Chapter I

Introduction

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1. The Rationale and Statement of the Problem

Reading is a fundamental and necessary skill for anyone learning English as a foreign language. Learners use reading as a tool for learning and acquiring English and to gather information for the professions of medicine, science, technology and law etc. Strategies are vital in English reading. Students use a variety of strategies to assist them with the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information. Students who pursue their studies at the university level especially need to read English texts because the study of English is included in the national curriculum. This

fact can be seen in the new College English Syllabus which has been published by the National Education Administration (1999).

The objectives of College English teaching are to encourage students to develop more efficient reading abilities, as well as good listening, writing and speaking abilities. We need to enable students to obtain information in English concerning their own majors, and to lay a solid foundation for further English study.

In China, English as a foreign language (EFL) has been taught as a compulsory course at colleges and universities for more than 20 years. Students must pass English proficiency examinations in order to obtain their educational diplomas, which are administrated by the Ministry of Higher Education.

Clearly, students have to deal with a lot of English in their college studies. They are expected to read and understand various kinds of texts from paragraphs, passages, simplified articles, and business letters, to operation manuals for tools, equipment, and machinery. The ability to cope with different kinds of texts is considered an important stepping stone for students in choosing their careers and continuing their studies. It is obvious that reading plays an increasingly important role in learning English, especially in higher education and in the instruction of the students who propose to enter professions in science and technology.

Since the early seventies, research in this area has for the most part,

focused on the best way to teach English learners to use a variety of strategies in order to read better. The current focus of research in foreign language reading has begun to concentrate on readers' strategies. Oxford and Crookall (1989) define "Strategies as learning techniques, behaviors, problem solving or study skills which make learning more effective and efficient (p. 404)". Rigney (1978) states reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension. Research in second language reading suggests that strategies improve reading comprehension. Comprehension or reading strategies, indicate how readers conceive of a task, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when reading comprehension is difficult (Singhal, 2001).

According to Nuttall (1996), reading is considered a process of decoding, deciphering, identifying, articulating, pronouncing, understanding and responding (p. 2). It can be understood as cognition and metacognition and involves the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to increase efficiency as readers strive to reach a desirable outcome.

Cognition is "the intellectual processes through which information is obtained, transformed, stored, retrieved and used. It is also the mental process or faculty of knowing, including awareness, perception,

reasoning, language, memory and judgment" (Brown & Baker, 1983 cited in Webster's Ninth New Collegiate dictionary, 1983).

Metacognition is an important concept in cognitive theory. It is "Knowing How To Learn" (Nelson, 1998. p. 6), and figuring out which strategies work best. It consists of two basic processes occurring simultaneously: monitoring your progress as you learn, and making changes and adapting your strategies if you perceive that you are not doing well (Winn, & Snyder, 1998).

According to Garner (1987), reading comprehension involves an integration of the reader's prior knowledge, language proficiency, and other metacognitive strategies. This involves far more than just understanding words, sentences, and text. Metacognitive strategies involve both knowledge about learning (metacognitive knowledge) and control or regulation over learning (metacognitive strategies or experiences).

According to Block (1992), metacognitive strategies include the activities undertaken by readers to plan, to predict outcomes, and to control, monitor and evaluate their comprehension. This same idea appears to be reflected by Vacca and Vacca (1999). The authors point out that metacognition involves the ability to think about and control our own learning. Readers need to use a variety of strategies to facilitate comprehension and learning. They must analyze the reading task before

them, and reflect on what they know or do not know about the material to be read. Finally, they need to devise plans for successfully completing the reading and to constantly evaluate and check their progress in accomplishing these various tasks (Vacca & Vacca, 1999).

Li and Munby (1996) found that Chinese students used metacognitive strategies from various sources to help them cope with academic EFL reading. While they were reading, they used metacognitive strategies to plan, monitor, evaluate, and remedy their comprehension. Li and Munby concluded that the findings of their study were consistent with other research findings; that is, the participants used many metacognitive strategies, such as prior knowledge, guessing, context clues, translation, and summarization to facilitate their comprehension.

