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Reading strategies versus reading skills: Two faces of the same coin

Polyxeni Manoli *, Maria Papadopoulou

University of Thessaly,Department of Preschool Education,Argonaftwn & Filellinwn, Volos, 38221,Greece

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to shed light on the definitions of *strategies* and *skills*, pinpoint differences and suggest a possible way to reconcile these two terms in the teaching and learning process, especially concerning the teaching of reading comprehension, as there is confusion about how they are conceptualized and deployed throughout literature. More often than not, researchers and educators use these terms interchangeably referring to the same process; while sometimes they make a distinction between them regarding the former as deliberate, conscious actions, which are used to achieve a goal, and the latter as automatic, unconscious abilities.

1. Introduction

What is a strategy? What is a skill? Are they the same? Do they differ? Do they correlate? These are frequent questions that occur in the minds of those who are engaged in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, especially in the teaching of reading comprehension, as there is inconsistency in the use of the terms strategies and skills. More often than not policy makers, researchers and educators make use of these terms interchangeably referring to the same process, while sometimes they make a distinction between them. Such inconsistency is particularly evident when processes such as contextual guessing are referred to as strategies in some studies and as skills in other studies in the reading literature. Since the terms strategies and skills are an integral part of the reading instruction and are constantly used in order to help learners comprehend the meaning of written texts, clarifying, therefore, the confusion between these two terms is of the outmost importance, as the way we define and implement them can have implications in the teaching of reading. This paper is part of a broader study under the auspices of HERACLITUS II: Enhancement of research man power through the implementation of thesis co-financed by the Greek Ministry of Education and the European Union-European Regional Development Fund.

2. In search of origin, definitions and differences between skills and strategies

Taking all the above into account, we attempt to shed light on the terms reading *skills* and *strategies* referring to their origin, providing definitions, pinpointing disparities and trying to find a way to reconcile these two terms through a literature review. To begin with, confusion between *skills* and *strategies* can arise from the inconsistent

* Polyxeni Manoli. Tel.: +302421074750
 E-mail address: pegyma@hotmail.com , pmanoli@uth.gr

use of the terms concerning time and disciplines. To be more precise, skill research has a longer history than strategy research, as skills have been used for a hundred years in both psychology and education (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008). From the educational point of view, especially in the field of reading, the focus on *skills* is part of the development of interest in comprehension attempting to break down this concept into more accessible chunks in order to provide educators with a structure for reading syllabuses, materials and tests (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). In the field of psychology, skills are inextricably linked with behavioral learning theories describing routine habits that are learned through practice and repetition (Afflerbach et al., 2008). On the contrary, strategies appear to have invaded in the reading research via psychology, where they became popular with the advent of information processing models in 1970s describing the actions that an individual adopts to attain a goal, referring to cognitive processes such as rehearsal, imagery and rendering the whole process more learner-centered (Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Afflerbach et al., 2008). In the early 1970s and 1980s, a lot of work contributed to our understanding of reading strategies, which are part of the learning strategies, through students' reports on what they are doing while reading (Olshavsky, 1997; Block, 1986; Kletzien, 1991; Saricoban, 2002) implying that teaching a set of strategies can help students, especially struggling ones, comprehend texts more efficiently (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Kern, 1989; Dole, Brown & Trathen, 1996; Brown, Pressley, Van Meter & Schuder, 1996).

As far as reading skills are concerned, they can be seen as cognitive abilities, part of the generalized reading process, which a person is able to deploy when interacting with written texts (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). At the same time, Psaltou-Joycey (2010) regards skills as the abilities that an individual possesses allowing him/her to perform something in an easy and fast way. A person usually needs to go through training to become skilful at something and arrive at high levels of success. Throughout literature, skills are considered to be highly routinized, almost automatic behaviors that can be unconsciously selected through practice and repetition and applied across different kinds of texts (Dole, Duffy, Roehler & Pearson, 1991; Urquhart and Weir, 1998). Furthermore, it is held that reading is composed of different subskills within a taxonomy or hierarchy of skills, which contribute to the development of the various reading syllabuses, teaching materials and tests (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Urquhart & Weir, 1998). More often than not, learners are given passages to comprehend and are asked a variety of questions afterwards (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984). Psaltou-Joycey (2010) also points out that in the field of teaching and learning of foreign languages the term *skills* refers to the four main modes of performance, that is reading, listening, writing and speaking, in a rather general manner, each of which consists of a series of subskills.

However, the *skills* approach to reading does not make readers proficient (Koda, 2005) and does not provide us with insights into how the readers arrive at this level of comprehension and what they do while they read in order to arrive at this particular product (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984). Students must be taught how to approach the text in order to become efficient and independent readers, as meaning is not inherent in the text but readers bring their own meaning to what they read based on their previous knowledge and their expectations from the text (Grellet, 1981). That's why, reading is regarded as an interaction between the reader and the text (Alderson & Urquhart, 1983). Moreover, reading is purposeful and requires active involvement on behalf of the readers when interacting with written texts, as readers have specific goals to achieve when reading a text, for instance, reading an office memo to confirm a meeting time, a manual to find out how to use an electric appliance, a newspaper to keep up with the latest news or a biology textbook to prepare for an examination (Koda, 2005). Therefore, learners can be actively involved in reading using strategies, whenever they interact with written texts.

