総説

Strategies to compensate for cultural background knowledge deficiency in L2 reading

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第二言語リーディングにおいてテキストの文化的背景の 知識不足を補うためのストラテジー

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SUMMARY

In L2 reading there are various kinds of non-linguistic factors such as readers' motivation, interest, nationalities, learning preferences, L1 reading proficiency, etc., that affect readers' comprehension. With older or more proficient readers the lack of knowledge of cultural background could be what mostly hinders their ability to comprehend L2 texts. In order to compensate older learners for this deficiency, strategies that raise metacognitive awareness are effective.

要　　旨

第二言語のリーディングでは言語以外の要因、例えば学習者の動機、興味、国籍、学習方法の好み、母語での読解力など様々な要因が学習者のテキスト理解に影響を与えている。ある程度年齢の高い、あるいは第二言語の運用がある程度出来る学習者にとっては目標言語の文化的背景の知識不足がテキストを読み理解する上での妨げになる可能性が大きい。年齢の高い学習者がこの知識不足を補うためにはメタ認知的ストラテジーを用いることが効果的である。

Key words: L2 reading, cultural background knowledge, reading strategies, metacognitive awareness

Introduction

Since the 1990s, reading comprehension in L2 has been said to interact with text, learning environment, reader characteristics, such as motivation, nationality, personality, preference, or background, reading strategies, and so forth (Erler and Finkbeiner, 2007). When learners read in L2, not only their proficiency in the L2 but also their personality, learning preference, and cultural background affect their reading comprehension. As various factors are interwoven, you cannot determine which factor is the most dominant in reading L2 texts. In that sense, it is more complex to analyze the

mechanism of L2 reading than the other three skills — listening, speaking, and writing. Due to the complexity, a variety of strategies to help learners improve reading fluency, accuracy and comprehension have been introduced and recommended. Some deal with vocabulary or grammatical structures, and others with readers' cultural backgrounds, or learners' preferences, etc.

Young adult learners such as university students use different strategies from those of young or beginning learners. In reading classes in Japanese universities, for example, strategies need not be focused on improving bottom-up proficiency, because the students are supposed to have acquired grammatical knowledge and a certain amount of vocabulary necessary to read and comprehend texts written in English. Rather, understanding the cultural background behind texts is more essential for them. In this paper, some general aspects and strategies of L2 reading will be introduced, and reading strategies that enable young adult learners to compensate for cultural gaps will be suggested.

Non-linguistic aspects in L2 reading

When we discuss L2 reading, the influences of L1 reading should not be ignored. L2 reading has a close and complex relationship with L1 reading. While reading in L2, learners often unconsciously try to adopt their L1 reading strategies even when the strategies do not work with the L2 reading. Yamashita (2002) posed two questions: Does high L1 reading ability compensate for low L2 language proficiency? Does high L2 language proficiency compensate for low L1 reading ability? She concluded that we should not overlook "the contribution of L1 reading ability" (p. 92), though she did not find any clear connection between L1 and L2 reading proficiency. Haradin (2001), on the other hand, concluded that "strategic reading behaviors in L1 predicted strategic behaviors in L2 reading" (Erler and Finkbeiner, p.196). We can conclude from their studies that L1 reading proficiency certainly affects L2 reading, though some variables are working to produce slightly different results.

There are some other factors we should keep in mind when discussing L2 reading. Erler and Finkbeiner (2007, pp. 197-200) categorized "culture, motivation and interest" as non-linguistic variables linked to L2 reading strategies. Motivation and interest in TL reading help learners read better, but it seems that differences between readers' cultural backgrounds and the target cultures seriously interfere with readers' comprehension. Cultural gaps affect comprehension more radically than the other two non-linguistic variables. In other words, understanding the target culture helps learners read with interest, which might increase their motivation in L2 reading.

