

Helping Learners Develop Autonomous Reading Strategies

Logan McCarville

MEd TESOL Program, University of Glasgow

Email: mccarvltt@gmail.com

I am originally from America and began developing interest in autonomy through my teaching experiences in Vietnam and Taiwan. In Vietnam, I worked at a language center as well as a public school and primarily taught young learners general English. While in Taiwan, I furthered my professional development by teaching business English and General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) preparation courses. Much of the organization in both teaching periods was strictly regimented and I began to wonder if the course designers' perceptions of what the students needed matched the actual needs of the learners. Continuing my studies in Scotland at the University of Glasgow in a one-year MEd TESOL program, I began exploring theoretical and practical approaches to developing learner autonomy and became interested in applying some of the principles through designing a lesson plan for teaching reading strategies. In this reflective account I share with you some of the main decisions that I made in designing the lesson, and reflect on the feedback that my peers and teachers gave me in the microteaching which has helped me develop my understanding of nurturing learner autonomy.

Microteaching Overview

The micro-teaching task was part of an assignment on lesson design, and each student was required to present 10 minutes of their 60-minute lesson to the course tutors and students. Following the microteaching, verbal and written feedback focusing on areas of improvement was given. The lesson that I designed was for B2 level Chinese university students studying at the University of Glasgow. They usually attend English class three times a week for two hours each lesson. Such students are pursuing a variety of disciplines, so the learning outcomes of the course focus on applying reading strategies appropriately in order to manage the high demand of out-of-class reading and to enhance reading comprehension for engagement in seminar discussions. From my experience, Chinese learners are often overwhelmed by the university's reading demands and struggle to critically engage in their weekly seminars. The main cause is not only their weak reading comprehension, but also their lack of experience in reading strategically and reflectively the texts that they are assigned. The discussions are an integral part of the course as they allow for learning opportunities on the theoretical material. For these seminars to be successful, learners must be able to critically engage with texts by comprehending and critiquing the author's stance as well as developing their own opinions. In order to complete these tasks, learners need to apply various reading strategies autonomously. My aim was to design a reading lesson that would help the students learn how to choose and apply certain reading strategies in a self-directed way to overcome these obstacles and become more successful learners in their undergraduate programs.

Rationale for the Lesson Design

I wanted the learners to be introduced to new reading strategies and to evaluate their current reading strategies to see how appropriately and effectively they are applying them. During classroom reading comprehension tasks, I have found difficulty in evaluating the approaches learners are taking to comprehend a text. Part of the reason is that many learners are unable to effectively articulate the reading processes they

have undertaken as Nassaji (2007) explains: “Any attempt to explain the processes whereby the text is understood entails a profound understanding of the cognitive processes in which knowledge is represented, processed, and used in comprehension” (pp. 79-80). To help learners better understand their current reading processes, I have them evaluate themselves and develop meta-cognitive knowledge to develop their abilities in deciding which reading strategies are best for them to successfully complete various reading tasks. Not only is this beneficial for the learner, but it also provides me with insight into the learner’s belief about the reading process and a greater understanding of the motivation behind the student’s behavior which allows for more tailored guidance for improvement (Morrison & Navarro, 2014) and cyclical awareness raising. As Victori and Lockhart (1995) propose: “self-directed programme[s]... should involve cyclic diagnosis of learners’ beliefs about language learning, preferred styles, learning needs and objectives in order to endow the learners with criteria for choosing optimum strategies, resources and activities for their individualized programmes” (p. 223). From my experiences at the University of Glasgow, many of the Chinese learners were not familiar with choosing from different reading strategies and did not know how to appropriately implement the ones they knew. In our seminars many of the learners raised questions regarding the comprehension of the texts and the author’s stance rather than the ideas behind it. In addition, much of the course required learners to work autonomously by finding articles and evidence that supported their theories. This proved troublesome as learners struggled to form their opinions of the text through lack of comprehension which made it more difficult to find readings that supported incomplete ideas. Due to these issues, I decided it was important for learners to begin to develop more reading strategies that they can apply autonomously in their reading outside of the classroom.