In spite of the fact that many of the previous studies have obtained information about learners' strategies and the reading process, few of these studies have examined readers' metacognitive awareness of reading strategies, or the readers use of these strategies or the strategies relationship to reading proficiency (Singhal, 2001). The researcher also found no published research studies that specifically investigated the metacognitive strategies that Chinese university students used in English (EFL) academic reading. Therefore, there are still many gaps in the research on metacognitive awareness of reading strategies. This specific research will investigate the metacognitive strategies of Chinese students,

who are studying at the university level at YuXi Teachers College. It will examine "where, when, how and why" they use metacognitive reading strategies in reading English.

Obviously, this study cannot cover all the studies which have been conducted in this area. It will not attempt to distinguish all the categories of metacognitive reading strategies, nor will we investigate how much metacognitive awareness can aid reading comprehension. We will not examine what strategies successful and unsuccessful readers apply in their reading or how to define positive or negative strategies etc., but this study will discuss the following questions:

1). What metacognitive reading strategies are first year college students aware of when they read academic materials such as textbooks?

2). What are their observed metacognitive reading strategies when they read academic materials?

3). How do they use these strategies?

4). Can we identify and categorize the reading strategies that students employ (i.e. Global Reading Strategies, Problem Solving Reading Strategies and Support Reading Strategies, etc.)?

2. The Background of the Study

Yuxi Teachers College (YXTC) is the first 4-year college in Yuxi Municipality, Yunnan Province, south west China. Currently, YXTC has 13 departments, including 38 majors, with 620 staff members, and about

5200 full-time students who are mostly from Yunnan province, as well as some from southwest China. The college mainly trains teachers for primary and secondary education, and plays a leading role in the social and economic development of Yuxi Municipality and the remote prefectures of Yunnan Province.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of English language teaching at the university level in China. One is for English majors. The other is called College English. College English in China refers to a compulsory course for non-English majors at all colleges or universities (Du, 2002). It is a required course for obtaining a bachelors degree. All the university students who want to graduate and get their bachelors degree must pass the English proficiency test at level 4. The test is administrated by the Ministry of Higher Education.

Reading is vital at the university level. It is critical in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Reading is important because of the number of texts that must be mastered and also because it is an essential skill for passing the level 4 proficiency test. This fact can be seen in the following (see Table 1: The Distribution of National English Proficiency Scores), which shows that the reading item in the test is the weightiest.

Table 1: The Distribution of National English Proficiency Scores

Items	I	II	III	IV	V
Category	Listening	Vocabulary and structure	Reading comprehension	Filling in the blanks	Writing
Points	15%	20%	40%	10%	15%

In October 2003, the researcher informally interviewed some of first year college students in different majors on their awareness of metacognitive reading strategies. These findings are addressed in the following:

First, none of the students had ever heard of the term "metacognitive reading strategies" and had no idea what it meant. A few students asked if it referred to reading skill.

Second, the students are grouped by their performance on a placement test after they enter this college. Normally, there are two classes in a major. Class A and Class B. Class A had an intermediate and higher English proficiency level. Class B had a lower English proficiency level (see Appendix E).

Third, the classes use different textbooks. The intermediate and higher level students, used more challenging textbooks than the lower level students. The teaching pace is also quite different. The teaching pace at the intermediate and higher level is normally faster.

After noticing the conditions stated above, the researcher decided to

choose two classes as a target group that included both levels. The researcher hoped to collect reliable data that would accurately reflect the general situation at this college. If she only chose Class A (intermediate and higher English proficiency level), the information from lower proficiency level (Class B) would be missing. If she only chose Class B (lower English proficiency level), the information from intermediate and higher English proficiency level (Class A) would be missing. The researcher also hopes the information provided will enable both students and instructors to be aware of students' reading problems and strategies, to identify their strengths and weaknesses in reading, and to give them some suggestions on how to read more efficiently.

