Where Should Reading Strategies Be Taught First: In Persian (L1), English (L2), or Arabic (L3)?

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ABSTRACT

This paper touches upon issues and trends in language transfer studies and reading research. Then, a brief report of three separate published papers by the author on the transfer of reading strategies from L1 to L2, L2 to L3 and L2 to L1 will be provided. In language transfer studies the idea is that languages affect each other. But, from where is it logical to lay the stepping stones of strategic reading if it is believed awareness of reading strategies transfer from one language to another in a multilingual mind? It seems it is logical and cost effective to improve strategic reading competence in L1 if it is shown that learners' skills and experiences in language learning are cross-linguistically linked together.

Keywords: L1, L2 and L3, Reading, Strategies, Transfer

INTRODUCTION

One of the major goals of learning an additional language is to improve reading achievement. Since reading is a problem-solving activity, and no longer seen to be passive, the idea of strategic reading has become the focus of investigation in reading research (See Oxford, 1990; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004). Learning strategy-based instruction helps students become more aware of available strategies, to understand how to organize and use them systematically and effectively, and to learn when and how to transfer them to new contexts (Brown, 2001). For practitioners and researchers in the area of reading, it would be interesting and necessary to know about the long journey that studies of cross-linguistic transfer and reading in bilingual/multilingual minds have made and are still making both in theory and practice. But the intriguing question is from where it is logical and cost effective to begin reading strategies instruction if cross-linguistic transfer of reading strategies in a bilingual/multilingual mind really occurs. What follows gives an overview of transfer studies and a report of three strands of studies on cross-linguistic transfer of reading strategies conducted by the author to come to a comprehensive view of this phenomenon in a multilingual learners' mind.

OVERVIEW OF LANGUAGE TRANSFER STUDIES

In the 1950s and 1960s, under the influence of behaviorism and structuralism, language transfer

studies went under spotlight in second/foreign language studies. Language transfer is one of the five processes central to language learning. The other four processes are known as transfer-of-training, strategies of second-language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralization (Selinker, 1972). Odlin (1989) defines language transfer as, "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (p. 27). The influence of L1 on the learner's performance in a given target language is called '*substratum transfer'* (Odlin, 1989, p. 169). This transfer can affect all linguistic levels such as phonetic, phonological, semantic, syntactic, and morphological levels. The direction of this transfer may also be the reverse. This kind of transfer is referred to as '*borrowing transfer'* (Odlin, 1989, p. 169) or 'reverse transfer' (Cook, 2003). Most of L2 learners have experienced the latter kind of transfer (e.g. using L2 words or concepts in our L1).

Transfer was assumed to be positive or negative. Negative transfer was considered as interference. In the heyday of behaviorism and structuralism negative transfer was believed to be the main source of problems for learners. This idea was reflected in the so-called *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis* (CAH) (Odlin, 1989). The main problem with this hypothesis is that structural differences between languages equal difficulty and this in turn leads to interference errors in L2. However, research showed that even similarities can be problematic and dissimilarities seem to facilitate SLA (Catford, 1964). Transfer was no longer considered the main source of problem in SLA when the Chomskian Universal Grammar theory suggested that L1 and L2 acquisition were equivalent developmental processes (Chomsky, 1969). Developmental errors were considered to occur as a result of the learner's strategies to make learning easier (Taylor, 1975) and second language acquisition came to be seen as a creative construction process rather than the transfer of habits from the first language to the second (Dulay & Burt, 1975). This view also went under fire because of considering a very small role for transfer in the process of L2 acquisition (Sharwood, 1996). This led to the argument that both transfer and creative construction are influential factors in the process of learning a second language (Danesi, 1995).

