

What can the FL Teacher Teach the Mother Tongue Reader?

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An experiment was carried out to determine whether reading skills acquired in L2 reading would be transferred to L1 reading. Two groups were tested twice in the L1 (Hebrew). In the intervening period, the experimental group were given an intensive reading skills course in the L2 (English). Both groups' performance improved on the second L1 test, but the experimental group's performance was strikingly greater than the control group's. Students' reports of their performance suggested that they had transferred efficient strategies acquired in the L2. The implications are discussed.

The present pilot study was planned to investigate if and to what extent reading skills and reading strategies instructed in the FL reading courses affect the student-reader's ability to read academic texts in the mother tongue.

The rationale of the study was based on Alderson's paper (Alderson 1984) in which he raised the issue of whether reading in the FL is a language problem or a reading problem for the FL reader. In other words, are the reading problems of the FL reader caused by his insufficient knowledge of the target language, rather than by the lack of efficient reading strategies or vice versa?

Previous research - extensively documented in Alderson's paper - did not provide a clear-cut answer to the question. Two distinct positions are presented in the literature on the problem:

- a) the claim made by Jolly (1978) and Coady (1979) who consider the reading ability in L2 to be the decisive factor in successful FL reading;
- b) the view advocated by Yorio (1971) who ascribes poor reading ability in the FL mainly to the inadequate knowledge of the target language.

Since the positions presented are not based on sufficient empirical evidence, Alderson justly claims the need for empirical data which would provide answers to the questions if successful reading is determined mainly by the reader's language proficiency or rather by the efficient use of reading strategies.

Accepting Clarke's (1979) position that a "threshold level" of linguistic competence is required before the issue of the use of reading strategies arises, we would like to focus on the problem of reading strategies. The assumption that successful reading depends on the use of efficient reading strategies leads to the following hypothetical situations:

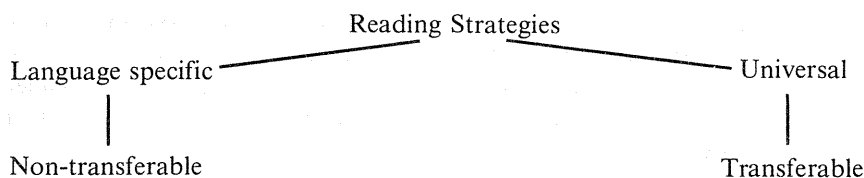
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1. Reading strategies are language specific; thus the strategies for reading in the FL are different from the strategies for reading L1 (see Alderson's hypothesis 1b). In this case reading ability in L1 is probably irrelevant to FL reading.
2. Reading strategies are universal (cf Goodman 1973). In this case poor FL reading may be due to the fact that either:
 - a) the reader has not developed any efficient L1 reading strategies
or
 - b) reading strategies developed by the reader in his L1 are not employed in his FL reading. (See Alderson's hypothesis 2b)

This brings us to the question of transfer of reading strategies across languages.

The hypothetical situations presented above can be summarized by the following diagram:



If there is a transfer of reading strategies across languages, a good L1 reader presumably transfers these reading strategies to the FL reading. A poor reader will, in contrast, be a poor FL reader, who either has no strategies to transfer or is not able to transfer them.

Instruction in L1 reading strategies would in this case result in improved L1 and FL reading. The question then arises if we can expect a transfer of reading strategies only from L1 to FL or if the direction of transfer across languages is of no practical relevance. In other words, can efficient strategies be transferred back from FL to L1?

Can reading be improved through instruction of reading skills and strategies in either of the two languages, L1 or FL?

The present study is an attempt to provide empirical evidence for the questions raised above. It differs in a number of aspects, from previous research.

1. In most of the studies carried out in the past, the subjects were balanced bilinguals. Thus, in Barik and Swain's Canadian study (1975), the subjects were children of English-speaking parents taught in French immersion programmes, where the language of instruction was L2 (French); Lapkins and Swain (1977) found evidence of transfer of reading abilities from L2 to L1 on the basis of studying the use of English and French Cloze tests in a bilingual education programme.