As regards the word *strategy*, it comes from the Greek word *strategia*, which means generalship or the art of war and implies planning, conscious manipulation and movement toward a goal (Oxford, 1990). In our attempt to first define the broader term *learning strategies* we can conceptualize them as operations deployed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information (Oxford, 1990). According to Chamot (1987: 71), 'Learning strategies are techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information'. Cohen (1998) also defines learning strategies as the processes which are consciously used by learners and usually result in action in order to enhance the learning or use of a

foreign language through the storage, retention, recall and application of information. Although there are a number of strategy classifications throughout literature, the most widespread ones are those of Rubin (1981), Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). In particular, as regards reading strategies, they are deliberate, conscious actions, identifiable to the agent and to others by intentions and selected goals (Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1983). Furthermore, Dole et al. (1991) mention that strategies are conscious and flexible plans emphasizing reasoning that readers apply and adapt to a variety of texts in order to construct meaning from texts. At the same time, Urquhart and Weir regard strategies as ways of getting around difficulties encountered while reading (1998).

In our attempt to clarify the confusion concerning the terms *skills* and *strategies* we arrive at some generally accepted distinction highlighting the distinctive features of each of them. First of all, there is a difference in intentionality (Dole et al., 1991). Namely, strategies are deliberate actions, plans adopted by the reader in order to achieve a goal, while interacting with written texts, for instance, to quickly spot some information into a text, whereas skills are automatic routines. At the same time, there is a distinction in awareness (Dole et al., 1991). Learners reflect on what they do while they read. That's, they are aware of whether they comprehend something or not and in case they face comprehension difficulties they consciously take action and apply the proper strategy in order to solve the problem. Therefore, strategies, unlike skills that develop unconsciously and almost automatically through repetition and practice, represent a conscious, response to a specific problem arisen, such as a failure to understand the meaning of a word or find the information one was looking for (Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Dole et al., 1991). Moreover, strategies differ from skills in flexibility (Dole et al., 1991). In other words, strategies are flexible and adaptable, since readers use a number of strategies or alter them according to the kind of text they have to go through and the goal they have to accomplish. For instance, they are used because there is a problem to solve or a goal to attain. By contrast, skills are consistently applied in a variety of texts without a reference to a specific goal. What's more, strategies are reader-oriented, while skills are text-oriented (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). To put it differently, strategy research focuses on active readers often divided into good and poor students, who report on what they are doing and how they arrive at text comprehension either during or at the end of reading, in order to facilitate and monitor comprehension. On the contrary, skills research tends to emphasize on text and skills taxonomies arrived at through text analysis assuming a passive reader who has mastered a number of subskills and automatically develops them in all texts (Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Dole et al., 1991). Last but not least, strategies can be directly taught through strategy training to help students understand what they are doing, when, why and how they are doing (Oxford, 1990). More often than not, strategy training follows a cycle of direct explanation of strategies, modeling, guided practice, where there is gradual transfer of responsibility from teachers to students, leading to more independent practice aiming at making students autonomous, aware of their own learning and able to learn successfully and independently of a teacher (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Pressley, Beard El-Dinary, Gaskins, Schuder, Bergman, Almasi & Brown, 1992; Cohen, 2007). Although skills can be taught, the goal of instruction is automatic application of skills in a number of texts including practice, feedback and repetition until mastery of skills is achieved. Below is provided a table with the distinctive features of *strategies* and *skills*:

Table 1. Differences between strategies and skills

Strategies	**Skills**
Deliberate	Automatic
Conscious	Unconscious
Mindful/Effortful	Effortless
Goal/Problem-Oriented	Goal/Problem free
Reader-oriented	Text-oriented
Teach, explain, model through think aloud, guided application-gradual release of responsibility-independent practice	Teach, practice to mastery, assess, reteach, if necessary

3. An attempt to reconcile the relation between strategies and skills

All things considered, we conclude by highlighting major points and commenting on the relation between *strategies* and *skills*. As we have already mentioned, strategies are deliberate actions, plans consciously deployed by learners in order to cope with comprehension difficulties, whereas skills are automatic behaviors. In fact, what differentiates strategies from skills is intentionality. An action is strategic as long as it is intentionally chosen from a set of alternative actions on behalf of the reader to attain a specific goal (Paris et al., 1983; Pressley, Goodchild, Fleet, Zajchowski & Evans, 1989). As Cohen points out: 'the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from those processes that are not strategic' (1998: 4). For instance, the process of contextual guessing can be regarded as a strategy, when it is consciously selected by the reader in his effort to solve a comprehension problem and guess the meaning of an unknown word based on context in a more challenging text, and as a skill, when it is used almost automatically and effortlessly in a relatively easy text. Therefore, strategies can become automatic through practice and repetition. As Paris et al. put it, 'strategies are not necessarily different actions, they are skills that have been taken from their automatic contexts for closer inspection' (1983: 296).

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, we cannot reject any of these two processes in the teaching of reading, as successful readers need to be aware of both processes and be able to opt for or shift between them, when interacting with written texts, depending on text difficulty and their knowledge. After all, we should bear in mind that, while automatic use of reading skills is a goal of reading instruction, a reading skill was once preceded by a period of deliberate and conscious application (Afflerbach et al., 2008). Thus, we can consider their relation to be two faces of the same coin, that is two sides of any reading process or task, since skills are strategies that have become automatic through practice whereas strategies 'are skills under consideration' (Paris et al.,1983: 295).

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