign languages, English in particular. Reading comprehension and interpreting legal texts are among most needed skills for practising lawyers in Croatia (Lukica & Kaldonek, in print) second only to speaking skills. As the role of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is to cater to students' specific, work-related needs in the context of the particular environment (Jordan, 1997) it follows that English for Legal Purpose (ELP) in Croatia should focus on facilitating better and easier understanding of various legal texts. We believe this can be done through teaching reading strategies.

Many definitions of reading strategies have been brought forth since the beginning of research on reading strategies thirty years ago as well as several taxonomies (Anderson, 1991; Cohen, 1990; Paris et al., 1991). For the purpose of this study, we cite Singhal's definition as it points clearly to the purpose of reading strategies "Reading strategies are processes used by the learner to enhance reading comprehension and overcome comprehension failures." (2001, p. 2). As for taxonomies, we will follow Mokhtari and Sheorey's (2002) classification of reading strategies into global, problem solving and support strategies as it has been developed for second/foreign language students.

Regardless of the lack of a single definition or categorisation of reading strategies, research shows the usefulness and benefits of explicit teaching of reading strategies in foreign language classrooms. Kern's research (1989) was based on Directed Reading and Thinking Activities approach and yielded positive results on reading comprehension scores of French L2 university students. Similar results were achieved in Carrel, Pharis, and Liberto's (1989) study of English L2 university students adopting Experience-Text-Relationship method and semantic mapping method. Song's study (1998) involving English L2 university students used the Reciprocal Teaching method which also led to increase in reading comprehension. In a recent study involving ESP university students, Moghadam (2008) showed positive results of explicit teaching of reading strategies using Janzen and Stoller's approach (1998).

Research has also shown that improvements in reading comprehension can result from discourse awareness and discourse-structure instruction (Grabe, 2009). Discourse-structure awareness is seen as "a type of metalinguistic awareness at the text level" (Nagy in Grabe, 2009, p. 243) which includes knowledge of reading strategies and their appropriate use in order to resolve reading problems and properly interpret text information. With regard to discourse-structure awareness instruction Grabe (2009) names three lines of instruction: teaching direct signalling of discourse structures, teaching the use of graphic organizers and teaching reading strategies, all of which improve discourse awareness and reading comprehension.

The aim of this study was to confirm the following hypothesis: explicit teaching of reading strategies in ELP class will enhance students' awareness of discourse structure as well as reading comprehension.

Method of the study

This study was designed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative method was used to analyse the answers to the questionnaire and the comprehension test, and the qualitative method was represented in the use of a semi-structured interview. As each method has its advantages and disadvantages, using more than one method ensures greater credibility and dependability of results (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Participants

20 practising lawyers participated in the study. They were attending the same ELP course at the Centre for Languages and Law at the Faculty of Law in Zagreb, Croatia. The placement test which they were required to complete prior to beginning the ELP course showed they possess a lower-intermediate level of general English knowledge. All participants had been studying English for a minimum of 8 years. Four participants were male and the rest female, aged 22 to 45, but neither gender nor age were considered a variable in this study.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study: a reading comprehension test designed for the purpose of the study and Survey of Reading Strategies questionnaire (SORS, Mokhtari & Sheory, 2002). The reading comprehension test consisted of texts taken from an ELP course book suitable for lower-intermediate level followed by 30 questions each carrying one point. Five types of questions were used (yes/no questions, true or false questions, alternative questions, wh-questions and multiple choice questions) to cover six types of comprehension according to the taxonomy of Day and Park (2005).

The SORS questionnaire is used to measure the perceived use of three categories of reading strategies: global strategies (e.g. using typographical features of a text to identify key information), problem solving strategies (e.g. adjusting reading speed according to the text one reads) and support strategies (e.g. going back and forth in the text to find relationships among ideas). It consists of 30 items each using a 5-point Likert scale (1-I never do this; 5-I always do this). This questionnaire was chosen because it was developed especially for adolescent and adult students of foreign languages (Mokhtari & Sheory, 2002). It was translated from the English original to the participant's mother tongue Croatian and two separate back-translations were done to ensure the accuracy of the Croatian translation.

Both instruments were administered before and after the reading strategies instruction to determine the possible effect such instruction has on test results and the level of perceived strategy use. The instruments were administered during a regular ELP lesson which lasts 90 minutes. 60 minutes were allowed for the test and 15 minutes for the SORS.

The semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview was chosen because it allows a greater degree of freedom in both administration and interpretation. The researcher is not limited by a strict set of predetermined questions, but can adapt their questions to the participants' answers. A semi-structured interview also gives an in-depth view of students' attitudes and ideas about reading in a foreign language and their interpretation of the problems they face while reading legal texts in English. Interviews were conducted individually at the time best suited to the participants and lasted between thirty and forty minutes depending on how elaborate students' answers were. Interviews were conducted both prior and after reading strategies instruction.

Reading strategies instruction

For the purpose of this study we adopted the Styles- and Strategies-Based Instruction (SSBI) method of teaching which is defined as "a form of learner-focused language teaching that explicitly combines styles and strategy training activities with everyday classroom language instruction (Cohen, 2009). Teachers are instructed to follow five components of this method in preparing lessons: strategy preparation, strategy awareness-raising, strategy instruction, strategy practice and personalization of strategies (Cohen & Weaver, 2006). SSBI allows the teacher to either start with the course material, a set of strategies to be taught or insert strategies spontaneously into the lessons. The role of the teacher is that of a guide who helps students become more aware of the language learning process, to introduce various strategies, show students how to use them and encourage students to use them in a manner which is best suited for their learning needs which we believe leads to higher motivation as one of the key components for effective language learning (Dörnyei, 2001, 2005).

The strategies that were chosen for instruction in this study were the 30 strategies listed in Mokhtari and Sheory. In addition, we decided to teach direct signalling of discourse structure as well as graphic organizers as they have been proven to increase both awareness of discourse structure and reading comprehension (Carrell, 1985; Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989; Jiang & Grabe, 2007).

The instruction was part of a regular one-year course in legal English which consisted of 35 ninety minutes sessions, one session per week.

Data Analysis Process

Reading comprehension tests were corrected and points calculated for each student. The results of the pre-instruction tests and post-instruction tests have been compared and individual gains determined.

The SORS was analysed according to the developer's instructions: the total mean was calculated for each student as well as means for three categories of strategies. The means were interpreted according to the scale offered by Oxford and Burry-Stock: high use (mean 3.5 or higher), moderate use (mean between 2.5 and 3.4) and low use (mean of 2.4 or lower) (Mokhtari & Sheory, 2002). Two sets of results (pre-instruction and post-instruction) were compared to determine the increase in perceived use of reading strategies.

The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The data obtained in the interviews were distributed into the following categories of ELP reading comprehension problems: legal terminology (technical terms, archaic term), text structure (long sentences, complex structure) and poor general English knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) in order to get a better idea of how students' perceive reading in a foreign language as well as reading legal texts in English.

Findings and discussion

Pre-instruction results

The average number of reading comprehension test points was 20 out of 30 (66%). However, there were students who gave correct answers to only 16 questions and those who correctly answered as many as 25 questions. We believe this large gap is due to some students using more reading strategies and being more aware of discourse structure. This belief was corroborated by results of the interview. Namely, students who scored lower or the reading comprehension test spoke of series of problems they encountered while reading the text in all three predetermined categories (legal terminology, text structure, poor general English knowledge). Long, complex sentences were the biggest problem followed by unknown words. When asked how they attempted to solve these problems, these students said they tried to "deduce the meaning of unknown words from the context, but there were simply too many unknown words" which led to frustration and giving up. They also attempted to divide the long sentences into smaller units, but that had not helped as they "could not recognize the difference between subject and object of the sentence" or "follow the train of thought of the author". They also mentioned they are much better at reading text which are not law-related and complained about the complexity of legal English. Students who scored better on the reading comprehension test had similar complaints about the overall complexity of legal texts, but they were not as easily discouraged from finding the correct answer as they felt more confident in their knowledge of English. They were willing to "read problematic sections as many times as necessary" and they "looked for the message, not what each word means". These points to higher strategies and discourse awareness as well as to difference in understanding the process of reading and utilizing not just decoding but constructing meaning as well.

In terms of the SORS, the mean for the whole group was 3.7 showing very high use of reading strategies in all three categories which was not in line with poor test results. Namely, we expected the test results to be explained by low use of strategies. However, explanation was provided by the students' answers to the interview questions. One of the students said: "Honestly, when I read texts for work, I don't remember half of these strategies. There are just few which I always use, like using a dictionary. And reading slower. I try to guess also even though you shouldn't in law." Several students admitted they wanted to appear better than they actually were and several wanted to impress their teacher (who was also conducting the study). This points to two problems in methodology, the first being unreliability of questionnaires as students write what they think they do and not what they actually do while reading, and the second the teacher conducting the research. On the other hand, the actual situation of reading strategy use was detected in the interviews and students were more comfortable talking to their teacher than an unknown person.