3. The Objectives of the Study

There are three objectives for this research:

1). To investigate the metacognitive awareness of academic reading strategies of first-year college students at Yuxi Teachers College.

2). To identify the categories of students' metacognitive reading strategies such as: Global Reading Strategies, Problem Solving Reading Strategies and Support Reading Strategies (Definition see Chapter III. p. 50-51).

3). To help instructors to have better understanding of their students' reading problems and the strategies they use in the English academic

context.

4. The Scope of the Study

1). The study will investigate the metacognitive awareness of first year college students handling their academic reading materials, so only college English textbooks are used. Other materials such as newspapers and magazines have been ignored.

2). The study concentrates on identifying the categories of metacognitive reading strategies in academic reading: i.e. Global Reading Strategies, Problem Solving Reading Strategies and Support Reading Strategies (Definition see Chapter III. p. 50-51).

3). Two classes (74 subjects) which included students at all levels of English proficiency have been involved in this study.

5. The Significance of the Study

1). The findings obtained from this study will provide information about the metacognitive strategies employed by Chinese university level students in their EFL academic reading, and will help students become more aware of metacognitive reading strategies, and to become more skilled at using metacognitive strategies. This should help students gain confidence when reading their textbooks, and to become more active independent readers as well.

2). The researcher also hopes the information will give instructors some pedagogical suggestions to help students learn how to read, and to improve the quality of language teaching, especially for the students who are struggling in reading.

3). Finally the researcher hopes this information will be useful in the designing of an appropriate pedagogical model to help students improve their reading strategies and promote their learning.

6. Definition of Terms

College English: College English in China refers to a compulsory English course for non-English majors at all colleges or universities (Du, 2002).

Reading: In the traditional view, reading is decoding, deciphering, identifying, articulating, speaking, pronouncing, understanding, responding to meaning (Nuttall, 1996, P2). According to cognitive science, reading is defined as a complex process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction between the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation (Silberstein, 1994, p. 12).

In the most general terms, reading involves "the reader, the text, and the interaction between reader and text "(Rumelhart, 1977, p.575).

Reading skills: Reading skills are information-processing techniques

that readers employ automatically in their reading. For example, deciphering the script, recognizing vocabulary, picking out key words, figuring out the meaning of the words, recognizing grammatical word classes, detecting sentence constituents, recognizing basic syntactic patterns, as well as reconstructing and inferring situations, goals and participants; can all be considered reading skills. These skills include both current knowledge of the world and the recognition of lexical and grammatical cohesive devices. These skills enable readers to get the main point, to distinguish the main idea from supporting details, and to adjust reading strategies to support different purposes (Lingualink Library, version 3.5, by SIL International, 1999 [Ordering Information].

Reading strategies: Barnett (1988, p.150) defines reading strategies as "the mental operations involved when readers approach a reading text effectively and make sense of that they read". Reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to textual comprehension. They are activities used to help students increase reading abilities (Carrell, 1989, p.121). They include how readers conceive of a task, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they don't understand (Nuttall, 1996).

The cognitive domain: includes first of all knowledge. We understand knowledge as the ability to recall, or to bring into mind

appropriate material, and specific information. We understand comprehension as the ability to make a written or oral communication and to use the ideas it contains without necessarily relating it to other ideas, or understanding all its implications. Thirdly, we understand application as the ability to take a new problem, idea, principle, or theory, and to use it in a new situation. Fourth, we understand analysis as the ability to break down a communication or article into its component parts and to detect the relationship of the parts and the way they are organized. Fifth, we understand synthesis as the ability to put together elements or parts to form a unified organization or whole. And finally we define evaluation as the ability to make judgments about quality, values, procedures, and methods etc. by using the appropriate criteria (the Reading Matrix, 2001. on-line serial).

