Meiko: Case Study of a Second Language Reader

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This article presents a detailed description of the observable reading behaviour of an ESL learner exposed to a programme of strategy instruction. Verbal data obtained from the learner during the reading sessions are supplemented by the learner's answers to a questionnaire on reading strategies and by the learner's responses in a series of interviews focused on her reaction to the instructional programme. It is argued that teachers must first know what strategies their learners are using before they can suggest alternative approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Learners' strategies have been the focus of a series of recent investigations in language learning. However there is some debate as to the meaning of the term "strategies". In a recent paper aimed at addressing the terminological problem, Stevick (1990) identified three major meanings:

S1: what learners actually do
S2: what learners know about what they do (also called "metacognition")
S3: what learners know about relevant matters other than S1.

This article focuses initially on S1 by reporting on the observable reading behaviour of one ESL student exposed to a programme of strategy instruction. The intervention provided the researcher with a certain amount of verbal data from the learner, which illuminated aspects of her approach to L2 written text, as well as the interaction between the instruction programme and her natural reading style. However, the learner in question had limited spoken skills in English and it was considered that this would affect and possibly distort her display of L2 reading skills. Accordingly, a process of triangulation was adopted to overcome this potential weakness, so that data on her reading performance was obtained from transcripts and videotapes of reading sessions (S1), the learner's answers to a written questionnaire on reading strategies (S2) and a series of interviews focused on the learner's reaction to the instructional programme.

The discussion is presented here with a twofold purpose: firstly, it is the writer's intention to emphasise the importance of knowing what strategies a student is actually using, and secondly to describe an intervention which allows teachers to observe their students' strategies as they use them. While it is clearly not possible to generalise on the basis of the behaviour of one student, it will be argued that the

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insight gained from intensive observation of one student is likely to enhance the teacher’s sensitivity to other learners’ difficulties with text. Recent research by Vann and Abraham (1990:177) provides evidence of the importance of case studies in verifying critical assumptions about second language learning. Close scrutiny of the context in which individual learners adopt particular strategies and more fine-grained descriptions of actual strategy use may result in greater success in strategy training.

THE CONTEXT FOR DATA GATHERING

The data referred to in this paper was collected over a period of twenty consecutive teaching days during sessions where a group of four learners read expository texts according to a procedure entitled “reciprocal teaching” (Palincsar and Brown, 1984). The sessions lasted for approximately 45 minutes each day. The subjects were four adult learners selected from a class working at the upper-intermediate level of an English for Academic Purposes course.¹ The four learners included two females (Japanese and Malaysian Chinese) and two males (Iranian and Austrian). All the learners were in their mid-twenties. Two higher and two lower proficiency learners were selected in order to examine the effects of strategy instruction on both more and less proficient L2 readers. Each day the discussion generated during the reciprocal teaching sessions was audio and video-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

A Case Study Approach

A case study approach to the data was adopted because it was believed that detailed study of individual characteristics would shed light on some of the significant variables in L2 reading behaviour. It is the writer’s strong conviction that completing one such study will yield insights into the L2 reading process which are likely to inform and enhance the teacher’s subsequent practice in the teaching of reading to all her learners.

Meiko

Meiko² (the Japanese student) and Hasan (the Iranian student) were selected for case study treatment on account of their being the two less proficient readers in the group. Reading strategy training programmes have been found to be particularly successful with poorer readers (Baker and Brown, 1984). This suggested that observation of the behaviour of the two less proficient readers might yield greater insights, since the two more proficient readers might already have some of the target strategies within their repertoire.
A profile of Meiko is built up here in order to indicate the kind and quantity of data available to the teacher adopting an intervention of this kind. (For a profile of Hasan, see Cotterall, 1990a.) Meiko was a 21 year old female Japanese student with no previous experience of study in an English-speaking country. She had arrived in New Zealand one week prior to the commencement of the English Proficiency Course. She was a reserved student and was usually reluctant to speak in class. Meiko had a good grammatical knowledge of English when she began the course, and was able to construct simple but accurate English sentences. Her spoken English, however, was far from fluent. Her weakest skills were her listening and speaking skills. Meiko's performance on vocabulary, reading and other placement tests situated her in the third quartile of ability in her class of 20 peers in an upper-intermediate grouping on the English Proficiency Course.