However, contrastive linguistics did not escape the new trends in transfer studies. Pragmatic transfer is a case in point. Pragmatic aspects, such as apologies, are culture-specific and it is obvious that culture shapes our conceptual framework. Therefore, both pragmatic and conceptual aspects of transfer must be regarded in classrooms. McLaughlin (1986, p. 34-35, in Cummins, 2005) reports the research findings of Jochen Rehbein (1984) suggesting that conceptual information and discourse strategies acquired in the first language transfer to the second. If we regard transfer as one of the influential variables in the learning of a second or foreign language, then we should shift our focus from the behaviorist principle of transfer to the transfer of processing strategies (Sridhar, 1980). This is especially helpful if we teach for transfer between skills within a language (e.g., reading to writing in English), or between languages within a skill (e.g., from L1 reading to L2 reading).

READING STRATEGIES AND STRATEGIC READING

Reading in L1, L2 or any further language(s) is a complex activity whose goal is to construct text

meaning based on visually encoded information (Koda, 2007, p.1). A distinction is usually made in literature between the process (i.e., various strategies that readers use) and product (i.e., reading score) of reading measured by reading comprehension tests (Bossers, 1992; Sarig 1987; Taillefer & Pugh 1998). The trend in EFL reading instruction shifted from teaching texts to teaching readers (Hamp-Lyons, 1985). Urquhart and Weir (1998, p. 95) regard reading strategies as "ways of getting around difficulties encountered while reading". When encountering comprehension problems, accomplished readers take immediate steps by monitoring their reading process carefully. They are aware of their own cognitive and linguistic resources, and are capable of directing their attention to the appropriate clues in anticipating, organizing and retaining text information. Such readers are strategic readers and their reading behavior is referred to as *'strategic reading'*.

The Relationship between Strategic Reading in L1, L2, and Any Further Language(s)

Learning a second language is not a monolingual activity. In reading, L2 readers have access to their first language as they read. Cohen (1995) found that people with access to two or more languages frequently shift between them. On the relationship between L1 and L2, Cummins (1981) proposed a *Common Underlying Proficiency* model to support second-language learning by transferring skills from L1 to L2. Cummins' model can be imagined as two icebergs which are separate above the surface, but underneath the surface they are one structure. In this model, skills, knowledge, and concepts learned in any language can be accessed through other languages making the learners free themselves from relearning acquired knowledge; Research of the 1970s assumes that reading is reading and L1 reading ability transfers to L2. This view is known as the *'Reading Universals Hypothesis'* (Goodman, 1971). Sarig (1987) found that "reading processes for the first language do appear to transfer to the foreign language" (p. 118). Singhal (1998) holds that reading in L1 and L2 is a meaning making process involving an interaction between the reader and the text. Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson (1995) state that bilingual readers tend to have a unitary view of reading, conceive many similarities between reading in Spanish (L1) and English (L2) and are aware of transfer of knowledge across languages. However, Yorio (1971) takes an opposite view. He puts that the reading problems of foreign language learners are mainly because of imperfect knowledge of the language, and the native language interference in the reading process. Researchers who argue that first and second/foreign language reading processes differ, commonly consider low language proficiency level to be the reason. But the intriguing question is if the problem in L2 reading is a language problem (i.e., a weakness in processing linguistic properties, i.e. orthographic, phonological, lexical, syntactic, and discoursal knowledge specific to L2) or a reading problem (i.e., weakness in higher level mental activities such as predicting, analyzing, synthesizing, inferencing and retrieving relevant background knowledge, assumed to occur universally across languages)? Alderson (1984) believes that problem in foreign language reading can be because of both language problem and reading problem; however, it is more a language problem at the lower levels of L2 proficiency and a linguistic threshold level is to be attained so that L1 reading ability transfers to L2.

TRANSFER OF READING STRATEGIES FROM L1 TO L2, L2 TO L1, AND L2 TO L3: A PROCESS PERSPECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to find from where (L1, L2, or any further languages) it is necessary to build up students' awareness of reading strategies. For this purpose, the author conducted three separate strands of research with pre-test, post-test experimental deign, on cross-linguistic transfer of reading strategies. What follows is a review of these three separate studies. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and implications will be made.

Study 1(Talebi, 2007): *Strategic Reading in L1 and L2: One System or Two Systems?*

It is commonly asserted by many teachers that the reason why their students cannot read adequately in English is that they cannot read adequately in the native language (Alderson, 1984).

