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Reading in a foreign language: Strategic variation between readers of differing proficiency

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ABSTRACT

For university language students who are required to deal with literary texts for linguistic or literary purposes, there is hardly any transitional stage between short adapted expository texts, read in the early stages of language learning, and complex literary texts, encountered at university in the literature class. Language readers must then make a substantial mental effort to understand texts intended for a native readership. In challenging reading mode, the quality of reading depends on the efficiency of problem-solving operations, including evaluative and executive strategies, put into place in order to attempt to fill in the comprehension gaps present in complex texts. Although reading strategies used by foreign language learners have been identified and categorised by research, the conditions of their use and their relationships are still unclear. Moreover, to my knowledge, no empirical investigation has focused specifically on comprehension monitoring in the context of foreign language literary texts. Literature instruction would benefit from such a study.

Using verbal reports to elicit data, this study proposes to examine how proficient and less proficient university students of French, at intermediate level of instruction, implement problem-solving strategies when reading literary texts. Strategies such as *guessing at words*, *consulting a dictionary*, and *translating mentally*, are studied in relation to their contribution to the overall monitoring cycle. The results obtained indicate that proficient and less proficient readers tend to use the same strategies but with different purposes. The study demonstrates that the major difference between the two groups of respondents resides in ability some readers have to integrate meaning and construct text in a cohesive and synthetic fashion.

INTRODUCTION

The study of literary texts is a significant feature of most university undergraduate programs in language departments. From the outset, first year post-secondary language students are required to study literary texts for linguistic and literary purposes. In most cases, there is no transitional stage for learners between the exposure to simplified or fabricated expository texts, read in the early stages of language learning, and complex literary texts intended for a native readership, encountered at university level. In such conditions, incomplete linguistic and cultural knowledge means that the demands may be much greater on foreign language (FL) readers than they are on first language (L1) readers to understand authentic literary texts. For language learners, this class of texts contains more comprehension gaps which need to be filled by using conscious questioning, planning and evaluating. Yet little is known about the process governing FL reading monitoring. (Block 1992) Although reading strategies used by foreign language learners have been identified and categorised by research, the conditions of their use and their relationships are still unclear. Thus the aim of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the way strategies relate to a larger monitoring framework. This study examined how proficient and less proficient language learners implemented problem-solving strategies when reading French literary texts. Verbal reports were used to collect data. Strategies were studied in relation to an overall monitoring cycle revolving around three steps: *Evaluating comprehension*, *Implementing strategic action*, and *Checking efficiency of strategic action*. Because of the vast amount of data produced by the study, it is not possible to give a full account of results in the present paper. My discussion will therefore present the major findings of the study in a condensed form. After a presentation of the research design, I will show evidence of a monitoring cycle, and will discuss the strategic characteristics of proficient and less-proficient readers, paying particular attention to mental translation, a strategy used by both groups of participants, but with different purposes.

THE STUDY

Methodological considerations

Verbal reports (also generally referred to as ‘think-aloud protocols’) have been applied in investigations of reading to reveal characteristics of the reading process. In particular, they have been used to elicit data on inference-making and strategy use. Verbal reports provide data through verbalisation of what is being thought during a particular task. They tend to elicit controlled processes in preference to automatised processes because the latter are not held in short-term memory. Verbal reports can take three forms (Cohen 1998):

1. General statement (e.g. *I usually avoid using a dictionary because it slows me down*)
2. Self-observation (e.g. *I have just reread this last sentence because I was not sure of its meaning*)
3. Self-revelation (e.g. *what is this pronoun referring to?*)

The purpose of the study was to elicit information on how participants went about solving comprehension difficulties in a *natural reading environment*. Consequently, I aimed only to investigate *initial* reading, as it could occur at home or in class, during

which readers discovered a text and relied only on their own knowledge and limited external resources (such as a dictionary). In such conditions, only a semi-directed protocol methodology, with minimal prompting from the researcher, could give the respondents the opportunity to reach beyond factual levels of comprehension by 'envisioning' the texts they had to read. It was felt here that potential textual envisionment¹ was more likely to occur if each text was presented as a whole (not sentence by sentence, for example). Following [Ericsson and Simon's](#) (1984) recommendations, it was judged that very careful instruction to respondents on the reporting procedure, as well as training, would be adequate and in line with our views on literary reading (see below for details).