Post-instruction results

The results of the post-instruction reading comprehension test showed improvement of the group as well as individual students, thus improving our hypothesis. The average number of correct answers was 24 out of 30 (80%) and the individual results ranged from 19 to 27 points. The gap was still obvious but it is important to notice that each student scored higher on this test than on the pre-instruction test, three points in average. Equally important, all of the students reported higher self-confidence in reading legal texts. The majority of students attributed this to the method of instruction and only two students said they were more confident because they had been attending the course regularly and did not indicate the connection to the teaching method. When asked why they thought reading-strategies instruction helped them increase their understanding of legal texts, the students either mentioned "knowing more strategies" or the explicit nature of the method of instruction. For example, a few students said they now have "more tools to help them read in English", while others called them "new techniques for solving problems". They also spoke very positively about SSBI because it gives them "opportunity to practise and experiment with different strategies trying to figure out which helps best in which situation." Because they are explicitly told what discourse structure and discourse markers are, they "know what to look for when reading". One student gave a particularly long, heartfelt explanation which

we are citing in full as it shows the extent of benefits SSBI instruction has on a student's understanding of the reading process and on reading motivation:

"You (the teacher) didn't assume we know all this stuff about languages like what is cohesion and coherence, because we don't. It doesn't come natural to lawyers. We are not language experts. At first I thought it was a bit...what the word is when you think somebody is stupid...I thought that you thought we were all stupid because you were explaining everything step by step. I didn't really believe talking about my problems would help. Or this new method. I just wanted somebody to help me read better because I have to do that every day and I feel bad about it every day. But I thought there is some kind of magic that the teacher will do and I will read better, you know. Or that some people are just better in English and they can think in English and understand it. I was a little lazy. I didn't want to work so much. Reading should be easier. It's not easy still, but it's better. And I think I will be even better if I remember the strategies."

The results of the SORS with regard to overall use of strategies show a decrease of strategy use (M=3.0). However, we should keep in mind the fact that the results of the pre-instruction SORS were influenced by the students' wish to represent themselves in better light. In the post-instruction interview, students' said they were precise in their SORS answers. The post-instruction result shows moderate use of reading strategies, but students reported using more global strategies than before which is in line with the intended shift in the approach to reading. When asked to identify the most useful strategies mentioned in the SORS, students' answers varied, but they all stressed the usefulness of teaching direct signalling and graphic organizers as being particularly helpful with legal English. One student said: "I know now that I have to pay attention to how words are connected in a sentence and how sentences are connected in a text. Not just look at them in isolation." and another few that "graphic organizers are very useful because they help in organizing information and representing it more clearly because they are visual".

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of the study confirmed our hypothesis that explicit teaching of reading strategies in English for Legal Purposes class will enhance students' awareness of discourse structure as well as reading comprehension. Each student achieved a better result on the post-instruction test in comparison with the pre-instruction test and eighteen out of twenty students attributed this increase in reading comprehension to the method of instruction. All students reported higher awareness of discourse structure in the post-instruction interview as a result of explicit teaching of reading strategies. A significant increase in reading motivation was also observed in the post-instruction interview as a result of explicit teaching of reading strategies instruction.

A problem was detected in administering the pre-instruction questionnaire as some students did not provide entirely truthful answers. Imprecise answers could have been provided unintentionally as well as students were reporting on what they believe they do while reading and were not observed during reading. As such problems could be anticipated, a semi-structured interview was chosen to provide a deeper understanding of students' awareness of reading, reading strategies and discourse structure. A suggestion for further research is to instruct the participants in verbal protocols in order to check reading strategies use during the reading process. The researcher also being a teacher was a problem in that it influenced the students' answers to the pre-instruction questionnaire. However, it also proved an advantage because students reported it was easier for them to talk to the teacher about their reading problems than to somebody they do not know.

Motivation for reading proved to be a very important factor in our study. Although English for Legal Purposes students are primarily motivated to attend classes because they need ELP at work, they also showed various degrees of reading anxiety or reading confidence which has to be kept in mind for further research. These can be conducted to ascertain if reading motivation increases using other teaching methods in ELP classes and is it affected by other factors such as the teacher or the learning environment.

As SSBI proved very successful in an ELP class consisting of practising lawyers, another line of research could be investigating its usefulness for ELP classes for university students of law in Croatia, which consist of a significantly larger number of students, as well as its usefulness in other areas of ESP.

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