Purpose of the Study
This study intends to determine whether strategic reading in L1 (Persian) differs from that of L2 (English) or not.

Research Questions
The following questions were raised:
1) Does reading strategy training in L1 have any effects on students' reading comprehension performance in L1 (Persian) and L2 (English)?;
2) Does reading strategy training in L1 have any effects on increasing the reading strategy awareness of students in L1 (Persian) and L2 (English)?

Methodology
Subjects - One hundred and twenty Iranian EFL learners participated in this study. According to NELSON proficiency test, those whose scores were between -1 and +1 SD on the normal distribution curve, were considered as intermediate students and those whose scores were above +1 SD on the normal distribution curve, were considered as advanced level students. They were put into control and experimental groups. Participants of this study were selected based on convenience sampling.

Instruments

A) Language proficiency test

In order to make sure of the homogeneity of control and experimental groups in terms of English language knowledge, a test of **NELSON**, series 300B was administered. It consisted of four parts: cloze tests, structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation. All parts were in the form of Multiple-Choice questions. There were, in all, 50 items and the time allotted was 35 minutes. The reliability of the test was .71 according to KR-21 formula. This test was used as the experience of the researcher showed it would give better results for test characteristics (i.e., reliability) and item characteristics (i.e., item facility/difficulty, and item discrimination)

B) Tests of reading comprehension in Persian language

In order to neutralize the test-wiseness effects of Persian language reading test on the students in the pretest and posttest phases, two parallel tests of reading comprehension were made in Persian, one for the purpose of the pretest and the other for the posttest. For each test of reading comprehension in Persian, two passages, each containing fifteen items, and in all 30 items were used. Each item carried two points. The nature of the items in terms of recognizing main ideas, vocabulary knowledge, and inferencing was the same for all passages and, by implication, for the two sets of tests of reading comprehension in Persian. The reliability of the scores of the two sets of tests, according to the KR-21 reliability formula at the piloting stage was calculated to be 0.62 and 0.64, respectively. Item characteristics were also taken care of at the piloting stage.

C) Test of reading comprehension in English

The English reading comprehension test was selected from the reading section of the TOEFL TESTS OF ARCO (1997). It was in three passages containing thirty items. The time allowed was 20 minutes. The reliability of the test scores for this study was .73 according to KR-21 formula.

D) Questionnaire

Strategic approach, or the process of comprehension, was measured by means of a five-point Likert scale questionnaire (Never/ Seldom/ Sometimes/ Usually/ and Always *true of me*). It contained two groups of General reading strategies and Local reading strategies. This instrument was adapted from the questionnaire by Taillefer & Pugh (1998) and offered an immediate retrospective picture of reading behavior. It was reviewed by four experienced professors in order to give their comments on the translated version of the questionnaire both in terms of clarity of translation and selection of the items in the instrument. In order to make sure of the internal consistency reliability coefficient of the instrument at the piloting stage it was given to twenty students of the similar proficiency levels taking part in the study. Based on the data gathered, the reliability coefficient alpha was calculated to be 0.89 which seemed suitable for the purpose of this study.

Procedure

The reading comprehension tests in Persian and English as pretests were given to the students followed by the reading strategies questionnaire as a retrospective measure to determine what strategies students would employ in L1 and L2 reading tasks. After the pretest, the experimental group received reading strategy treatment in Persian language with Persian language texts. In order to teach students how to read strategically, the five elements proposed by Winograde & Hare (1988, cited in Carrell, 1998, p.5) were used which includes the following: *What the strategy is; Why a strategy should be learnt; How to use the strategy; When and where the strategies should be used; How to evaluate use of strategy*. The course consisted of eight 35 to 40 minute sessions. After the treatment, both the experimental and control groups were given the posttests as had been given in the pretest.

Results and Discussion

A multivariate analysis of variances (MANOVA) was run to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups, from two different proficiency levels, advanced and intermediate on pretest and posttest English and Persian tests. The obtained results showed improvements in reading strategies awareness both in L1 and L2 in the experimental group, but not in the control group. In addition, improvements in reading performance for the experimental group were just observed in L1 reading, but no improvements in L2 reading performance were observed for the control group.

