



Making implicit practice explicit: How do upper secondary teachers describe their reading comprehension strategies instruction?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 February 2014
Received in revised form 8 May 2014
Accepted 9 May 2014
Available online 2 June 2014

Keywords:

Instruction
Literacy
Metacognition
Reading comprehension strategies
Teacher knowledge
Teacher professional development

ABSTRACT

This study examined the activation of teachers' tacit knowledge of reading comprehension strategy instruction as part of a teacher professional development course. Although studies have examined professional development courses that inform teachers about research-based knowledge, there has not been much research on courses activating teachers' tacit knowledge, as is the case with the present study. This qualitative study analyzed 21 upper secondary teachers' instructional design; which strategies they promoted, how these differed across subjects, how their instruction was made explicit through professional development, and how the course contributed to the activation of tacit knowledge. This study demonstrated teacher learning over time, where implicit practices were made explicit through written narratives and increased metacognitive awareness.

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1. Introduction

Lower reading scores than desired on the PISA literacy test for 15-year-olds have drawn attention to the reading proficiency of secondary school students and instituted a number of policy initiatives. These initiatives have prompted the search for methods to improve reading instruction at this level. Solutions have focused on training secondary school teachers to change their instructional practices and include reading comprehension strategies instruction (Hargreaves, 2003; Moje, 2008; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2012). As pointed out by Duke, Pearson, Strachan, and Billman (2011), "Teachers matter, especially for complex cognitive tasks like reading for understanding" (p. 51).

However, even as research has begun to document that teachers matter (e.g., Grossman et al., 2010; Hattie, 2009; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, & Ecob, 1988) and that strategy training is effective for student reading comprehension (e.g., Bernhardt, 2011; Duke et al., 2011), uncertainty remains about which strategies contribute to such an improvement and how teachers conceptualize the process of developing better readers (e.g., Aasen et al., 2012; Block & Duffy, 2008; Hellekjær & Hopfenbeck, 2012). Pressley (2008) recently stated the need to conduct research on the professional development of comprehension instruction teachers. He argued that, despite the urgings of the National Reading Panel (2000) and professional development initiatives, there was "no evidence of much comprehension strategies instruction occurring extensively now" (p. 406). Then he reminded us of the importance of such instruction, bearing in mind that "very effective

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readers actually use a small repertoire of strategies” (p. 407). Other scholars have echoed this description (e.g., Grossman et al., 2010; Hattie, 2009; Hellekjær & Hopfenbeck, 2012; McNamara & Magliano, 2009; Parris & Block, 2008), and called for more research about teachers’ metacognitive learning related to the teaching of strategic reading, along with the knowledge necessary to engage in such practices (Baker, 2008; Block & Duffy, 2008; Duke et al., 2011).

This article addresses these issues by examining how 21 teachers described their reading comprehension strategies instruction in Norwegian upper secondary schools. Norway represents an interesting case in this context. First, Norwegian students performed significantly below the OECD average on the PISA literacy test in 2006, with a decline from 2000, while this negative development was reversed from 2006 to 2012 (OECD, 2013; Roe, 2013). Second, PISA 2009 scores indicated a correlation between Norwegian students’ reading literacy and their ability to recognize effective reading comprehension strategies (Hopfenbeck & Roe, 2010). Third, the national curriculum (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [KD], 2006, 2013) stated that teachers have methodological freedom to choose which strategies to teach and how to address strategic reading in their classrooms. This article therefore suggests that a productive means of promoting strategies instruction involves giving teachers a voice in defining practices that support comprehension.

The present study combined qualitative data from written teacher narratives and contextualized interviews. Together, these data explored how and for what purposes teachers included reading comprehension strategies by asking, “What role do reading comprehension strategies play in upper secondary teachers’ instructional design?” The study further investigated which reading comprehension strategies the teachers promoted, how these practices differed across subjects, and how the teachers’ strategy instruction was made explicit through professional development.

1.1. Strategic reading instruction development

The following review presents empirical findings of strategic reading instruction, and teacher development initiatives to foster such instruction.

1.1.1. An apparent paradox

Through guided strategy instruction, teachers have demonstrated how students can overcome problems they encounter when reading to understand (e.g., Block & Duffy, 2008; Duke et al., 2011; Fisher & Frey, 2008). This outcome proposes an apparent paradox, as research suggests that reading comprehension strategy instruction is not carried out in the majority of reading classrooms (Duke et al., 2011; Hellekjær & Hopfenbeck, 2012; McNamara, 2011; Moje, 2008; Pressley, 2008). On the one hand, student reading skills have improved markedly among secondary students in Norway (Hellekjær & Hopfenbeck, 2012; Olsen, Hopfenbeck, Lillejord, & Roe, 2012). On the other, research acknowledges a lack of information about what goes on when students are asked to read for understanding in Norwegian secondary school (Aasen et al., 2012).

1.1.2. An overwhelming number of strategies

Studies have shown that a large number of reading comprehension strategies have been successful when teaching students to read strategically. This abundance of strategies can lead to a few problems, as there are simply too many to agree on a fixed set (Roe, 2008). Teachers might feel the need to collect strategies to fill their already full lessons (Fisher & Frey, 2008), at the risk of becoming “strategy junkies” (p. 262).

Researchers have attempted to codify the useful strategies. Weinstein and Meyer (1986), for example, captured the main strategies of memorization, organization, elaboration, and monitoring. Memorization indicates surface-level processing, while the other three contribute to deeper-level processing (Bråten & Samuelstuen, 2004; Bråten & Strømsø, 2011; Weinstein, Ridley, Dahl, & Weber, 1988). In their study of naturally-occurring strategies instruction, Anmarkrud and Bråten (2012) found that elaboration strategies were most frequent, though they identified substantial differences occurring across four lower secondary classrooms. Further, Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) found more than 100 strategies in their study of verbal protocols of reading. Block and Duffy (2008) listed 45 strategies proposed from 1978 through 2000, where main strategies such as monitoring, organizing and elaborating appear together with specific strategies such as asking questions, summarizing, and relating what one reads to prior knowledge. Similarly, Roe (2008) described 15 reading strategies in work she reviewed. She argued that, while some were main strategies (e.g. monitoring), others were specific strategies (e.g. “visualize” can be a form of monitoring). This illustrates how strategies can be complementary and interrelational.

1.1.3. Teaching a small repertoire rather than a multitude of strategies

While research conducted through 2000 focused on strategies being taught one at a time (Block & Duffy, 2008), recent research suggests that a more sensible approach would be teaching a small repertoire of strategies in combination (Dole, Nokes, & Dritis, 2009; Duke et al., 2011; McNamara & Magliano, 2009; Pressley, 2008) and increasing the use of metacognitively-oriented instruction (Baker, 2008; Parris & Block, 2008).

In line with the notion of strategies repertoires, Block and Duffy (2008) proposed nine strategies “that have been researched and validated to be highly successful since 2000” (p. 22), namely predict; monitor; question; image; look-backs, rereads, and fix-it strategies; infer; find main ideas, summarize, and draw conclusions; evaluate; and synthesize. Duke et al. (2011) proposed a similar repertoire of eight strategies: setting purposes for reading; previewing and predicting; activating prior knowledge; monitoring, clarifying, and fixing; visualizing and creating visual representations; drawing inferences; self-questioning and thinking aloud; and summarizing and retelling. However, they pointed out that, “the list of strategies that research indicated are

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