Meiko was a conscientious participant in the interactive reading programme. Although she contributed the lowest numbers of turns each day (approximately ten percent of the total number of turns), the videotapes record a high level of interest in the discussion on her part, despite a low level of verbal contribution. In order to build up a picture of Meiko's reading performance, her behaviour with each of the four strategies used in reciprocal teaching will be considered. First, however, the teaching intervention will be described.

**Reciprocal Teaching**

Reciprocal teaching first appeared in the literature in 1984 when Palincsar and Brown described an intervention they had used with children experiencing difficulty reading in their first language. Reciprocal teaching focuses readers' attention on the active strategies they can use in order to both monitor and promote comprehension. Strategy research suggests that less competent readers are able to improve their skills through training in strategies displayed by more successful readers (Carrell, 1989). Reciprocal teaching involves training and practice in the use of four strategies – clarifying, identifying the main idea, summarising and predicting. A typical reciprocal teaching session includes the following method steps:

1. The teacher distributes the day's reading text.
2. The learners and the teacher look at the title only of the reading passage and make predictions about the likely content of the passage based on the title.
3. The group silently read the first paragraph of the passage.
4. One member of the group acts as discussion leader for that paragraph by leading the group through the subsequent steps.
5. The leader seeks or provides clarification of any difficulties experienced in that section of the text.
6. The leader locates and states the main idea of that paragraph.
7. The leader summarises the content of that paragraph.
8. The leader predicts the likely content of the following paragraph. (The discussion leader is encouraged to seek feedback on each of the four steps, so that the activities take place within as natural a dialogue as possible.)
9. The current discussion leader nominates another student to lead discussion of the following paragraph in the same way.

This procedure continues until the group members have finished reading the text.

Reciprocal teaching combines four crucial features: metacognitive awareness, modelling of strategy use, scaffolded instruction and overt monitoring of comprehension. Each of these features is briefly discussed below.

a. **Metacognitive Awareness**

Brown, Armbruster and Baker (1986:49) have argued that “metacognition plays a vital role in reading”. The term “metacognition” refers to one’s understanding of any cognitive process. In the context of reading it is usually understood as firstly knowledge of strategies for understanding written texts, and secondly control of those strategies. Reciprocal teaching seeks to raise to awareness learners’ understanding of reading strategies by means of a discussion of learners’ behaviour and actions while reading. Metacognitive control is promoted by prompting learners to reflect on successful strategies employed to solve particular problems, in order to be able to employ these strategies independently in the future.

b. **Modelling of Strategy Use**

Reciprocal teaching is an instructional procedure which aims to guide students through a process of initial observation of strategy use, then acquisition and practice of those strategies and finally independent application. It achieves this by initially having the teacher model the four strategies as the group read and discuss together a given text. In large classes, the teacher usually assumes the role of leader for the whole of the session in which the procedure is introduced, and for the first part (namely, for the discussion of the first paragraph) of subsequent sessions. This gives participants numerous opportunities to, for example, seek clarification of particular terms or concepts, ask how the teacher “knew” where to find the main idea, query why a detail was omitted from the summary and other similar activities. This is valuable preparation for the time when the students will each in turn assume the role of discussion leader.

In reciprocal teaching, strategy instruction is not detached from the learning context, but is embedded in it. The instruction is rooted in an interactive dialogue concerning the meaning of particular texts. Students participate in a discussion which mirrors the invisible processes of proficient readers interacting with text.
The four strategies chosen for inclusion in the strategy training programme were prediction, clarification, identification of the main idea and summarisation. They were selected because it was hypothesised that they would improve understanding of text (Levin & Pressley, 1981; Baker and Brown, 1984), and would also induce learners to monitor their comprehension.

