Effects of Using Cognitive Strategy Training Programs in Developing Reading Comprehension

Okuma Becerilerinin Geliştirilmesinde Bilişsel Strateji Programı Uygulanmasının Etkileri

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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of cognitive strategy instruction on English reading comprehension of Iranian advanced students. A total of 60 participants took part in the present study. The participants (n=20) in one experimental group were provided with the cognitive training only condition while the participants (n=20) in the other experimental group were exposed to both a training and a verbalization requirement condition. Control group participants (n=20) did not receive any training. Students of the experimental group in both conditions received 10 hours of cognitive strategy training in their regular lessons. The findings in this study generally supported that the consciousness-raising of the cognitive strategies had a positive impact on the reading development of Farsi-speaking English learners.

Keywords: English reading comprehension, cognitive strategy instruction, advanced students, gender

Özet: Bu çalışma İranlı ileri düzey İngilizce öğrencilerine verilen bilişsel strateji eğitiminin okuma becerilerine olan etkisini araştırılmıştır. Çalışmaya toplam 60 öğrenci katılmıştır. İlk deney grubundaki katılımcılar (n=20) bilişsel strateji eğitimi görürken diğer deney grubundaki katılımcılar (n=20) hem bilişsel strateji eğitimi hem de zorunlu sözlü çalışmaları katılmışlardır. Kontrol grubu (n=20) ise herhangi bir programa katılmamıştır. İkinci deney grubuna da toplam 10’ar saatlik bilişsel strateji eğitimi uygulaması sunulmuştur. Çalışmanın sonuçları bilişsel strateji eğitiminin sunduğu bilinçlendirmenin Farsça konuşan İngilizce öğrencilerinin okuma becerilerinin gelişimine olumu katkı olduğu olmuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İngilizce okuma anlama, bilişsel strateji eğitimi, ileri düzey, cinsiyet

Research on strategies has focused on two broad areas: learning strategies and communication strategies. In learning strategies the learner makes attempts to establish competence in the target language, whereas in a communication strategy the difficulty of the moment is to be solved.

Looking at learning strategies from the linguistic perspective, a contradiction can be identified. The universal hypothesis claims that second language acquisition happens naturally, without mental efforts on the learner’s part. Consequently, learning strategies reflect what happens in cases of instructed SLA, or, in Krashen’s (1985) terminology, while learning (not acquiring subconsciously) the target language. On the other hand, research on communication strategies does not take acquisition into consideration, but aims to find out how learners manage to solve their problems in certain situations.

Although language learning strategies have always been recognized, there is a limited

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As shown in Table 4, there are no significant mean differences between the male and female participants’ scores. The results of an independent samples t-test also signify the same finding. The results are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Independent Samples T-test Results for Cognitive Strategy Use across Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>.323</td>
<td>.572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>.198</td>
<td>58.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show that the significance level of Levene’s test is \( p = 0.572 \), which means that the variances for the two groups (males and females) are the same. The results of t-test show that there is not a significant difference in the use of strategies by the male and female participants and the second null hypothesis is accepted (\( t (58) = -0.197, p = 0.844 \)). Therefore, the different pattern of strategy use for the three groups does not apply in relation to their gender, with each gender group showing preference in the same order. This finding is supported by the results obtained from descriptive analysis. The descriptive means show that there is not a difference between males and females in their use of strategies regarding the mean scores.

**Students’ Perceptions and Self-Assessment**

The findings from the questionnaire buttress the statistical analysis results. Although both of the experimental groups reported positive attitudes toward their better understanding of the reading texts, the experimental group participants who were required to verbalize the strategies, reported greater motivation and progress in their reading achievements. For those learners with the opportunity to engage in verbalization, appropriately implemented training program may be perfectly corrective, combining comprehension with a focus on ‘pushed output’ which encourages them to process material syntactically, ‘stretch’ their interlanguage, and thus gain a genuine command of previously learned strategies. The following sample entry from one of the participants signifies this conclusion:

“The thing I liked most about my teacher’s correction of my mistakes in reading is that I felt like I was able to read the texts more rapidly and that the end result was not disappointing... contrary to my previous experiences, I managed to answer most of the questions correctly. This
was especially motivating because I have had the chance to practice many ways of reading a text in more effective ways.”

Although the participants in the experimental group with no verbalization requirement also asserted their progress compared with their previous reading comprehension abilities, they appeared to be slightly less satisfied with the training because they were not given an opportunity to practice the strategies by themselves. This means that learning the strategies does not matter so much if one does not have the opportunity to put them into practice and receive corrective feedback and help, as it is suggested by the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2000).

Participants of the control group reported that their reading ability was the same as before. This finding was expectable, however, since these subjects were deprived from the opportunity to learn the strategies and to put them into practice.

Conclusion

This study had the purpose of examining the effect of teacher’s explicit training on learners’ cognitive strategy use and their improvement in the strategy employment. It has been found that the training provided by the teacher contributes to the FLL process, and learners’ awareness of the accurate use of the cognitive strategy increases. The results suggest that teachers’ explicit instruction and assistance of learners’ strategy use during a particular activity are linked with the learners’ overall achievement and effective use of strategies. Although instruction is accompanied with positive effects of increasing learner awareness about strategy application, the results are more promising if the learners are asked to provide explicit verbalizations of the strategies which they have learned. In this sense, the results of the present study are in line with Swain’s (2000) research on collaborative dialoguing. It suggests that if strategy instruction involves verbalizing the strategies employed, it can be effective. Swain (2000) defined collaborative dialoguing as a “dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building” (102). Knowledge building is the epiphenomena of the learners’ saying and responding to what is said. This knowledge building, then, can be achieved by the teacher’s explicit training of the learners and requiring them to verbalize the strategies. In the present case, the more the teacher provided explicit training on learners’ strategy use and required their verbalization, the more the learners were motivated to use them effectively. The reason can be explained as because learners may not be aware of the strategies in how they can help them achieve success in the process of language learning, explicit instruction and training on how to use the strategies more effectively in an explicit format promoted their learning.

Another finding of this study was concerned with the gender of language learners and their strategy use. The results indicated that there were no differences between male and female participants. The results imply that it is important for instructors to enhance the strategic awareness of both genders, because it may lead to more active engagement in language learning process. Further research is needed in piloting similar activities with other groups of learners and teachers both in Iran and with learners of different first languages studying other target languages. At the risk of sounding repetitive, however, one must acknowledge that there has been an element of explicitness in the effective instruction programs carried out.

To sum up, although students seem to rely on naturalistic processes in the acquisition of the target language, instruction and social processes also contribute. These findings provide support to Wong Fillmore’s (1991) model of child SLA, in which social, linguistic and cognitive processes interact with one another. Therefore, it is critical for the teachers to help their students become self-directed and effective language learners by integrating language learning strategy instruction into regular language lessons.

The findings offer further implications for the classroom: both naturalistic processes and the
teacher instruction play a crucial role in language learning, and this role should be exploited to
the learners’ benefit. Also, FLL involves more than the acquisition of the target language, as
learners’ develop cognitively, socially and linguistically at the same time.

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