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Doris Jones

The American University in Cairo AUC, djones@aucegypt.edu

Caroline Mitry

The American University in Cairo AUC, cmitry@aucegypt.edu

Joyce Rafla

The American University in Cairo AUC, joyceraf@aucegypt.edu

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Reflective Pedagogies and the Metacognitive Approach to Reading Comprehension

Doris Jones, Senior Instructor, Department of Rhetoric and Composition
Caroline Mitry, Center for Learning and Teaching
Joyce Rafla, Center for Learning and Teaching

The Department of Rhetoric and Composition has a strong pedagogical culture of fostering reading and critical thinking in its curriculum. Yet teaching AUC students to reflect on how they read remains challenging. Such reflection is a metacognitive skill and requires the most effective teaching resources available because literacy is foundational for all learning. An extensive review of the literature has shown that most research concerning critical reading skills development focuses primarily on K-12 learners. There exists, however, some landmark research about metacognitive reading skills in higher education. Flavell's (1979) model of metacognition serves as the foundation for research in the field of metacognition today. According to Flavell, metacognition is fundamental in reading, oral skills, language acquisition, writing, attention, social interactions and memory. He also divides metacognitive processes into four categories: (1) metacognitive knowledge, (2) metacognitive experiences, (3) goals/tasks, and (4) actions/strategies (p. 906). Flavell further claims metacognition involves the "active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes in relation to the cognitive objects or data on which they bear, usually in service of some concrete goal or objective" (p. 232).

In this essay, we highlight the results from a year-long Action Research project that involved the implementation of metacognitive reading strategies in several *CORE 1010 Filming Difference* classes. Implementing and evaluating metacognitive reading strategies included: (1) choosing longer and strategic readings to complement the course theme; (2) placing students in reading communities (small reading groups) to identify text structure before reading, (3) assigning specific critical reading questions for groups to engage the text; and (4) conducting focus group sessions before and after the text was read. Taking these steps were critical in order to understand AUC student behaviors and practices related to course readings and classroom discussions. Furthermore, students were divided to work in groups to help answer two strategic questions:

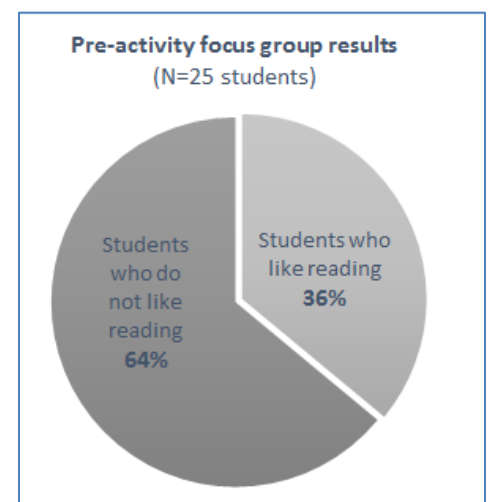
1. Do metacognitive/small group reading skills lead to greater comprehension of a text than private reading?
2. If so, what aspects of metacognitive/group reading contribute to higher levels of comprehension?

Finding answers to these questions involves reflective teaching and research to address problems students encounter when they attempt to develop higher level reading skills while also creating guided opportunities for interpersonal and small group discussions. Based on initial findings, there is strong evidence to support the integration of a metacognitive reading model, which includes helping students perform a critical inventory of their own knowledge before actively engaging with texts.

Action Research Findings

Following the assignment of the readings and group presentations, we assessed the use of guided reading activities with students in Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 (a total of 25 students). CLT performed several focus group sessions with students before and after they engaged in the activities. A brief overview of the findings is presented in this article while a more detailed presentation will be included in CLT's symposium this semester.

In pre-activity focus groups students were asked general questions about their reading preferences and habits, whether they like to read or not, their attitude towards readings assigned in an academic setting, etc. The graph here shows students' response to the general question of whether they like to read or not (in any language), 64% of students (18) indicated that they do not like



to read. The majority (90%) of students who do not like to read listed boredom of reading and lack of time to read as their primary reasons for their aversion to reading.

When asked about readings that are assigned within an academic setting, the majority of students agreed that if a reading is interesting enough for them, they would not mind it being “long”, as in such a case the reading becomes less boring. Interestingly, the relevance of a reading to their field of study or to their lives did not affect students’ interest significantly. All students agreed that the most important thing in a reading would be how interesting they found it.

Many students also mentioned that they had issues with maintaining focus while reading assigned material. When asked about how they dealt with that problem, they indicated several strategies such as: highlighting text, taking notes while reading, dividing text into sections to read at different times, summarizing paragraphs while identifying and focusing on the important parts, skipping uninteresting parts, timing themselves, and using Google Translate to find the meanings of difficult words.

Post-activity focus groups were also conducted to find out what students had learnt from working together, the factors that helped them learn and their suggestions for improving similar activities in the future. These focus groups yielded some useful suggestions that were incorporated by the instructor in the following semesters’ guided reading tasks.

Post-activity focus groups showed that there were specific elements of the design of the reading activity that helped students read “better”. First, the focus group reflected the importance of using questions in the guided reading activity. Students reported that questions helped them maintain interest by creating a more purposeful reading. They also added that they helped them organize knowledge. These responses are in line with recent cognitive research that provided evidence to the effectiveness of having well structured questions to guide reading (Andersen, 2000). Another factor that also enhanced their reading experience was reading in groups. To elaborate, students were able to understand each others’ perspectives of the readings which, in turn, enhanced their metacognitive abilities. Students reflected on their experience saying that the group diversity provided a richer experience to analyzing the text. Also, when different people answered the same question, each brought their own understanding of the text thus providing a more holistic picture. The design of the assignments in Spring and Summer 2015 helped students maintain focus as they felt the workload was manageable and specific; as one student put it “we knew what we needed to focus on.” In addition, the students felt more encouraged to understand from one another within the group, rather than reading on their own.

Based on an analysis of the focus group results, it was discovered that consciousness of reading strategies with students increased, and that more metacognitive strategies were performed during the think-aloud tasks. In addition, the results of this yearlong Action Research have wider institutional and pedagogical implications for the Common Reading Program and for faculty across the disciplines. Since reading is a foundational skill for all learning, it is important that teachers employ a variety of methods by selecting texts and using reading strategies to achieve specific learning goals. Equally important, teachers are encouraged to model metacognitive strategies to support students as they learn how to use these skills to become knowledge producers instead of passive consumers of information.

If you have any questions please contact djones@aucegypt.edu, cmitry@aucegypt.edu, joyceraf@aucegypt.edu

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