**Predicting** provides learners with the opportunity to activate relevant background knowledge or schemata and to set a purpose for their reading, namely, to check the accuracy of their prediction. Research conducted by Carrell (1984a, 1984b) has indicated that readers’ formal schemata, or background knowledge about text structure, affect reading comprehension. Second language readers often bring quite different formal schemata to the reading of text. Making these expectations or mismatches explicit is seen as a means of promoting greater comprehension of text and greater control of the reading process. Practice in predicting also alerts learners to the clues that titles, headings and subheadings provide about the likely development of ideas through a text.

Explicit training in **clarification** is a critical component of reciprocal teaching. Routinely seeking clarification of difficult sections of text is seen as a prerequisite to building an understanding of the complete text. Poor comprehenders’ failure to critically evaluate text has been well documented (Markman, 1977, 1979; Harris, Kruithof, Terwogt and Visser, 1981). This strategy aims to equip learners with an understanding of why comprehension can break down, and how it can be restored. Students are encouraged to identify causes of comprehension difficulty. These might include, for example, difficult vocabulary, unclear reference items, unfamiliar content or poorly organised text. They then receive instruction in appropriate strategies for restoring understanding, such as re-reading, reading on, using context or asking for help. This instruction is embedded in the activity of reading text, so that instances of students’ misunderstanding of the text provide the opportunity to adopt appropriate “repair” strategies. The aim of training in clarification is to facilitate readers’ monitoring of their comprehension so that when they experience comprehension problems, they can attempt to identify the source of the problem and take appropriate steps to restore meaning.

The third strategy in Palincsar and Brown’s intervention was question-generation. In the present study, the question-generating strategy was replaced with a requirement that learners **identify the main idea of a paragraph of text**. The rationale for inclusion of question-generation in Palincsar and Brown’s procedure was that, in order to use this strategy students must first identify some key information in the text. Then they would formulate a question seeking that information as response. They hypothesised that this would test the reader’s understanding and recall. A pilot
study with ESL learners, however, had found that the linguistic difficulty involved in formulating a question aimed at probing content tended to result in learners becoming distracted from the task of identifying key information in the paragraph. Accordingly the procedure was modified in the present study to enable learners to focus instead on the identification and statement of the main idea of the paragraph. This step provided valuable practice in distinguishing main idea from detail.

The final strategy was summarisation. Self-directed summarisation has been shown to be an excellent comprehension-monitoring technique (Linden and Wittrick, 1981; Brown and Day, 1983; Brown, Day and Jones, 1983). Monitoring one's progress while reading, to test if one can pinpoint and retain important material, provides a check that comprehension is progressing smoothly. If readers cannot produce an adequate summary of what they are reading, this signals that comprehension is not progressing smoothly. The diagnostic information provided by inappropriate learner summaries is often revealing for teachers. Learners' summaries differed from their main idea statements in length and coverage. Whereas the identification of one main idea per paragraph sought to enable learners to construct a picture of the overall pattern of text organisation, in their summaries learners were encouraged to incorporate all the information contained in the paragraph, but to use strategies such as substituting superordinates for lists of similar items to achieve conciseness.

c. Scaffolding Instruction

The instructional procedure designed by Palinscar and Brown was designed to replicate the main features of expert scaffolding. Scaffolding has been described by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976:90) as a "process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts". Expert scaffolding is a natural teaching style whereby an expert (teacher) reduces the amount of assistance she provides. Learners are required to participate at a more challenging level and to assume greater responsibility for the procedure. In large classes implementing the transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the learners is made more demanding by the necessity of monitoring the performance of many groups of students simultaneously.