The study concludes that there is one system for strategy awareness in L1 and L2 and awareness of strategies is transferable from L1 to L2. However, in order that students improve their L2 reading performance as a result of transfer of L1 reading strategies from L1 to L2, more practice in L2 with L2 texts seems to be needed.

Study 2 (Talebi, 2007): *The Relationship between Reading in L2 (English) as the First Foreign Language and L3 (Arabic) as the Second Foreign Language: Which Model: Total Separation, Total Integration or Interconnection?*

The experience of learning a second foreign language is not a new experience. The learner already knows what it feels like to learn a foreign language.

Purpose of the Study
This study was designed to find out the effect of L2 on L3 in strategic reading comprehension.

Research Questions
This study investigated whether the reading strategy awareness and the reading performance both in L2 and L3 would increase as a result of reading strategies instruction in L2.

Methodology
The participants in this study were 120 Iranian pre-university male students who had English and Arabic courses simultaneously. Participants of this study were selected based on convenience sampling.

Instruments
A) Language proficiency test (NELSON, series 300 B)

B) A reading comprehension test in Arabic
In this test two passages, each containing fifteen items. After piloting the test on 15 students the reliability of the test through the K-R21 formula turned out to be 0.84. This test was validated against the 50 item reading section of the Arabic Proficiency Test (APT) (1994) which was developed by the University of Michigan and the Center for Applied Linguistics. The correlation coefficient turned out to be 0.74 which was suitable for this study.

C) Test of reading comprehension in English

The test of reading comprehension in English was from the reading component of the *Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test (Gear, J, 1993. pp. 416-421).* The time allowed was 40 minutes determined at the piloting stage. To have a reliable test it was piloted on 15 students and through the K-R21 formula the reliability turned out to be 0.82.

D) Questionnaire

Strategic approach, or the process of comprehension, was measured by means of a five-point Likert scale questionnaire (Never/ Seldom/ Sometimes/ Usually/ and Always *true of me*). This instrument was adapted from the questionnaire by Sheorey & Mokhtari (2001) and offered an immediate retrospective picture of reading behavior. The instrument measures two broad categories of reading strategies, namely, metacognitive strategies that are "intentional, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor or manage their reading", and cognitive strategies that are "the actions and procedures readers use while working directly with the text (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001, p. 436). In order to make sure of the internal consistency reliability coefficient of the instrument at the piloting stage it was given to 15 students of a similar group taking part in the study. Based on the data gathered, the reliability coefficient alpha turned out to be 0.82. Two experts in the field were also asked to rate the instrument in terms of how effectively it sampled significant aspects of its purpose for providing an estimate of content validity.

Procedure

First, the NELSON proficiency test (Series 300B) was administered to homogenize students. Out of the 210 pre-university students, 120 students whose scores were between -1 and +1 SD on the normal distribution curve, were considered as intermediate students and those whose scores were above +1 SD on the normal distribution curve, were considered as advanced level students. They were put into control and experimental groups. For the purpose of determining the subjects' current abilities in L2 and L3 reading comprehension, reading tests in L2 and L3 were given a pretest to students immediately followed by the general reading strategy questionnaire that would determine what strategies students applied during reading in L2 and L3. After the pretest, the experimental group received strategy treatment along with their regular classroom materials, but the control group was only taught their regular classroom materials. In order to teach students how to read strategically and model strategic reading, the five elements proposed by Winograde & Hare (1988, cited in Carrell, 1998, p.5) were used as constituting: a*) What the strategy is; b) Why a strategy should be learned; c) How to use the strategy; d) When and where the strategies should be used; and e) How to evaluate use of the strategy.* A common method of teaching cognitive/metacognitive strategies is the teacher think-aloud modeling. The researcher explained each single strategy to the students and showed them through modeling how to use it while reading. Then, the students were shown how to use all the strategies together by reading the text and thinking aloud about it. Then, they were given a reading text and asked to read it using all the strategies taught to them while reading. The treatment consisted of ten one hour sessions, arranged with the normal class hour. After the treatment, both the experimental and control groups were given the posttests as they had been given in the pretest.

