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READING STRATEGIES IN TEACHING LITERATURE

Abstract: Focus in recent times on realistic pedagogy implies that we can no longer depend on a transmission model of training, either for teachers or learners. We need to develop strategies that will help teachers and learners to be co-participants in the learning process. Mental modelling is one technique suggested in this presentation. It is a technique through which the teacher demonstrates the mental process of a ‘superior reader’ while she/he makes sense of the literal text being read in the foreign language class. Since this makes the process of reading ‘visible’ it is easy for the learners to imitate the steps in order to understand the foreign language literature.

Key words: realistic pedagogy, reading strategies, mental modelling, mental process, foreign language literature

INTRODUCTION

Focus in recent times on realistic pedagogy implies that we can no longer depend on a transmission model of training, either for teachers or learners. We need to develop strategies that will help teachers and learners to be co-participants in the learning process. Mental modelling is one technique suggested in this presentation. It is a technique through which the teacher demonstrates the mental process of a ‘superior reader’ while she/he makes sense of the literal text being read in the foreign language class. Since this makes the process of reading ‘visible’ it is easy for the learners to imitate the steps in order to understand the foreign language literature.

The paper presents the process and findings of a study with this technique in a teacher education course at the School of Education, Nottingham University, UK. The study was later applied in the university level at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina. The trainees tried to guess the meanings of unknown words in texts and then listened to their tutor’s mental modelling while doing the same task. Data was collected through transcripts of group discussions, mental modelling of the tutor, and retrospective notes of the tutor. Findings from the study showed that mental modelling can be an effective pedagogic strategy in Serbian classrooms in terms of motivating the learners to develop improved reading strategies.

READING STRATEGIES AND MENTAL MODELLING

Reading strategies are the mental operations involved when readers approach a text effectively to make sense of what they read (Barnett

1988). Good readers apply more strategies more frequently and more effectively than poor readers. Research has also shown that learners can be instructed to use appropriate reading strategies to help them improve comprehension and recall. Learners therefore need to be trained to use these strategies to become more competent readers. Mental modelling is one technique suggested in the article by Duffy, Roehler, and Herrmann in 1988. In this article, the authors describe mental modelling as a teaching technique which teachers can use to show the learners the flexible reasoning processes that support strategic reading.

MENTAL MODELLING

Mental modelling is a teaching technique that informs the learners about the reasoning processes that lie behind strategic reading. The teacher uses this technique to show the ‘novice’ learner ‘how’ reading by thinking aloud may negotiate for meaning through the text. Thus the learner is able to get a glimpse into the mind of a ‘superior’ reader, and is able to imitate the process. Emphasis on the strategic aspects of reading and the role of meta-cognition in reading make it imperative that the reading process be made explicit for the learner.

THE STUDY

The study was conducted in the School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK with Serbian students who were attending master courses. The study reported here was conducted in a three-month ELT training programme for these students who were foreign language users of English.

PROCEDURE

The study began with a brief training to make the trainees comfortable with articulating their thoughts. Therefore this began with the practice of verbalizing in the context of everyday activities, like the process of making a cup of tea, and coming to the faculty by bus. Since these were routine activities, trainees did not experience any awkwardness in verbalizing the process of these activities. At the next stage, tutor demonstrated the mental processes as he solved some anagrams, following which the trainees did the same. The next step was modelling the mental processes, while guessing the meanings of unknown words in short texts in their L1. The purpose of this entire exercise was to ensure that the novelty of the procedure did not interfere with the trainees’ understanding of the reasoning of a

‘superior’ reader. In addition, this raised their awareness of the reading strategies they used in their mother tongue.

For the main activity, four short texts were selected to model the *word attack strategy*. For each text the same procedure was followed. First of all, the trainees worked in groups of five and tried to infer the meanings of the unknown words in a given text. Before doing the task the students were asked if anyone knew the meanings of the underlined unknown words. This was done to ensure that the words were genuinely ‘unknown’. Group work by the trainees was followed by a demonstration of mental modelling given by the tutor while working through the same task. A combination of English and Serbian was used to put the trainees at ease, and show them that language is not a barrier while using this technique. This was followed by a whole class discussion on the content of the mental modelling, which helped in identifying the strategies used. It also assisted in deciding about the feasibility of doing it in their classrooms.

FINDINGS

The first purpose of the study was to see how far the trainees were successful in using the word attack strategy through the technique of mental modelling, and if they were successful in completing the tasks.