In the small-group setting investigated in the present study, the teacher played a dominant role for the first week of training. At first he was principally concerned with modelling the strategies, raising awareness of the usefulness of the various strategies and providing information on the application of strategies to the texts under discussion, as well as assisting the learners with their efforts to acquire the skills. As the study progressed, however, provision of feedback on the learners' application of the strategies and requests for clarification of difficult words or ideas
became the principal focus of the teacher’s contributions. A pattern established itself after the first day in which the teacher acted as leader for the first paragraph of the day’s text, and each of the four learners assumed the role of leader for one of the subsequent paragraphs.

d. Overt Monitoring of Comprehension

Reciprocal teaching enables the participants to detect and rectify shortcomings in their comprehension of text almost as soon as they occur. Too often poor readers miscomprehend sections of text only to have their “failure” detected ignominiously at the end of the lesson in front of the whole class. Reciprocal teaching, on the other hand, allows breakdowns in understanding to be dealt with promptly, by making them central to the discussion.

Why Reciprocal Teaching?3

Reciprocal teaching is a convenient vehicle for observing learners’ reading behaviour in that it exposes the reading process to scrutiny. It permits consideration of the roles played by variables such as background knowledge, vocabulary size and syntactic proficiency in a learner’s ability to read text with understanding. It highlights a learner’s strengths and weaknesses, enabling a teacher to subsequently design a reading programme which is finely-tuned to the individual’s needs. Furthermore, in light of recent research in learning strategies, we can confidently assert both that strategic approaches to learning are likely to enhance learners’ ability to learn, and that learners can be taught to use strategies (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990:225).

As a means of investigating individual learners’ reading behaviour, reciprocal teaching essentially functions by externalising problems. Other methods of eliciting data on the reading process such as, for example, think-aloud decoding, are likely to be distracting to the L2 reader because of the dual focus they imply. Readers are required first to concentrate on the text and secondly to reflect on the process itself. While some researchers (Hosenfeld, 1979) have explored this method with informants whose first language they share, requiring informants to self-report in the L2 was deemed, in the present study, to constitute an unreasonable burden.

Let us now examine Meiko’s reading behaviour during the reciprocal teaching sessions.

MEIKO’S OBSERVABLE READING BEHAVIOUR

a. Clarifying Behaviour

Throughout the study almost all of Meiko’s requests for clarification related to discrete words. This was in contrast to other participants who sought clarification on items of assumed background knowledge, a range of textual conventions or on large chunks of text whose meaning was obscure for them. In examining the responses she
received to her requests, it is clear that Meiko tended to be satisfied with synonyms and regularly sought one-to-one correspondences between target English words and either familiar English words or Japanese words. This observation was reinforced by subsequent observations of Meiko making entries in a vocabulary notebook which consisted of lists of target English words accompanied by one-word Japanese translations. There was no accompanying contextual information, nor was there a sample sentence illustrating use of the word.

Meiko initiated more requests for clarification than she responded to. Despite her natural reserve, she was not reluctant to ask for help. She generally did so, however, in a somewhat formulaic manner, asking –

M: What does it mean X?

Once she had received a response to her request, Meiko generally seemed satisfied, or at least pursued the discussion no further. When responding to others’ requests for clarification, Meiko’s tendency was to supply either a synonym or a word belonging to the same word family as the target word. The limitations of this kind of strategy rapidly become obvious when the transcripts are inspected.

H: What’s the meaning of “mysterious”?
T: Anyone know “mysterious” – line 34?
M: Mystery.
T: That’s right, so it means – ? Mysterious, mystery?
M: Strange.
T: Like that, unknown, secret ..... 