The subjects in our study were speakers of Hebrew studying English as a foreign language.

2. In the previous studies, the languages concerned were relatively similar in their structure: e.g. English and French.

The need for empirical evidence based on structurally different languages became self-evident in view of some researchers' claim that strategies employed by the reader in his processing of a text are language specific. Consider e.g. Cowan's claim (1976) that the structural characteristics of L1 and L2 should be considered if one wants to understand the nature of reading and the manner in which strategies operate in different languages. His position would lead to the conclusion that the bigger the linguistic distance between languages, the less likely one is to read the first language the same way as the FL, and therefore it is less likely that there is a transfer of strategies across these languages.

Our study investigated the possibility of transfer of reading strategies between languages that are markedly different in their structure: English and Hebrew.

3. In the previous investigations the emphasis was on the possibility of transfer of reading strategies from L2 to L1. Our study dealt with a so-called "back-transfer", i.e. the possibility of transfer of reading strategies acquired in FL to reading in L1.

It was of great interest to find out if the direction of transfer is of any significance.

In order to obtain meaningful data on the problem of transfer of reading strategies across languages, it was important (as rightly noted by Alderson), to focus on the process of reading - comprehending - rather than on the product of reading - comprehension. Out of a number of existing techniques aimed at providing insight into how the reader has arrived at his interpretation of the text (e.g. Hosenfeld's (1977) "think aloud technique", Hatch's (1973) letter-crossing technique, Clarke's miscue analysis), we decided to employ the technique of the subjects' verbal reports as a source of information about their processing of the text (cf Cohen 1984).

Taking into consideration Seliger's (1983) cautious attitude to verbal reports, we would like to point out that in our experiment verbal reports were used as a tool for gathering information on the reading strategies which helped the students carry out the reading task. It should also be stressed that the metalanguage for the description of reading strategies was provided to students in English, while the verbal reports were given in the students' MT (L1).

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects of the present research were two groups of first year University students. 59 of the students who took the Advanced English course in reading comprehension constituted the Study Group. The Control Group consisted of 17 students who were placed in the same Advanced English course - on the basis of the compulsory placement test taken upon admission to the University - and who postponed their EFL studies for personal or technical reasons.

Both groups included humanities and social science students. Thus, the study group was comparable to the control group on the parameters of

- a) FL ability;
- b) subject mix.

Procedure

During the first week of the University term a test in L1 (Hebrew) reading (Test I) was administered to both groups of students. The author and the topic of the Hebrew text were familiar to the subjects from their high school studies. Since the text was meant to be in the subjects' main language, it was essential that the text to be read should not be too easy; this accounts for the choice of an author whose writings are known for their complexity of style and sophisticated development of ideas.

The text was followed by 14 comprehension questions aimed at testing those skills and strategies that were taught in the EFL reading comprehension course. After each comprehension question, the students found a request asking them to try and point out what led them to answer in the way they did, what served them within the text as a directive guide in answering each of the comprehension questions. The purpose of these request-type questions was to induce the reader into an immediate retrospection which in the course of the test probably cumulatively developed into a self-observation process. The questions were kept open so as to provide no guidance towards or biasing in favour of preconceived or expected strategies.

The study group was then exposed to a ten-week, four hours per week, instruction in reading skills as part of the syllabus of the English reading comprehension course (Levine and Statman 1983). The reading course provided training in the integrative use of linguistic and rhetorical skills as techniques for text interpretation. It consisted of intensive instruction in the following reading skills and strategies:

1. Recognition of syntactic and discourse markers and their use as clues of logical relationships within the text.
2. Recognition of logical relationships of comparison and contrast, cause and effect.
3. Distinction between general statements and illustrative support.
4. Use of the strategies of prediction, skimming, scanning, drawing of inferences and making generalizations.

Each reading skill was presented in a fully-developed unit which included the introduction of the skill, the exercising of the skill and its application to short reading passages. This ensured student mastery of the skill before his confrontation with authentic academic reading. The reading passages studied in the reading course were related to the students' field of specialization. The control group was not exposed to any formal instruction in reading strategies during that period.

