

NNS Readers' Strategies for Inferring the Meanings of Unknown Words

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This article compares the strategies used to infer the meanings of unknown words by three NNS readers – a 'good' reader, an 'average reader' and a 'poor' reader – from a series of six readings. Information about the readers comes not only from their answers but from a series of questionnaires. The writer concludes that the good reader uses a wider range of strategies than the weaker ones, and that all readers, strong or weak, tend to 'read in' meanings from their own specialized subject (in this case chemistry).

INTRODUCTION

This article is concerned with the strategies nonnative-speaker students of English use to infer the meanings of unknown words they find in their reading in English, and asks whether there are differences in the strategies used by successful and unsuccessful readers.

In trying to discover the strategies students use one cannot rely solely on students' reports of their strategies. As Vann and Abraham write:

..... these descriptions of the "good" language learner have in most cases been based on teacher/researcher observations and learners' generalized (often retrospective) reports. In some recent studies interviews with learners have generated statements such as "I look up words I don't know" In others questionnaires on strategies and learning behaviours have been used. Little subsequent research has attempted to confirm how strategies are utilized as learners engage in actual tasks (1990: 178).

Porte (1988) also found that some poor learners expressed a belief that their teachers would "either not approve of, or not be interested in, their strategy" (1988: 169); and that they had often transferred strategies (such as writing out word lists) used and approved of in their schools, but which were, for one reason or another, inappropriate in the new learning situation. Faced with different demands from the teacher, students continued to use these old strategies, but clandestinely.

We should therefore have some scepticism towards students' reports of their strategies. Fearing disapproval, they may hide their real strategies and pretend that they use strategies which they know their present teacher approves of.

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