Without the teacher’s intervention Meiko’s contribution might have passed unnoticed since neither the noun “mystery” nor the synonym “strange” appeared to provide an immediate clue to meaning for the other student. In contrast to Meiko’s one-word contributions, other learners’ attempts at providing clarification were characterised by a greater degree of interaction which focused on checking whether comprehension had resulted or not.

b. Main Idea Strategy

Few of Meiko’s main idea statements were modified by other participants, but when a student did suggest a modification, it was not always easy to interpret Meiko’s reaction, as the following example illustrates:

M: Nobel’s main concern, and the reason for the Nobel Prize.
F: No, I think that the main idea of this article is that uh Nobel was a very idealistic man. He did not ah think too much about himself, I think. Do you think so too?
M: Mmm, hm.
In such cases, Meiko’s response was inconclusive and problematic. One would expect further interaction and debate concerning the justification for each of the proposed main idea statements, but the effect of Meiko’s minimal response here — “Mmm, hm” — was to terminate the discussion, leaving the observer unsure as to how she had interpreted the feedback. She may not have understood the meaning of the other student’s modification, or she may not have perceived it as conflicting with her original statement. What is clear is that she failed to avail herself of the opportunity to justify her statement. This may suggest that she was not sure she had it right, or that she was not sufficiently confident of her oral skills to debate the issue.

However on other occasions Meiko’s contribution clearly benefited from the input of other participants, as in the following example:

M: I think main idea is two types of the whale.
F: Mmm, hm.
K: Are there two types?
M: Ah, no, not two types. Two groups.
F: Two.
M: Two main groups, main groups. The toothed and the toothless (laughs). Did I say that right?

In formulating her main idea statement, Meiko depended heavily on the original text. Her strategy appeared to be to search for a topic sentence and to minimally alter that sentence transforming it into a main idea statement. For example, on day five, Meiko’s main idea statement for the fifth paragraph was:

M: Main idea is lack of food.

The first sentence in the text was:

The most urgent problem created by the rapid increase in population is a shortage of food.

Meiko also occasionally contributed to others’ main idea statements, and sometimes provided valuable additions. For example, on day 13 she made an interesting modification to the teacher’s main idea statement:

T: Well – main idea ..... Um, I think it’s um, the main idea is about the increasing consumption of energy, and – anything to add to that?
M: I think line 6 – “The problem lies in the fact ”
T: Oh yeah.
M: “ – sources are finite.”
T: You see that as the most important sentence? Yeah, I think that’s right .....
Here Meiko’s search for “signposts” to the main idea had revealed the phrase “The problem lies in the fact that ....”. In seeking to locate the main idea, Meiko appeared to believe that it existed somewhere in the text in a quotable form, and that her job was therefore simply to locate the relevant phrase of sentence in the paragraph. Consequently she always paid considerable attention to signpost phrases such as “The chief problem, however ...” or “But it is important to remember ...”. In general, this strategy was rewarded with success in accurate identification of the main idea, and therefore became a regular feature of her reading behaviour.

Another preferred strategy of Meiko’s was to circle “but” and “however” whenever they occurred in a text. She did this following comments by the teacher that these two discourse markers generally signalled the introduction of some important information. Her main idea statement on day three for paragraph two is a clear example of this. The final sentence of the paragraph read:

But animals in a large part of the northern hemisphere spend every winter fast asleep.

Meiko’s main idea statement was a thinly disguised paraphrase of that sentence:

M: In large part of the northern hemisphere animals spend every winter fast asleep.
T: OK, you picked the right place. What was your clue?
M: Pardon?
T: What was your information that that was an important – probably the main idea? ....
M: (Pointing to the text) “But”.
T: Yeah, you’re right. It begins with “But”, and so if that, if that “But” connects all of the, all of the first part with the last part, it means the last part is more important. Good.

Meiko’s interaction with the teacher confirms the deliberate nature of her strategy. Her adoption of this strategy almost certainly resulted from the strategy training programme. First she saw it modelled, then she experimented with it herself, and experiencing success with it – she adopted it as a regular component of her reading behaviour.

c. Summarising Behaviour

In most cases, Meiko constructed her summaries by proposing an initial statement, after which (often because of her extremely slow rate of delivery) other participants would either encourage her to provide more information or would contribute what they considered she had overlooked, as in the following example:
M: Summarise – toothed mm toothed whales are whales who have tooth, um are include dolphin, porpoise, killer and sperm whales, and oh toothless whales are include um the shape of toothless whales grey and humpback, right and blue whales.