On the basis of the transcripts, the evidence of the following was visible. The trainees read the text as a whole before going to the parts. They made a conscious attempt to puzzle out the meanings of the difficult words, which gradually became more systematic. They made deliberate attempts to look for clues by trying to establish a relationship between parts of the text.

We can see this in the example which is given below. (S1 stands for student number 1, S2 – student number 2 etc.)

The original text:

At the beginning of the 19th century, some of the Zulu clan were ruled by a king called Chaka. He was a clever military leader with insatiable political ambition. He won most of the South Eastern Africa and untied all the Zulu clans into one great empire, the Zulu nation. Soon afterwards however, the downfall of the Zulu empire started by dissension among the blacks themselves, and ended in conflict with the whites. (Haastrup,1987)

S1: I guess . . . Among blacks among black people and whites. Black people and white people, there must be a revolution

S2: No perhaps I think it is the discrimination, racial discrimination.

S3: but it is already started by the blacks

S4: blacks

S3: among themselves

S5: so what . . . the downfall of the Zulu empire is

S4: cause of something
S3: So what is dissension?
S2: Discrimination?

Later they were guessing the meaning of the word ‘sub’ and ‘shadowed’.

S3: It is about war between two countries. China and America. So it is about war. Two countries fighting.

S1: May be S2: Ship or something here is about boats. I think boats, may be a boat. submarine is sub, yes, sub, and submarine.

S4: May be. So shadow is like being S1: Is it a ship, what is this vessel? together. You know how we have shadows.

S3: Being together.

S4: Let’s put it in the sentence, like she does. Fast new Chinese built nuclear subs have together.

Trainees’ use of background knowledge was visible in all the transcripts. In the initial tasks, this background knowledge was often not supported by textual clues. Instead, the trainees’ own background knowledge was implied to infer the meanings of the words.

TRAINEES’ ATTITUDE

The trainees’ attitude to mental modelling was positive. They were able to perform better at their tasks, and these sessions strengthened their belief that learners could be helped with reading problems and literature understanding through this technique.

Some of the comments given by the trainees originally in a mixed code show their attitude to mental modelling as a teaching technique.

- *“This is a good technique because there is possibility for co-operative learning”.*
- *“It helped me to work in a team, in a group”.*
- *“I was able to see your ‘aha!’ point but I am worried that it may not be mine”.*
- *“When I heard tutor modelling my understanding also became clearer”.*

CONCLUSION

Although it is not possible to generalize from the limited data generated from this study, it shows mental modelling as a successful technique in terms of helping ‘learners’ in a teacher education context. This in turn improved their own reasoning while reading. However, this kind of a modelling must be followed by

interaction with the trainees to see how far they understand the teacher educator's that is tutor's reasoning. A deliberate attempt should be made to identify the strategies used, so that these gradually become a part of the trainees' repertoire of reading strategies. Though the duration of the study was only five hours, the result it showed suggests that this technique has potential in assisting both teachers and learners to develop reading strategies, and thus be better readers of the foreign language. Mental modelling is a technique for teachers to experience and put into practice in their classrooms. Teacher educators can use this technique to make the implicit explicit, just as teachers can do with their learners. It will be interesting to see how the teachers in this study try this technique in their own classrooms with their learners at the primary or secondary level. Some teachers who were involved in the study suggested that they could use passages from the learners' textbook for this purpose. The procedure was tried out in the teacher education context at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina and could be also replicated in the teachers' classrooms with modifications required by the context. Also, there is an impression that we need lots more of that kind of research and it could be incorporated into teacher training in very productive ways. It is being done, but it seems to me that it is an area that could be expanded quite a lot in Serbia.

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СТРАТЕГИЈЕ ЧИТАЊА У ПРОЦЕСУ ПРОУЧАВАЊА КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ НА ЧАСОВИМА ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА

Резиме: У последње време педагогија и дидактика све више пропагирају да не можемо зависити од преносног модела подучавања и учења. Уместо тога треба развити стратегије које ће помоћи и наставницима и ученицима да буду сарадници у васпитно-образовном процесу. Ментално уобличавање је једна од техника коју сугеришемо у овом раду. То је техника која се спроводи на тај начин што наставник демонстрира ток размишљања за време читања неког књижевног текста на часу енглеског језика. Пошто на тај начин читање текста постаје „уочљиво“, студенти или ученици могу да имитирају кораке читања и разумевања текста на енглеском језику које је наставник претходно показао.

Кључне речи: педагогија, стратегије читања, ментално уобличавање, ментални процес, књижевност енглеског језика