To assist learners in becoming more successful, I designed a lesson that introduces students to comprehension reading strategies that can be applied autonomously. The lesson begins with the introduction of the task (see the Plan/Introduce stage of Appendix A) and a series of questions for students to consider in order to help direct them towards the purpose of their reading. Direction is used throughout the lesson to help clarify expectations of tasks as I believe complete freedom may be overwhelming for some students (Morrison & Navarro, 2014). The overall purpose of the first task is for students to *implement* and *monitor* their current reading strategies to help develop an understanding of the learning processes for text comprehension. This was done so the learners can engage in meta-cognitive knowledge to help improve their task and strategy knowledge. Wenden (1998) supports this and states “In learning transfer, meta-cognitive knowledge facilitates the appropriate choice of previously learned strategies to achieve learning goals and/or to deal with problems encountered during learning” (p. 526). In Appendix A, other areas of direction are provided in the stages of Group Discussion, Introduce Additional Reading Strategies, Implementation and Monitoring of New Strategy, and Goal-setting.

After the reading is finished, students are asked to *reflect* on their reading experience and *evaluate* the effectiveness of the learning strategies they used through small group discussion (see the Reflect and Evaluate stages of Appendix A). Thoughtful reflection is supported by Kohonen (1992) who states “Only experience that is reflected upon seriously will yield its full measure of learning, and reflection must in turn be followed by testing new hypotheses in order to obtain further experience” (p. 17). In this statement, the reflection stage is recognized as a key element in the learning process as it provides opportunities for learners to gain metacognitive knowledge about the reading process through reflecting on experiences with the reading strategies that they try to use. Following reflection, Kohonen suggests learners test their new theories or reading strategies to further their understanding of the reading process through practical experience. To obtain further experience, the learners repeat the process with a different text to *reflect* and *evaluate* the new learning strategy used (see the Implementation and Monitoring of New Strategy and Evaluate and Discuss New Reading Strategy sections of Appendix A). By doing this, learners have the opportunity to explore

other tactics for comprehending a text which could be useful in their autonomous learning as part of controlling one's own learning is making connections between outcomes and reading strategies (Candy, 1991, p. 389). Once finished, the students reflect further on their experiences in a reflective journal and set learning goals for the week as well as *plan* for how they will achieve them in order to better focus their learning (see the Goal-setting stage of Appendix A) (Benson, 2011, p. 106).

The idea of reflection stems from my own teaching experience. I believe learners need to take more responsibility for their learning as too many students rely heavily on the teacher. Through reflection, learners can evaluate not only the amount of effort they are putting forth but also how effective their learning strategies are. Reflective discussions after reading comprehension tasks were something I originally began to implement with Taiwanese GEPT preparation students as it provided opportunities for learners to be introduced to other methods of tackling difficult tasks. As reading comprehension performance was evaluated through multiple choice questions, learners had a better sense of the effectiveness of their reading strategies which resulted in more thoughtful discussions. Through these discussions learners likely added to their repertoire of strategies and further developed their meta-cognitive knowledge. I also found it important for learners to keep a reflective journal of new items learned. This served as a source of learning strategies and also a device to encourage autonomous learning by setting learning goals. By setting goals, learners may be more motivated to engage in autonomous learning to achieve their desired objectives.

To encourage more autonomy within the lesson, students were not provided a text unless the student had failed to bring their own. This was done to help encourage students to take ownership of their learning which may result in further pursuit of learning (Morrison & Navarro, 2014). In addition, I did not explicitly teach any learning strategies; students explained these through interaction with each other. By taking this approach, students were less reliant on the teacher and it encouraged them to be more resourceful.