(Pause)

F: But I think you also want to say that ah the the toothed whales eat large animals like like killer sperm whales and humpback or blue whales – they eat large animals –

In such situations Meiko seldom responded verbally to the suggestion but generally seemed satisfied that the addition resulted in improving the quality of the final summary.

As with her main idea statements, Meiko relied very heavily on the original wording of the text when constructing her summaries. Her strategy in constructing a summary appeared to be to identify a kind of topic sentence, usually the one she proposed as main idea for that paragraph, re-state it, and add some detail. This strategy functioned reasonably efficiently, given that the main idea of the paragraph is likely to be an important component of the paragraph summary in most cases. In order to examine more closely the relationship between her main idea statement and her summary for a given paragraph, let’s look at a typical example. On day 16, when reading a text about Uri Geller, Meiko produced the following main idea statement:

M: Main idea is test of telepathy, about test of telepathy.

Her summary of the same paragraph was as follows:

M: Summarise – at first Uri test five test from telepathy and he could correct. After that .... after that he tried to do another thing and he move copper ring, and scientists were very surprised!

This summary could be characterised as an expansion of the main idea she had previously identified and stated.

In the weekly interviews Meiko repeatedly reported that the summarising strategy was the most difficult for her. In addition, when asked what she did not like about playing the role of the teacher, she reported “Summary”. She then explained that the main idea strategy was the easiest for her because “I need not to describe long.” This suggests that one of Meiko’s difficulties with the summarising strategy was the construction of the sentences. Her heavy dependence on the original text was a nice strategy for overcoming this problem.
d. Predicting Behaviour

Meiko appeared reluctant to make a prediction unless it was her turn to assume the role of teacher, and seldom contributed a prediction when another participant was leading the discussion unless prompted or directly invited to do so. Predictions were classified into three categories in the study. Text-based predictions are defined as predictions organised around a hint or clue explicitly mentioned in the original text which usually specify the content of the following paragraph to some extent. Top-down predictions indicate application of background knowledge, and rely less on suggestions presented in the text. The final category incorporates predictions which reflect sensitivity to text organisation. They seem to proceed from an assessment of what kind of information has already been presented in the text, and a characterisation of what information still remains to be presented.

Meiko exhibited a strong preference for one type of prediction – those classified as text-based predictions. Of her 21 predictions, 14 (66 percent) were text-based, three (14 percent) were classified as top-down predictions and four (19 percent) were classified as predictions demonstrating some sensitivity to text organisation and structure. Analysis of Meiko’s text-based predictions suggests that she appeared to inspect the text for explicit clues to new topics likely to be elaborated in subsequent paragraphs of text, often finding such “clues” in either the first or last lines of the paragraph under discussion. All these predictions depended on the use of words or phrases from the original text for their formulation. For example, on day three Meiko’s prediction was:

M: More detail about “secret store”.

The final sentence of the preceding paragraph was as follows:

To keep the milk supply going, the she-bear eats the food from her secret stores.

Meiko’s text-based predictions were often formulated according to the following pattern – “More detail about X”. However, Meiko also produced four (19%) predictions classified as “text-sensitive”. An example of this occurred on day twenty when the group were reading a text about the Fur Trade. At the end of the introductory paragraph, Meiko predicted that the text would develop by discussing:

M: After 1889, where they go and what they –

Analysis of the context reveals that Meiko had (correctly) interpreted the function of the first paragraph as a review of the situation until the date mentioned. Her prediction, therefore, was that the text would develop chronologically by describing the next step in the story.
PROFILE OF MEIKO

The profile obtained from detailed observation of this ESL learner is one of a careful reader who is heavily dependent on bottom-up techniques of processing the text and who, while exhibiting a low tolerance of unknown words, is not afraid to ask questions. It is hardly surprising to identify a "bottom-up" approach to text in a learner with limited experience of decoding L2 text, and limited resources for doing so. The lexical items represent her principal resources in constructing the meaning of the text. Unlike the more proficient members of the group, Meiko seldom appeared to apply background knowledge to phenomena or events described in the texts. O'Malley and Chamot (1990:142) have written of the significance of the "all-purpose" strategy of elaboration, by which learners make connections between new information and existing knowledge. There is little evidence in Meiko's L2 reading behaviour of the existence of this strategy.