At the end of the ten weeks both the study and the control group were again given a test in Hebrew. Care was taken to provide a test which would be equal in length and difficulty to Test I. Thus, both Test I and Test II were administered to an independent group of students in alternating order. It was found that the results were similar within the same amount of testing time; the combined mean scores on the two tests were: Test I - 17.4. S.D. 2.06; Test II - 16.8. S.D. 1.89.

The purpose of this procedure, administering two L1 reading tests of equal length, level of difficulty and structure to the study group before and after the EFL instruction period and to the control group which was not exposed to any formal instruction between the two tests, seems to be obvious. The intention was to see if there was any improvement in the reading comprehension and/or in the efficient use of strategies in the L1 between the two tests. The assumption was that if the second test showed considerable improvement in both aspects, comprehension and use of strategies in the study group but not in the control group, it could be hypothesized that it was the effect of EFL instruction input which was transferred to the reading in the L1. If, on the other hand, the results were similar for both groups of students, i.e. if both groups showed (or did not show) improvement in the reading comprehension it could be assumed that the instruction given to the study group in the EFL course was irrelevant to the reading in L1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Test I and Test II were scored by independent raters.

The answers to comprehension questions were scored as "right" or "wrong" while the strategies were categorized and grouped according to their content. Thus, if the response indicated an uncritical re-reading of the whole paragraph where the comprehension question referred to a specific point in it, the strategy was marked as inefficient. Reference to discourse or syntactic clues found in the text were considered efficient strategies.

Data regarding the scores on the comprehension questions are summarized in Table I.

Table I Comprehension Question Scores

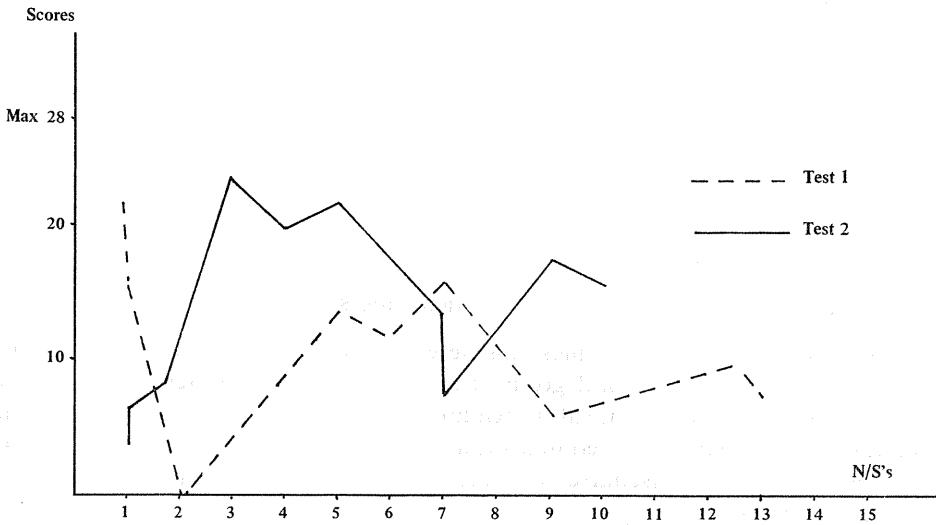
	N	TEST I		TEST II	
		\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.
Experimental	59	10.52	4.04	15.19	3.01
Control	17	10.13	3.76	10.75	2.92

It can be seen that both groups of students performed better on Test II than on Test I. The improvement, however, is far greater in the study group than in the control group: while the difference between the mean scores of the two tests in the study group is 4.67, an improvement of over 40%, the difference between the two tests in the control group is only .62, an improvement of about 6%.