Description of design

Participants

Ten first-year post-secondary students were selected to participate in this experiment which took place at the University of Melbourne in 1997. The participants had studied French for six years at secondary level before entering university. Their response in a motivational questionnaire showed that they were all strongly motivated by the study of literature. ([Bouvet 1998](#))

Participants' proficiency was assessed by a combination of external indicators. Five participants were labelled 'proficient' (referred to in this study as P group) and five participants 'less proficient' (referred to as LP group), according to the following criteria:

- Their response in a questionnaire on FL literary reading studying self-perception ([Bouvet 2000](#)):
 - Besides indicating what motivated them to read literary texts, students had to assess their reading proficiency.
- Their results in the compulsory Placement Test taken at the beginning of Semester one:
 - The test, designed and implemented in the department at first-year post-secondary level, aimed to assess the overall morphosyntactic knowledge of incoming students in order to help place them into proficiency streams.
- Their results at the end of Semester one in the Textual Studies test:
 - The test consisted of a written analysis of a literary extract to be written either in French or in English. This language criterion helped determine the reading ability of students in relation to a task performed in a limited time-frame. In order to complete the written analysis of a 600-word text satisfactorily, students had to be able to read the text very quickly in an accurate manner.
- An assessment made by their Textual Studies instructor.
 - Instructors were asked to rate pre-selected students according to:
 1. their willingness to participate in class discussions;
 2. their demonstrable interest for literature in the context of first-year post-secondary studies.

The rating by instructors indicated that very active participants in the classroom (likely to be selected in the P group, the proficient group) tended to read most prescribed texts, suggesting an interest and an aptitude for reading. Also instructors' ratings allowed to discriminate between verbally active and passive students. Because the experimental design was based on verbalisation, the investigator had to ensure all selected students were likely not to be intimidated by the reporting task.

Consequently, proficient participants possessed the following characteristics:

- They judged themselves to be proficient readers.
- They obtained a score of at least 75% on the Placement test.
- They obtained a score of at least 75% on the Textual Studies test.
- They were assessed by their Textual Studies instructors as:
 - participating actively in class
 - showing a keen interest in literature.

Less proficient participants possessed the following characteristics:

- Although they displayed positive attitudes towards studying literary texts, these students believed they had reading difficulties
- They obtained a score of no more than 65% on the Placement Test.
- They obtained a score of no more than 65% in the Textual Study test.
- They were assessed by their Textual Studies instructors as:
 - fairly good class participants
 - showing some interest for literature

Characteristics of materials

Three twentieth-century French literary passages were selected from the list of texts prescribed for first year post-secondary level. They were beginnings of short stories (*La Plage* by A. Robbe-Grillet, *Les Muets* by A. Camus and *Le Proverbe* by M. Aymé) and were approximately 400 words in length. It was decided during the elaboration of the design and pilot trials that complete short stories were not manageable in the context of the experiment because of the amount of data produced in each reporting session. Since whole stories could not be used, particular attention had to be paid to textual unity. Each extract had to be semantically and structurally as self-contained as possible.

The texts were allocated as follows:²

Proficient group (P group):

- **Les Muets** (A. Camus) : Easy
- **Le Proverbe** (M. Aymé) : Difficult

Non-proficient group (LP group):

- **La Plage** (A. Robbe-Grillet): Fairly easy
- **Les Muets** (A. Camus): Difficult

Les Muets was common to both groups. It allowed direct comparison between levels of difficulty in a similar reading context.

Verbal report session

Prior to the start of the experiment, participants were provided individually with an instruction sheet explaining what was expected from them. They were asked to verbalise four aspects of the reading process:

1. control of comprehension;
2. identification of obstacles;
3. attempts to solve comprehension problems;
4. checking of action efficiency.

At the beginning of each session, the participants were thoroughly briefed on the aims of the experiment and the procedure. The participants were then asked to practise verbal reporting on a 40-word text of average difficulty. I asked participants to focus on the four steps described in the instruction sheet until their verbalisation technique was judged satisfactory.