It is significant also to note that in the early days of the study, Meiko depended on the teacher more than the other participants did. Background information on the model of learning to which she had previously been exposed suggests that adopting an active and independent approach to her learning would not come easily to Meiko. In discussing a survey of the learning behaviours of high school students learning French, Bialystok (1981) concluded that the use of strategies appeared to be related primarily to the learner's attitude and not to language learning aptitude. This finding prompted the writer to search the data for insights into Meiko's attitude to the reciprocal teaching sessions as well as to the reading activity itself (i.e. S3 in Stevick's terms).

Reading Strategies Questionnaire

Before the study began, Meiko and the other learners in her class completed a Reading Strategies Questionnaire. The questionnaire (which is reprinted in Appendix 1) was designed to explore the learner's approach to reading for study purposes in English. Some of Meiko's answers to the questionnaire are particularly informative when considered in conjunction with observations of her reading behaviour during the reciprocal teaching sessions.4

Questions (i), (j) and (v) relate to the learner's preparation for reading. To question (i) Meiko responded that she only sometimes planned her reading before she began. To question (j), she answered that she never had a purpose in mind when she read. Finally, to question (v) she responded that she never had an idea of what the text would be about before she read it.

Meiko appeared to approach each text with no expectations, no relevant schemata and most revealing of all, no specific motivation for reading. This profile
corresponds to Meiko’s observed behaviour, particularly in the fact that she made no overt connections between information presented in the text and what she previously knew about a given topic.

Questions (e), (n), (o), and (p) all related to aspects of the learners’ behaviour while reading. Meiko responded “Never” to question (e) indicating that she failed to question what she read as she read. Her responses to questions (n), (o) and (q) revealed respectively that Meiko never ignored things in the text which she did not understand, only sometimes sought help when she came across a problem in the text and never checked the text for typographical or other kinds of errors when she did not understand something. These responses suggest a somewhat passive reader who has a very low tolerance of ambiguity or unknown words and who automatically assumes that the fault is hers when comprehension breaks down. These comments are completely in agreement with Meiko’s practice of querying every unknown word during the reading of texts.

Finally, in answer to question (z) Meiko responded that she was sometimes happy if she could simply say the words of a reading text correctly. This question was designed to probe the learners’ conceptualisation of the reading process. Meiko’s response provides us with a tantalising suggestion that, for her, reading may not always have been conceived of as a meaning-focused activity, but rather as a mechanical symbol-sound recognition activity.

**Weekly Interviews**

In addition to the questionnaire administered at the outset, the study incorporated a series of weekly interviews aimed at probing the participants’ perceptions of reciprocal teaching and of their experience of adopting the relevant strategies. In week two, Meiko explained that when she was having difficulty understanding the text, she liked to try and summarise what she had read so far. While summarising might result in resolving a source of difficulty in the text by generating corrective feedback, it is revealing that Meiko did not see the clarifying strategy as a step towards solving the problem posed by the text. In fact, in the teaching intervention the four strategies were sequenced in such a way that learners were encouraged to deal with comprehension problems during the initial clarification phase; summaries were intended rather to reflect the learner’s understanding of the overall contribution of the paragraph to the development of the text.

In week four, in answer to a question concerning the usefulness of the strategy instruction, Meiko explained:

> Now when I read the passage, I can find the main idea more easily and I can guess unknown words from the context.
This statement bears no evidence of an appreciation of the potential for applying the strategies in which she had received training to other contexts, or of the purpose of reading being to make sense of the ideas represented in text.