Cognitive strategies: Cognitive strategies are used by learners to transform or manipulate language. They include things like: note taking, formal practice with specific aspects of the target language, and paying attention to context clues. There are also techniques that help the learner to remember and retrieve information. They include creating mental images through grouping and association, semantic mapping, using keywords, employing word associations, and placing new words into a context (the Reading Matrix, 2001. on-line serial).

In reading, these strategies enable the reader to manipulate the

linguistic material in direct ways, e.g. through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, and reorganizing information to develop stronger schemata (knowledge structure). Cognitive strategies were significantly related to L2 proficiency in studies by Oxford (1990), and Paris and Winograd (1990), among others.

Metacognition: Metacognition consists of two words, "meta" and "cognition". "Meta" comes from a Greek word which means "beyond", "behind" and "above". "Cognition" refers to what you know or perceive and the process of knowing or learning (Seyler, 1997, pp.9-10). So metacognition is the process of thinking about thinking. It refers to one's knowledge concerning one's cognitive processes and anything related to them. It is about what we know or do not know and how we regulate our learning. It also refers to learners' automatic awareness of their own knowledge and their ability to understand, control, and manipulate their own cognitive processes (Metacognition, 1998, on-line serial).

Metacognitive strategies: As defined by Schraw (1998, p.89), metacognitive strategies are "knowledge and regulation of human cognition, in an array of self-constructed regulatory skills that span a variety of diverse cognitive domains". They also refer to "taking conscious control of reading, planning, selecting strategies, monitoring the progress of learning, correcting errors, analyzing the effectiveness of reading strategies, and changing reading behaviors and strategies when

necessary" (p.113).

Metacognitive strategies also refer to the readers' abilities to identify his or her own learning style preferences and needs. This includes planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing material, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategies which are employed in managing the overall learning process. These include: meta-memory-related strategies, meta-comprehension affective strategies and social strategies (Blakey, 2003). According to Rivers (2001), they are generally divided into two types: self-assessment (the ability to assess one's own cognition) and self –management (the ability to manage one's further cognitive development).

Therefore, metacognitive strategies are behaviors undertaken by readers to plan, arrange, and evaluate their own reading. Such strategies include directed attention and self-evaluation, organization, setting goals and objectives, seeking practice opportunities, and so forth. In the context of reading, self-monitoring and correction of errors are further examples of metacognitive strategies. Learners also use affective strategies, such as self-encouraging behaviors, to lower anxiety and encourage reading.

Metacognitive Awareness: Regarding reading, having metacognitive awareness is knowing if what you are reading makes sense. You do this by monitoring and controlling your own comprehension as you

read.   Research shows that successful readers appear from an early age to possess metacognitive awareness that allows them to adjust their reading strategies.   They know when they don't understand what they are reading and they have strategies to help them understand. However, unsuccessful readers are weak in the awareness of those strategies. They usually have no idea how to deal with problems when they encounter them or they are not sensitive to the meaning of the text at all (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 150).

Metacognitve knowledge refers to "knowledge of one's own cognitive processes and those of others... Regulation of learning, as distinguished from knowledge about learning, entails the use of metacognitive strategies" (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 150).

 Prior knowledge: The sum total of what the individual knows at any given point. Prior knowledge includes knowledge of content as well as knowledge of specific strategies and meta-cognitive knowledge (Knuth & Jones, 1991).

Self-Regulation: refers to the learners' ability to make adjustments in their own learning processes in response to their perception of feedback regarding their current status of learning (Paris & Winograd, 1990).

Predicting: Includes anticipating the outcome of a situation and constructing Meaning from the Text: It is a process in which the reader

integrates what is read with his or her prior knowledge (Knuth & Jones, 1991).

Structured interview: the agenda is totally predetermined by the researcher, who works through a list of set questions in a predetermined order (Nunan, 1992, p. 147).

Active student: is an active participant in the classroom activities and exhibits use of metacognitive reading strategies in these activities.