Erler and Finkbeiner introduced Singhal's survey (1998) in which it said that both L1 and L2 reading required knowledge of cultural content and of formal and linguistic schema. Singhal argued that the major differences between L1 and L2 reading were that L2 readers who were not familiar with content schema or did not possess appropriate L2 sociocultural knowledge would have comprehension difficulties in that they could not perceive L2 text in a culturally authentic way (Erler and Finkbeiner). Roller (1990) also discussed how familiarity of the text affected comprehension. In her study, it was suggested that familiarity of topics of texts helped L2 readers' comprehension whereas Adams and Huggins (1986) claimed that contexts that were too familiar did not help L2 readers, because the readers understood or inferred the texts even though they could not linguistically comprehend the L2 text (Roller, p. 86).

Cultural differences can also be viewed the other way around. Erler and Finkbeiner claimed that not only target cultures, but also readers' nationalities or cultural backgrounds affected their "measures of reading comprehension and measures of strategy use" (2007, p. 199). They cited Parry's research (1991, 1993), which compared university participants from Nigeria with those from China by examining their English L2 reading strategies (Erler and Finkbeiner). Although they questioned whether the number of the participants and the gender proportion in Parry's study were appropriate for comparison, they admitted the results showed some distinct differences between them. According to the study, the Chinese students tended to care about details, while the Nigerian students preferred broader comprehension. Hyland (1993) showed that Japanese students had no particular strategies, but in general they were interested in a kind of metacognitive style and were "keen to discover their own and their peers' styles" (p. 83).

L2 reading strategies in general

Cohen (2007) stated five purposes of language learner strategies: to enhance learning, to perform specified tasks, to solve specific problems, to make learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable, and to compensate for a deficit in learning (pp. 38-39). Grabe's list of reading strategies (2002, p.83) (see note) meets Cohen's five purposes and is useful both for learners and teachers. We cannot declare, however, that there are particular strategies which can be applied to every learner successfully. Then what are the differences in strategy use between stronger readers and weaker readers? Have weaker readers acquired negative strategies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1995) which interfere with learners' comprehension? Or do weaker readers differ from stronger readers in their use of strategies? Anderson (1991) found that stronger students were quite different from weaker students in their use of strategies. Although the number of strategies used both by stronger and weaker readers was not different, the better readers used strategies in integrated ways. Anderson also observed that the weakest student in his case study knew quite a few strategies, but she did not seem to monitor the strategies or orchestrate them successfully. Then the question becomes how to make learners monitor or orchestrate their strategies.

In order to monitor or orchestrate learner's own strategies, metacognitive skills are indispensable. Erler and Finkbeiner pointed out that "successful comprehension was associated with metacognitive strategies which involved the monitoring of cognitive strategies, including 'bottom-up' strategies" (2007, p.192). For example, if readers do not have metacognitive skills, they cannot overview the text, or they even fail to grasp the purpose of their reading, which forces them to read word by word and prevents them from comprehending the text as a whole.

Anderson (2008) showed metacognition had five primary components: preparing and planning for learning, selecting and using strategies, monitoring learning, orchestrating strategies, and evaluating learning (pp. 100-102). "Preparing and planning for learning" is the first step and readers should be careful not to lose sight of the purposes of their reading and they should think about what to do to achieve their purposes. Then they choose the appropriate strategies to meet their purposes. The strategies should be taught explicitly to avoid wasting time or gaining either ineffective or negative strategies. To monitor learning, readers should often check if they are working on track, and using the

appropriate strategies. In order to evaluate their own learning, readers should be encouraged by teachers to reflect on what and how they have done, and whether the strategies they have adopted are working.

Strategies to bridge cultural gaps

Cultural background knowledge behind texts is an important element in L2 reading comprehension. Knowledge of cultural background itself should be gained directly from books, teachers, the Internet and so on. And yet there are some strategies to make learners notice and compensate for cultural gaps. Paying attention to discourse organization of TL, including genre, rhetorical organization or text structure, for example, would facilitate reading. Learners could read better with the knowledge, especially when their L1 is linguistically and culturally distant from the L2, or they are learning the L2 in a foreign language environment.