This detailed profile of Meiko’s reading behaviour can be exploited diagnostically. Her concentration on the word-level, and her overwhelming concern with clarifying the meaning of all unknown words in the text, suggest that she might benefit from extensive reading practice with texts containing fewer unknown words than those used in the study. This might assist her in developing skill at building interpretations of text which extend beyond the word level. She might also benefit from a vocabulary development programme which stressed the importance of exploiting information available in the wider context, and taught active strategies such as guessing from context, and using word parts.

IMPLICATIONS

The adoption of an instructional methodology such as reciprocal teaching brings clear benefits both to learners and teacher. The learners benefit from seeing the required behaviour modelled and from having support of their peers in gradually adopting the modelled behaviour themselves. The teacher, meanwhile, is freed from the obligation of “leading” the reading session, and can informally observe the strategies and idiosyncrasies of the various learners as they engage in reading. The potential risk of learners’ reading performance being distorted or inadequately conveyed by limitations in their oral skills can be overcome by seeking to triangulate data gathering methods as described in the present study. Finally, the learners benefit from the opportunity to reflect on the reading process itself and from the results of the teacher’s diagnosis of their weaknesses, as individual language enrichment programmes are designed for each learner.

1 The students were attending the English Proficiency Course in the English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington, during the summer semester 1988-1989.
2 All names used in this paper are fictitious.
3 For a fuller discussion of the implementation of reciprocal teaching, see Cotterall, 1990b.
4 A reviewer of this paper has pointed out that it would be interesting to discuss with students their responses to the questionnaire, so as to confirm interpretations of certain responses.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1

Reading Strategies Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to explore your approach to reading for study purposes. Please answer the questions as honestly as you can. Please answer the questions in reference to your reading habits in English.

Circle a number under each statement indicating how often you behave in the way stated.

1 = ALWAYS
2 = USUALLY
3 = OFTEN
4 = SOMETIMES
5 = NEVER

For example, look at statement a)

a) I find words and sentences easy to read.
   1 2 3 4 5

If you ALWAYS read words and sentences easily, circle number 1 under the statement.

a) I find words and sentences easy to read.
   1 2 3 4 5

b) I get stuck on unusual words and long sentences.
   1 2 3 4 5

c) I look for the main ideas when I read.
   1 2 3 4 5

d) I try to remember facts when I read.
   1 2 3 4 5

e) I ask questions about what I read as I read.
   1 2 3 4 5

f) I read fast when I am studying.
   1 2 3 4 5

g) I read different types of texts at different speeds.
   1 2 3 4 5

h) I read slowly when I am studying.
   1 2 3 4 5
i) I plan my reading before I start.
   1  2  3  4  5

j) I have a purpose in mind when I read.
   1  2  3  4  5

k) I search for organisation in a text.
   1  2  3  4  5

l) I notice headings and subheadings in a text.
   1  2  3  4  5

m) I try and relate headings to the topic when I read.
   1  2  3  4  5

n) When I don’t understand something in a text, I ignore it.
   1  2  3  4  5

o) When I don’t understand something in a text, I seek help.
   1  2  3  4  5

p) When I don’t understand something in a text, I check whether there is a typing or other kind of error.
   1  2  3  4  5

q) When I don’t understand something in a text, I re-read the section of the text which is causing the problem.
   1  2  3  4  5

r) When I read, I try and predict what will come next.
   1  2  3  4  5

s) I like reading for learning.
   1  2  3  4  5

t) I take notes when I read for study progress.
   1  2  3  4  5

u) I underline words and sentences in the text when I am studying.
   1  2  3  4  5

v) I have an idea of what the text will be about before I read it.
   1  2  3  4  5

w) I summarise each paragraph (in my head) before going on to read the next one when I am studying.
   1  2  3  4  5
x) I like to understand every word of what I read.
   1 2 3 4 5

y) When I read, I expect to obtain some meaning from the text.
   1 2 3 4 5

z) When I read, I am happy if I can simply say the words correctly.
   1 2 3 4 5