Reflection on Microteaching

In developing the lesson, I completed a microteaching task in which I taught 10 minutes of the lesson to the other students on the MEd TESOL program. After the teaching demonstration, the tutors and other learners on the program provided feedback for areas of improvement as well as positive aspects of the lesson. Many of the comments from my peers focused on my selection of the text for the students as this contradicted student control of the content of their learning, a significant principle of learner autonomy. My tutors were concerned with the lack of development of meta-cognitive knowledge of the reading process and not providing enough explicit attention to reading strategies. By reflecting on these comments, I realized that my lesson plan was not as autonomous as it could be. Based on Candy's (1991) spectrum of autonomy, where one side represents student's control and the other teacher's control (p. 9), my original plan favored the teacher end of the spectrum. To shift the control, I further applied Benson's (2011) three dimensions of autonomy which are *control over content*, *control over learning management*, and *control over cognitive processes*. I started with *control over content* and decided to have students choose their own reading based on their discipline of study. This not only allowed for students to find a reading of interesting content, but also provided further personalization of their learning needs as they were able to use a lab report, business plan, academic journal article and so on. In addition, the revised lesson now focused on the development of understanding the reading process along with the introduction of new reading strategies instead of a primary focus on text comprehension. To further promote these developments and to shift the *control over cognitive processing*, several reflection tasks were added. Without including these stages, opportunities for learner planning and further development of effective self-directed learning would have been lost.

The process of designing this lesson plan has helped me refine my own definition of learner autonomy and has broadened my understanding of how autonomy can be supported to develop higher achieving

learners. The feedback received from my classmates and professors has inspired me to continue my pursuit of shifting the control of learning to students to develop more self-directed and more autonomous learners.

References

- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy* (2nd ed). Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Candy, P. C. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kohonen, V. (1992). Experiential language learning: Second language learning as cooperative learner education. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Collaborative language learning and teaching* (pp. 14-39). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Morrison, B., & Navarro, D. (2014). *The autonomy approach: Language learning in the classroom and beyond*. Peaslake, England: Delta Publishing.
- Nassaji, H. (2007). Schema theory and knowledge-based processes in second language reading comprehension: A need for alternative perspectives. *Language Learning*, 57(1), 79–113.
- Victori, M., & Lockhart, W. (1995). Enhancing metacognition in self-directed language learning. *System*, 23(2), 223-34.
- Wenden, A. L. (1998). Metacognitive knowledge and language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 19(4), 515–37.

Appendix A. Revised Lesson Plan

Type of lesson: Reading

Level: B2 **Age group:** Chinese University Students **No. of students:** 12

Teaching context: University of Glasgow

Lesson aims for the students: By the end of the lesson the students will be better able to/have had the opportunity to...

- introduce and raise awareness of various learning strategies for reading
- evaluate the overall effectiveness of selected reading strategies

Specific skills

- General reading skills – skills may vary depending on what the learner chooses to practice (possible skills: comprehension, skimming, scanning, etc.)
- Speaking accuracy on the topic of reading strategies

Anticipated problems & solutions

Ss may have forgotten to bring a text, so T will bring various texts to the class.

Assumed knowledge

- General understanding of reading strategies

Materials (include references)

The lesson plan was copied and distributed to tutors and peers for the micro-teaching. They could make notes in the Comments /Questions column. The format is adapted from Morrison & Navarro, 2014.

Revised lesson plan procedure (practice and micro-teaching)

Type of lesson: Reading **Level:** B2 **Date & Length:** 60 minutes

Stage, Timing, Interaction	Aims (Why)	Procedure (what)	Comments/ Questions
	To raise awareness of the purpose of the task and the actions to take to achieve it	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. T explains that Ss will read the text they have chosen and that during the reading, the Ss should focus on what they are doing throughout the reading process in order to comprehend the reading. The Ss will give a brief summary about their reading in small groups once finished. 2. T writes prompts on the board before reading to help them to think about the strategies they are using in the reading process. Possible prompts are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>How do you feel before reading the text? Why?</i> ● <i>What are the first things you do when this reading task starts?</i> ● <i>Which parts of the text are the easiest to understand? Why?</i> ● <i>Which parts of the text are the most difficult to understand? Why?</i> 3. T explains that the Ss should be as specific as possible when identifying the difficult part of the task (i.e. organisation, grammar, main ideas, etc.) 4. T explains that students can use anything available to them to comprehend the text 5. T asks Ss to take out their text, gives the learners Handout 1 1, and sets a time limit for task completion 	
Implement and monitor reading task <i>10 minutes</i> <i>Ss work individually</i>	To raise awareness of the strategies the learners use during the reading process and help develop meta-cognitive knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ss read the text they have chosen and think about difficulties with the task 2. T should monitor Ss and try to see what strategies Ss are using if possible. T should not assist learners in comprehension of the text in order for Ss to further develop self-directed learning. 	
Reflect Individual reading reflection <i>5 minutes</i> T – S <i>S work individually</i>	To reflect on reading and identify difficulties during the task in reading comprehension	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. T asks Ss to reflect on their reading individually and to note down any strategies they used. Ss should also note what was difficult. 	