As mentioned in the previous section, successful comprehension is associated with metacognitive strategies. Grabe introduced research by Schoonen, Hulstijn and Bossers (1998) on influences of vocabulary and metacognitive knowledge in reading. This research showed that as readers got older or more proficient, metacognitive knowledge contributed more strongly than vocabulary (Grabe, p. 147). In other words, when readers are younger, teaching vocabulary and grammatical structures explicitly is important, whereas adult learners must be taught how to develop metacognitive skills. Adult ESL or EFL learners already know and have acquired some reading strategies or schemata, because they have more experience in L1 reading and are more competent compared with younger learners (Grabe, p. 113). Then, how should we raise students' metacognitive awareness and what strategies can we use to extend their knowledge of target cultures?

Among Grabe's list, "teaching specifying a purpose for reading," "previewing the text," "summarising information," "rereading," and "identifying difficulties" might be efficient as metacognitive strategies. Reflecting on what has been learned from the text is effective for successful reading, because raising awareness and reflection are the two key elements for being a good and proficient reader. With these strategies students are likely to notice that it is a lack of knowledge about target cultures that prevents them from reading fluently and accurately.

I then would like to add one more strategy to fill cultural gaps: working with others. O'Malley and Chamot (1995) showed that in an ESL social studies class a number of "metacognitive, cognitive, and social and affective strategies" (pp.210-212) were taught to develop reading comprehension. They made students practice activities in cooperative groups. Though the students in their research were in upper elementary and secondary school, it could also work with adults or more proficient readers in order to extend cultural knowledge. Joritz-Nakagawa (2006) gave a full account of her successful case with cooperative learning in an EFL reading class in a Japanese university. She managed a large class with about 60 second-year students, effectively giving them both individual and team-building activities. In her class, reading was taught in an integrated way with a writing project and oral presentations, and developing her students' reading skills was not the primary importance, though. One of the purposes of her cooperative learning class was to give her students "opportunities to do stimulating and challenging work related to global issues" (p.134). Most of her students seemed to enjoy the class and their

motivation greatly improved during the course.

Working with other learners may sound a little strange in reading classes, as reading is basically an individual activity. However, some kinds of cooperative learning such as discussions or research projects on cultural background of TL are necessary as well as useful. In cases where readers have already noticed cultural gaps, discussing with other readers will help them come up with a way to fill the gaps. Working cooperatively would be even more effective when they do not realize the absence of knowledge. It is easier to notice a gap but it is far more difficult to notice what does not exist in their cultures or what they have not experienced. The absence of knowledge makes their reading confusing and they do not know why. Then by working together they can at least clear up what the problem is, even if that does not lead them to solutions, nor help them fill the absence of knowledge instantly.

Conclusion

Cultural differences interfere with reading comprehension. Although it is not easy to overcome the problem, there are still some strategies to compensate or fill the gaps. With the strategies mentioned in this paper readers can facilitate L2 reading even when they encounter difficulty in comprehending cultural background behind the text.

The most important thing for teachers is to make sure not to load too many strategies on learners, which might make them reluctant readers. After all, the main purposes of acquiring strategies are "to make learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable" (Cohen, p. 39).

Note

Grabe's reading strategies are:

1. Specifying a purpose for reading

2. Planning what to do/what steps to take

3. Previewing the text

4. Predicting the contents of the text or section of text

5. Checking predictions

6. Posing questions about the text

7. Finding answers to posed questions

8. Connecting text to background knowledge

9. Summarising information

10. Making inferences

11. Connecting one part of the text to another

12. Paying attention to text structure

13. Rereading

14. Guessing the meaning of a new word from context

15. Using discourse markers to see relationships

16. Checking comprehension

17. Identifying difficulties

18. Taking steps to repair faulty comprehension

19. Critiquing the author

20. Critiquing the text

21. Judging how well objectives were met

22. Reflecting on what has been learned from the text

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