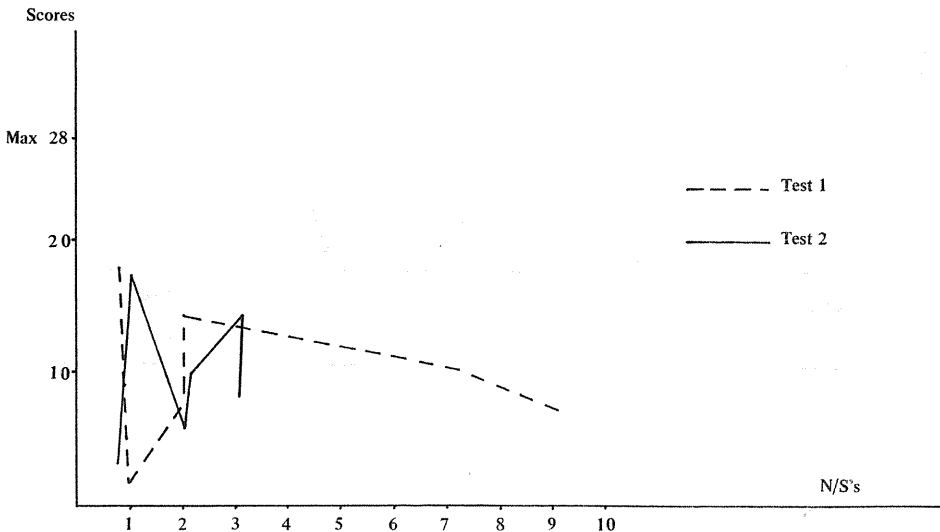
There were noticeable differences between the two groups in the range of scores in Test I and Test II. The results are presented in Figure I.

Fig. 1

A. Range of Scores (Study Group: Test I and Test II)



B. Range of Scores (Control Group: Test I and Test II)



It can be seen that more students in the study group achieved higher scores in Test II, than in Test I. It should be noted, however, that in the control group too, fewer students got low grades in Test II than in Test I. The improvement found in the control group may be ascribed to the ten weeks which the subjects spent taking various courses at the University. They were probably exposed to the reading of specialized material which could have brought about some practice and progress in the skill of reading. The dramatic improvement witnessed in the study group, on the other hand, suggests that besides the same experience in reading accumulated in their specialized studies, the subjects of the study group benefited from the intensive instruction in FL reading to which they were exposed in the course of the ten weeks between the two tests. Testing for statistical significance was considered inappropriate since the groups were not selected randomly.

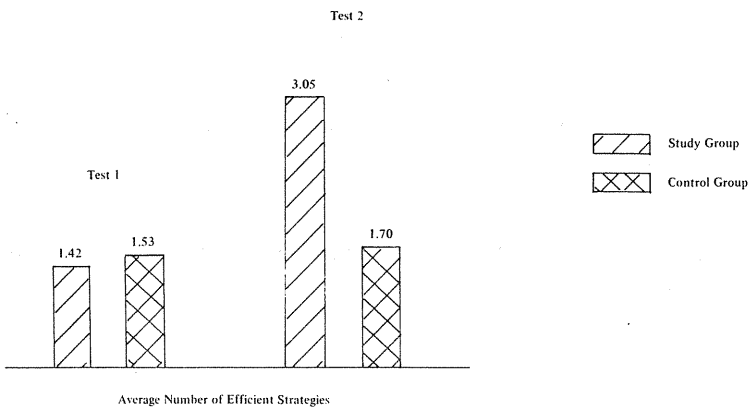
Data regarding the strategies used for comprehending the test - as reported by the subjects - are displayed in Table II.

Table 2 Strategies Used

		Number of Strategies Used	Number of Efficient Strategies	Total Number of Types of Strategies
		\bar{X}	\bar{X}	
Experimental	Test I	2.75	1.42	8
	Test II	4.51	3.05	12
Control	Test I	1.43	1.53	5
	Test II	1.56	1.70	7

It can be seen that in the case of the experimental group, both the number of strategies reported by the subjects and the number of strategies considered efficient increased in Test II to a much greater extent than in that of the control group. The differences between the two groups are clearly seen in Figure II.

Fig. 2 Average Number of Efficient Strategies



Since one of the objectives of the study was to get immediate, first hand information about the process of "comprehending" (not only of the product of "comprehension"), it seems to be of particular interest to examine the differences between the two groups, the experimental and the control group, in terms of their use of various reading strategies.