Results and Discussion

The Paired t-test statistical procedure was run to analyze the data. This study had two findings. First, it was found that the instruction of reading strategies in L2 improves reading strategies awareness of students both in L2 and L3 as a result of transfer of reading strategies from L2 to L3. Second, this increase in the awareness and use of reading strategies in L2 and L3 improved reading performance of students both in L2 and L3.

Conclusion

This study showed that the strategic reading behavior of an already acquired foreign language would seem to have a positive effect on the learning of a further foreign language.

Study 3 (Talebi, 2012):*Rearding In L2 (English) And L1 (Persian): An Investigation Into Reverse Transfer Of Reading Strategies*

Cook (2003, p.1) states "the first language of people who know other languages differs from their monolingual peers in diverse ways" from vocabulary to pragmatics.

Purpose
The purpose of this study was to investigate whether reading strategies awareness and reading performance in L2 and L1 would increase by reading strategies instruction in L2.

Methodology
The subjects of this study were Iranian pre-university boy students of about 18 years of age, who had already passed the general English as well as the Persian language and literature courses at the third grade of high school. Participants of this study were selected based on convenience sampling.

Instruments
A) Language Proficiency Test
In order to make sure of the homogeneity of the control and experimental groups in terms of their English language knowledge, a test battery of NELSON, series 400B was employed. The time allotted was 30 minutes. The test was piloted on a similar group of ten students and the reliability of the test scores according to the KR-21 formula turned out to be 75.78.

B) Test of Reading Comprehension in English
In developing the test of reading comprehension in English five passages were selected from the reading section of books two and three of New Interchange series (Richards, 1997). The number of words in the selected five passages ranged from 257 to 295 words. Six items were developed for each passage and in all there were thirty items for all five passages. The reliability of the test of reading as calculated through the K-R21 formula turned out to be .81.

C) Test of Reading Comprehension in Persian language

The reading comprehension test in Persian had two passages, each containing fifteen items, and in all 30 items. After administering this test to a similar group of twenty students, the reliability of the scores of this test according to the KR-21 formula at the piloting stage was calculated to be 0.82.

D) Questionnaire

The strategic approach was measured by means of a five-point Likert scale reading strategies questionnaire (Never/Seldom/ Sometimes/ Usually/ and Always true of me) offering an immediate retrospective picture of the reading behavior.. All the 33 items in this study were adapted from different related questionnaires in research-validated studies (Oxford, R, L., Yunkyoung Cho, Santoi Leung, and Hae-Jin Kim, 2004; Sheorey R. and Mokhtari, K., 2001; Baker, William and Boonkit, Kamonpan, 2004; Taillefer and pugh, 1998) and adopted for the purpose of this study. The strategy questionnaire was in Persian so that students felt more comfortable with the questionnaire. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of the instrument at the piloting stage was calculated to be 0.78 as it was piloted with 10 students of the similar proficiency level taking part in the study.

Procedure

According to NELSON proficiency test, 120 students whose scores were between -1 and +1 SD on the normal distribution curve, were considered as intermediate students and those whose scores were above +1 SD on the normal distribution curve, were considered as advanced level students. They were put into control and experimental groups. To find out the current reading ability of subjects in L2 and L1 reading comprehension, an English and Persian reading test as pretests were administered to the subjects, immediately followed by a reading strategies questionnaire offering an immediate retrospective picture of the reading behavior in L2 and L1. After the pretest, the experimental group received strategy treatment along with their regular classroom materials, but the control group was only taught their regular classroom materials through translation. In this study for the scaffolding of the reading process the two central phases of Scaffolding Reading Experience (SRE) introduced by Graves and Graves(1994, in Graves and Graves, 1995)were used, including, a) *The planning phase* at which the teacher should consider the students (their needs, concerns, interests, strengths, weaknesses, background knowledge, etc.), the text (its topic and theme, its comprehensibility, etc.), and the purpose(s) for reading (for what purpose is the student reading the text?), and b) *The implementation phase*: The implementation phase of SRE has three components: pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading activities. Apart from this, in this study teacher and peers scaffolding, also known as people scaffolding (McEwan, 2004) was used. For this purpose the model of Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) developed by Klingner & Vaughn (1998) was adopted and adapted. CSR consists of four comprehension strategies that students apply before, during, and after reading in small cooperative groups. These reading strategies are, (a) preview (before reading); (b) click and clunk (during reading); (c) get the gist (during reading); and, (d) wrap-up(after reading).After the experimental group received cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies instruction, post-tests were distributed.