DATA ANALYSIS MODEL

Model elaboration

The classification model was elaborated in stages. First, a basic framework was trialed in a preliminary study. The model was then expanded and implemented in the pilot study. This version of the model was called the 'provisional framework'. Finally, the model was completed and adjusted to meet the specificity of data produced by the verbal report study.

Block's (1992) problem-solving scheme was adopted as the shell for the classification model used in the study. Block's model comprises three phases and six steps:

- Evaluation phase:
 1. problem recognition
 2. problem source identification
- Action phase
 3. strategic planning
 4. strategy implementation
- Checking phase
 5. check
 6. revision

This basic framework allowed me to verify the workability of the three-phase, six-step model. However, Block's model does not provide any details of the various strategies and behaviours at work during reading. A larger monitoring framework was subsequently designed, borrowing features from several theoretical and empirical

studies. Hosenfeld (1984) provides a list of word-attack strategies used by good and poor readers. Sarig (1987) offers a logical classification of strategies (or “moves” as they are referred to in her study) into four categories:

- technical aid moves;
- clarification and simplification moves;
- coherence-detecting moves;
- monitoring moves.

In a review of strategy research, McDonough (1995) offers a compiled list of strategies organised under Sarig’s classification scheme, which are compatible with Block’s model. The *action* phase in our model, where the majority of strategies were located, was then expanded and sub-divided to accommodate different types of problem-solving strategies emerging from the coding of pilot reports. The *strategy implementation* stage (Step four in Block’s original model) was divided into four sub-categories as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic monitoring framework

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- Evaluation phase:
 1. problem recognition
 2. problem source identification
 - Action phase
 3. strategic planning
 4. strategy implementation
 - instrumental strategies
 - deductive strategies
 - simplification strategies
 - cohesive strategies
 - Checking phase
 5. check
 6. revision
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After the ten reporting sessions had taken place, all transcripts of reports were examined and problem-solving strategies were isolated and coded according to the basic monitoring framework presented in Table 1. As suggested by Pearson Cassanave (1988), problem-solving strategies were viewed as strategic behaviours occurring between a *triggering problem* and its *resolution* (or attempt at resolution). On each side of the problem-solving phase lies routine monitoring. So, reading monitoring may be viewed as an alternation of routine monitoring behaviours and strategies, and evaluation and fix-up strategies.

The following transcript extract provides a good example of verbalisation and illustrates how strategic behaviours were codified (see Table 2).

Transcript reads:

I don't understand *tonnellerie*. But I think it's important to understand the rest. So I'll look it up. (Looking in the dictionary)... *cooperage*... Now I understand.
(Francine, P group)³

Table 2: Typical elicitation of strategic behaviours

• I don't understand <i>tonnellerie</i> .	1. problem recognition
• (covert process here)	2. (source problem identification not verbalised)
• But I think it's important to understand the rest.	3. problem evaluation
• So I'll look it up.	4. strategy planning
• (Looking in dictionary) <i>cooperaage...</i>	5. strategy implementation
• Now I understand.	6. checking

Once codified, strategic moves were counted and classified according to the monitoring framework presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Monitoring framework and overall number of strategies used by P and LP groups

STRATEGIES	TOTAL P	TOTAL LP
	<i>Les Muets Le Proverbe</i>	<i>La Plage Les Muets</i>
1. Identifying a problem • stating nature of a problem	12	5
2. Deciding on importance of a problem • deciding a problem is important/unimportant • changing plan	19 19	12 12
3. Planning strategic action • announcing type of action to be undertaken • justifying action plan	11 0	6 1
4. Implementing problem-solving strategies • skipping and ignoring problem • reading on for clarification • rereading problematic part silently • rereading problematic part aloud • slowing down reading speed • increasing reading speed • marking text for ulterior consultation • using a dictionary • step-by-step translating until next problem • inferring meaning using morpho-syntactical clues • inferring meaning using lexical recognition • inferring meaning using contextual clues • inferring forgotten meaning from memory • translating for coherence • visualising a situation • making a hypothesis about situation • confirming a hypothesis • disconfirming a hypothesis • connecting problematic part with another section of text • elaborating a macroframe • making a summary • identifying a theme • relating a theme to the text • refocussing concentration • making comments on text's characteristics	33 19 13 15 1 0 5 16 6 10 15 24 16 6 4 10 9 0 10 30 3 7 5 0 3	13 9 3 23 10 5 7 58 105 4 25 14 0 0 3 4 4 0 1 7 7 0 4 9 3
5. Evaluating the effectiveness of action • commenting on the effectiveness of action taken • making comment on personal aptitude	1 0	8 10
6. Revising the action	2	0
Total strategies	324	372