"Better learners" of languages have been found to employ more strategies in oral communication than less successful learners (Reves 1982). This seems to be the case for reading strategies too; while there is a noticeable difference between the number of strategies used in Test II by those subjects who between the two tests were taught various skills and strategies usefully applicable to reading, in the control group there was hardly any difference between the two tests in this respect. This may lead to the conclusion that readers who received instruction in reading strategies in the FL and are liable to apply them in the L1 reading task too, will eventually develop better reading habits altogether and thus become "better readers".

A similar pattern emerges from the analysis of the types of strategies used in reading. In the course of the ten-week study period the experimental group succeeded on the whole in developing a wider range of reading strategies, than did the control group in the same period of time. It seems obvious that a group which had been tutored in reading skills and strategies would perform better on a reading test than a group of students that had not been systematically instructed in these skills (Rubin 1981). What should be noted, however, is the fact that the instruction was provided in the FL, as part of the FL course, and not in the L1, which was the language of the test. What we are witnessing here, therefore, is not a simple application of material taught in class, but a transfer of reading strategies beyond the barrier of the language in which they had been taught. It should be noted, in addition, that we witness here a transfer of strategies from FL to L1 and not just from L1 to L2 (or FL) as illustrated in the literature.

The types of strategies applied by the readers in Test II were also of higher rank in terms of their quality and sophistication. While in the first test most strategies were of the simplest kind, e.g. copying quotations from the text, referring to printed cues in the text, the strategies used in the second text reflected a greater awareness of cohesion and coherence devices, e.g. discourse and reference markers, comparison/contrast relationships, inference cues.

c.f. Student A's answers in Test I and II, respectively:

Test I - Question:

"Why is the writer surprised by the fact that Agnon is still considered a religious writer in the orthodox sense of the word?"

Correct Answer:

"Because in his previous studies he brought undeniable evidence to the fact that in his view Agnon was a secular writer."

Student A reported the following strategy:

“I read the whole text over and over to find the answer”.

A more efficient strategy would have been the use of the connective “lamroth” (“in spite of”) and of the reference marker “hako!” (“all that”). They point to the previous sentence, which contains the answer.

Test II - Question:

“In what way is a modern educator different from an educator of previous generations?”

Correct answer:

“Educators of previous generations were expected to possess full authority while the authority of modern educators is of a more limited character.”

Student A’s reported strategy was:

“The words “Ee hatama bein...” (“incongruity between”) helped me to locate the sentence describing the difference.”

This description of the strategy points to the skill of using contextual clues. In this case the student found a comparison/contrast relationship with the help of a key word.

Additional support for the noticeable improvement in Test I comes from the number of efficient strategies used by the subjects; twice as many efficient strategies were used in Test II in the experimental group, while in the control group the difference between the two tests was 0.17.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The question posed at the outset of the present study was whether there is a transfer of reading skills and strategies across languages.

The findings of the study suggest the following conclusions:

1. The significant improvement - both quantitative and qualitative - in L1 reading after a period of exposure to formal instruction in FL reading skills and strategies points to the possibility of transfer of these skills and strategies from one language to another.
2. The linguistic distance between the language of testing (Hebrew) and the language of instruction (English) highlights the possibility of transfer of skills and strategies. The structural difference between the languages does not seem to hinder the transfer.
3. The direction of transfer appears to be of no relevance. The results of the present study - strategies acquired in FL were transferred to L1 - are in accordance with those of previous studies which suggested the transferability of reading skills and strategies from L1 to L2.

Some practical implications for teaching reading can be derived from the present study:

1. Reading in the L1 can apparently be improved by systematic instruction in reading skills and strategies in a second language. The results suggest the possibility of teaching the skills of reading in the FL, which is instructed only in formal classroom situations, just as well as in the L1, which the learner is constantly exposed to.
2. It seems, however, to be obvious that some policy decision should be made, according to which the instruction of reading skills and strategies should take place in L1 reading courses, whereas the FL instruction should concentrate on language proficiency, i.e. on spoken and written communication in the FL, an important aspect of which may then be a reinforcement in FL reading.

The findings of the present study would certainly justify further research based on a larger and randomly selected population.

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