Results and Discussion

Independent samples T-test and repeated measure ANOVA were employed to analyse data collected. This study had two findings. Firstly, reading strategies instruction in L2 improved reading strategies awareness both in L2 and L1. Secondly, this increase in L2 and L1 reading strategies awareness improved reading performance in L2 and L1.

Since both reading process (awareness of reading strategies) and reading product (reading performance) increase in L2 and L1 as a result of reading strategies instruction in L2, it is concluded L2 can have an enriching effect on L1 as far as strategic reading behavior is concerned.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In the above three studies conducted by the author, it was found that awareness of reading strategies (or the process of reading) transferred cross-linguistically, although the results about reading performance (or the product of reading) were not consistent in them. However, as far as the direction of transfer of reading strategies is concerned, it seems that awareness of reading strategies transfers from one language to another, but this does not necessarily result in better reading performance. It seems unlikely to see improvements in L2 reading performance as a result of reading strategies instruction in L1, but it is highly likely to see improvements in L1 reading performance as a result of reading strategies instruction in L2. When two foreign languages are involved, reading strategy instruction in the first foreign language or L2 has been shown to improve awareness of reading strategies and reading performance in both L2 and L3.

When students come to experience reading in a new language, they are not blank in mind about their task. They are aware of the process of reading in their new reading experience. Therefore, the findings of these studies are in keeping with Cummins' *Common Underlying Proficiency hypothesis*, and his *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency*, and Goodman's *Reading Universals hypothesis*. Cummins' model can be imagined as two icebergs which are separate above the surface, but underneath the surface they are one structure. In this model, skills, knowledge, and concepts learned in any language can be accessed through other languages making the learners free themselves from relearning acquired knowledge; according to Goodman reading is reading and L1 reading ability transfers to L2. In addition, according to Sarig (1987) "reading processes for the first language do appear to transfer to the foreign language" (p. 118). Singhal (1998) holds that reading in L1 and L2 is a meaning making process involving an interaction between the reader and the text. Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson (1995) state that bilingual readers tend to have a unitary view of reading, conceive many similarities between reading in Spanish (L1) and English (L2) and are aware of transfer of knowledge across languages.

Reading strategies instruction will create readers who are autonomous in their reading endeavors no matter in what language they are instructed first. Learning strategy-based instruction is a learner-focused approach to teaching with the goal of creating greater learner autonomy and increased proficiency. As Tseng, Zoltan, & Norbert (2006, p. 78) mention the

majority of work in the strategy-based instruction have tried "to explore ways of empowering language learners to become more self-directed and effective in their learning." In fact, learning strategy-based instruction helps students to become more aware of available strategies, to understand how to organize and use strategies systematically and effectively, and to learn when and how to transfer strategies to new contexts. (Brown, 2001) Therefore, based on the above discussions, two pedagogical implications can be made. Firstly, it is cost-effective to teach strategic reading in L1 classes hoping to improve L1 reading strategy awareness and effective use of strategies and as a result free the learners' minds from learning these concepts in a second or third language. Secondly, if it happens that this stepping stone is not laid first in L1, we should teach them in L2 or any further language(s) to see its positive effects not only in the language in which these strategies are being taught but also in the previously existing language(s) in mind as a result of cross-linguistic transfer of reading strategies. In this way we can train students who take responsibility for their own learning.

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