DISCUSSION

Some evidence towards a monitoring cycle

The study produced enough data to identify the three steps of the monitoring cycle: *evaluation*, *action* and *checking*. However, it must be pointed out that respondents tended to remain mostly covert about the first phase *evaluation* and the last phase *checking*. In fact, most of the data were concentrated in the *action* phase. It could be that, when a text is presented to the reader as a whole, most *evaluation* and *checking* activities are covert because they are masked by strategy implementation, which is more demanding in terms of effort and energy. Both phases may be situated on a less conscious plane than action processes. Checking, for example, may in fact be integrated in cohesive strategies such as *translating for coherence*, *making a hypothesis*, and *making a summary*, which are higher-level strategies used to tie text together. These strategies may feature in-built *checking* and *revising* devices which could covertly send positive or negative feedback to the reader.

Use of action strategies

Results show that, although P and LP respondents reported using a fairly similar number of strategies (see results in Table 3), these were used in different ways. P readers' better knowledge of the target language helped them focus on more dynamic action strategies which carried them through the text. They tended to favour energy efficient moves, such as *skipping and ignoring a problem*, and *inferring meaning from contextual clues*, with little use of external sources (e.g. dictionary), which they seem to avoid when possible, in order to allow higher-level processing to take place.

One of the most pertinent features of proficient reading seemed to be the importance given to macroframe elaboration. Macroframe elaboration can occur at section, paragraph and whole text levels and is text structure dependent. This strategy consists in formulating snapshots of text at regular intervals, when the structure permits it. As reading progresses, textual pictures are touched up and updated, then put together to form a global picture.

This step is essential to the monitoring cycle for several reasons: 1) it helps check partial or overall comprehension; 2) it enables formulation and spotting of inconsistencies and allows revision to take place; 3) it facilitates anticipation and acts as a vector for text progression. Even when the text became more complex and difficult to process, P readers endeavoured to elaborate, maintain and refine macroframes, which helped them mark out text and progress in stages. LP readers also used macroframe elaboration, but not as much, or as systematically as P readers. Before they could reach such elaborative levels, weaker readers had to overcome textual unfamiliarities mechanically, by resorting to facilitating processing strategies, such as slow reading, reading out loud, rereading out loud, using lexical recognition and translating literally. They also tended to make profuse use of external sources (e.g. dictionary) instead of guessing from context when they could have done so. As a result of the enormous amount of effort and mental energy required to build up stable comprehension, LP readers reported sparser and less complete macroframes than proficient readers.

Same strategies but different purposes

P and LP respondents reported using similar strategies to process text, but they made use of some of them in different ways. For instance, *skipping and ignoring a problem* was reported by both groups, but P respondents used the strategy in a more effective way than LP respondents. Analysis of transcripts suggests that P readers avoided breaking the reading flow, even when they came across unfamiliar words or expressions. In such a case, readers made the implicit decision (during the Evaluation phase) that the obstacle was not important enough to be dealt with and moved on. LP readers sometimes displayed similar use of the *skipping and ignoring a problem* strategy to P readers when conditions were right. But the transcripts show that they also used the strategy in a different and less effective manner: they skipped and ignored difficulties they were unable to process, leaving irremediable comprehension gaps in the text.

The particular case of translation

It is in the area of translation where the most noticeable difference between P and LP respondents lay. Results indicate clearly that LP readers made much more use of translation than P readers. This characteristic appears to be symptomatic of poor reading in FL and L2 (Bensoussan 1989). However, it is important to distinguish between two types of translation: ‘disintegrative’ (or ‘word-for-word’ translation; a term borrowed from Kern (1994) which indicates lack of syntactical and structural cohesion) and what could be called ‘integrative’ translation (called *translating for coherence* in our framework), which have different processing functions. The integrative/disintegrative dichotomy presented here is compatible with Block’s (1986) classification of reading as two patterns of strategy use: extensive (surface-bound) and reflexive (inference-based) reading.

In this study, LP respondents reported 105 disintegrative translation items and not a single integrative translation item. P respondents, on the other hand, reported 6 disintegrative translation items and 6 integrative translation items. This indicates that LP readers relied much more on literal translation than P readers who only used it as an extreme measure to clarify comprehension in particularly complex conditions. However, P respondents relied on cohesive translation to a certain extent, as a means of firming/confirming comprehension, integrating a portion of text into a wider section.

Disintegrative translation

Disintegrative translation is closely associated with reading in challenging mode. In this study, LP readers tended to apply a ‘read-and-translate’ approach to text comprehension at local level. In this case, disintegrative translation consisted in translating roughly whatever could be translated (regardless of L1 grammatical correctness) and leaving gaps whenever translation was impossible. Often, literal translation passages were a combination of French and English. As text difficulty increased, translated segments became shorter (a few words, a single word). Often LP readers translated, solved an incoming problem, and then translated again until the next problem as shown in the following example:

...*au plein de l'hiver*... Would that be "full of winter" (literal translation)? ... *et cependant une journée radieuse*... Okay, "it was still winter, it was still a radiant day" ... *se levait*... "got itself up" (literal translation)... arose (adjustment) itself on the town already active".
(Scott, LP group, *Les Muets*)

Integrative translation

Integrative translation was a strategy sometimes used by proficient readers to consolidate or confirm the meaning of a more difficult portion of text. It was not often associated with reading aloud. Integrative translation was not used to process fragments of text, as was the case with disintegrative translation. Rather it assisted in processing whole meaningful sentences. Integrative translation has cohesive properties and is, in a way, similar to paraphrasing or constructing a summary. It was a higher-level strategy used by readers, the main function of which was to ensure that comprehension was taking place in a coherent way, at a conscious level. By elaborating a more familiar format in their native language, readers aimed to recreate and match trouble-free processing conditions of subsequent easier sections, in order to maintain reading flow. Integrative translation could be used to create a 'friendlier' paratext in reading conditions close to routine conditions which did not warrant a switch to analytical problem-solving mode. The following example shows how Helen used this strategy to "get the meaning together":

He always liked swimming; and the years passed, and he had Fernande, the girl that he is... and the longer hours to make a living. I'm just 'pacing' to get the meaning together...
(Helen, P group, *Les Muets*)

CONCLUSION

In this study, various aspects of comprehension monitoring have been examined with a particular focus on problem-solving strategies. Verbal report methodology was used to elicit verbal data from foreign language readers of differing levels of proficiency. The study aimed to investigate the possible strategic differences between proficient and less-proficient readers. It was shown that both groups of readers used the same strategies, though differently and with different purposes. Differences between P and LP readers were more evident in the area of strategy implementation. P readers appeared to adopt strategic behaviours based on efficiency and involving integration and cohesion, whereas less proficient readers often resorted to using strategies in a less productive manner. One of the most substantial findings produced by this study concerned the use of integrative translation by proficient readers and disintegrative translation strategies by less proficient readers. As argued by Kern (1994), it is possible that the disintegrative mode of translation used by weaker readers corresponds to a developmental stage towards more efficient reading techniques. The most evident difference between proficient and less proficient reading therefore resides in the ability to integrate meaning and construct text in a cohesive and synthetic fashion. Translation constitutes obviously an important dimension of reading and should be the focus of further investigation.

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NOTES

¹ Concept developed by Langer who defines envisionments as "dynamic sets of related ideas, images, questions, disagreements, anticipations, arguments, and hunches that fill the mind during every reading, writing, speaking, or other experience when one gains, expresses, and shares thoughts and understanding" (Langer 1996: 9)

² The texts were rated in relation to their degree of difficulty, since another aspect of this study was to investigate the effect of the variation of text difficulty on strategic behaviour. Although it will be mentioned in this paper, the issue of relative difficulty is not developed here.

³ Participants have been given pseudonyms.