<p>Evaluate Group discussion and reflection on reading task <i>10 minutes</i> Ss – Ss or S – S</p>	<p>For Ss to further reflect on the reading strategies used and to provide opportunities for Ss to be introduced to new strategies. For Ss to evaluate the current reading strategies they are using and to decide if they need to change their reading strategies and try something new</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Ss break up into pairs or small groups to discuss what they did during the reading process and give a brief summary of their reading. T writes possible points of discussion on the board which could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>What did you do when you were reading to help you understand the ideas in the text?</i> <i>How effective were these strategies?</i> <i>What strategies did you use that were similar</i> <i>What strategies did you use that were different?</i> <i>Were the strategies related to the type of text?</i> <i>Were they related to where the texts were found?</i> Ss should also consider if they need to change their strategies or if a different strategy would have been more helpful 	
<p>Introduce additional reading strategies <i>8 minutes</i> T – S S – T</p>	<p>To raise Ss awareness of additional reading strategies</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> T shows Ss HO1 and asks them to compare their reading process to the HO T asks Ss questions to help guide their use of the HO. Possible questions could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Which ones did you use?</i> <i>Is there anything else you did that is not included?</i> T elicits strategies that were used by the Ss and writes them on the board. Ss should write the new strategies on their HO 	
<p>Implementation and monitoring of new strategy <i>12 minutes</i> T – S S individually</p>	<p>To provide Ss the opportunity to try a new reading strategy and evaluate its effectiveness for possible future use</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> T explains that Ss will choose a new strategy to use and a new text to read to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. Ss will read and give a brief summary about the new reading and the new strategy they used. T writes questions on the board to help guide the learners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>What new strategy did you try to help you understand the ideas in the text?</i> <i>How effective was the strategy</i> <i>Is there anything you could do to make this strategy more effective? If so, what?</i> T has Ss reads the texts 	
<p>Evaluate and discuss new reading strategy <i>8 minutes</i> Ss – Ss or S – S</p>	<p>Ss to evaluate the new reading strategy and decide if it is effective and something they will utilize in the future</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> After the Ss have finished reading, they work in their small groups again and discuss their experience. 	

<p>Goal-setting 4 minutes S individually</p>	<p>Ss to plan their learning for the week so they can implement, monitor, and evaluate their reading and their current use of reading strategies</p>	<p>1. Ss take out a reflective journal to write down what they had learned for the day and the new reading strategies they were introduced to.</p> <p>2. Other possible points of reflection could be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What did you learn about the reading strategies you use (and don't use) for reading exercises?</i> • <i>How can you find out about other reading strategies?</i> • <i>Can you think of any similarities between reading strategies and listening strategies?</i> <p>3. Ss write a reading goal for the week and write what they will do to meet the goal</p>	
---	--	--	--

Appendix B. Handout 1

1. Check the strategies you used.

- *I read the whole article and tried to understand the general idea.*
- *I took notes in English/my first language as I was reading.*
- *I underlined the text as I was reading.*
- *I took notes in English/my first language after I read.*
- *As I was reading, I thought about the ideas and how true they are.*
- *As I was reading, I thought about the ideas and how they relate to my experience.*
- *I did something else: _____.*

2. If I didn't understand a word:

- *I looked it up in my dictionary.*
- *I asked someone.*
- *I ignored it, and focused on the words I did know.*
- *I guessed the meaning.*
- *I did something else: _____.*

3. When I checked the meaning, using a dictionary or person:

- *I wrote the new word in my vocabulary notebook.*
- *I wrote a translation on the text.*
- *I just checked the meaning, and kept reading.*
- *I did something else: _____.*

4. If I didn't understand a sentence:

- *I guessed the meaning.*
- *I ignored it.*
- *I read it again.*
- *I did something else: _____.*

5. Other: