

Enhancing Metacognitive Awareness on First and Second Language Reading and Writing Mediated by Social Networking Websites

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Abstract. The purpose of this research is to study how second language (L2) learners' metacognitive knowledge on first and second language reading and writing would differ according to L2 language proficiency levels. Extending the study conducted by Carrell (1991) and Victori (1999), this research draws on interview data collected from Japanese learners of English. The interview data indicated that some effective L1 metacognitive knowledge could transfer across languages as L2 language proficiency improves; however, it appears that most learners tend to focus on language rather than content in L2 tasks. The study further explores the possibility of online reading together with sharing summaries on a social networking website to improve learners' perception of literacy skills.

Keywords: EFL reading, EFL writing, transferability, metacognitive knowledge, social networking website.

1. Introduction

Influenced by first language (L1) research on reading-writing relationships, recent English language education has highlighted the connection between these two literacy skills. The assumption underlying this trend is that cognitive knowledge is shared by domains of reading and writing (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). This shared cognitive domain was also hypothesized to function as a basic competence from which literacy skills stem regardless of language in the interdependence hypothesis as advocated by Cummins (1994).

In the field of L2 reading research, Clarke (1980) introduced the short circuit hypothesis, which argued that the transfer of reading skills from first to second language can be restricted by limited L2 language proficiency, which has not reached

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the threshold level where the transfer begins to occur. Regarding this intervention of language proficiency, Alderson (1984) asked whether poor L2 reading skills were due to poor L1 reading skills or due to low L2 language proficiency. Carrell (1991) examined this issue and found both L1 reading skills and language proficiency were critical elements to predict L2 reading skills.

In contrast, L2 writing research on the transferability of the skills across languages has remained inconclusive. Nevertheless, according to Grabe (2001), the transferability of L2 writing skills is also determined by the L2 threshold level. The author pointed out that this notion of the L2 threshold level was versatile in L2 writing as well. Moreover, theoretically, the transferability of writing skills could be supported by Flower and Hayes's (1981) cognitive process theory of writing when combined with the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1994). The authors described the process of writing in terms of the cognitive functions, and this skill could be shared across different languages if Cummins's (1994) hypothesis was valid. The result of Edelsky's (1982) research empirically supported Cummins; whereas, Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, and Kuehn (1990) revealed that the interlingual transfer of writing skills is more difficult compared to that of reading. In order to further understand the L1 and L2 reading and writing relationships, Japanese learners of English were surveyed in this study.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In the current study, semi-structured interviews were conducted within a cross-sectional design. The data were collected from two private universities which are located in Tokyo and Okayama. The participants were 11 Japanese undergraduate students including four elementary, two intermediate, and five advanced level learners. They were purposefully selected based on their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores.

2.1.1. Procedure

A questionnaire inquiring metacognitive knowledge on reading was adapted from Hashiguchi (2002), which was a Japanese translation of a questionnaire devised by Carrell (1989), and this questionnaire was altered to interview questions. Because the purpose of this study was to investigate the L1 and L2 reading strategies employed by the students, not to assess the degree to which the participants were able to manipulate the strategies, the questions were asked as open-ended questions except the statements on confidence describing the proficient reading behaviors. Furthermore, in order to inquire into metacognitive knowledge on L1 and L2 writing, the present study modified the interview questions developed by Victori (1999). The interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents and transcribed.

3. Discussion

The interview data showed that the respondents at elementary level had barely acquired effective reading and writing strategies in L1 or L2. On the other hand, the intermediate and advanced level learners had obtained some effective metacognitive knowledge on both reading and writing in L1, but most of them seemed to be unable to transfer these strategies to L2 tasks. Therefore, as [Clarke \(1980\)](#) noted, the threshold level is not as definitive as can be determined by the standardized test.

In [Carrell's \(1989\)](#) study, proficient readers utilized the global reading strategies focusing on content while poor readers depended on the local reading strategies focusing on linguistic information. Also, the author found that the higher L2 language proficiency was, the higher the level of the strategies employed. The present study followed this result; however, even though the level of strategies used by the advanced level group was higher compared to the lower L2 proficiency level groups, most participants reported that they would switch from the global to local strategies when they read in L2. This could be explained by the strong influence of Japan's English education at secondary level, which primarily focuses on grammar instruction and translation. Because the main goal of the education is often to pass university entrance exams, assumingly, learners were trained to use local strategies in order to precisely answer exam questions but were less likely to develop global strategies concurrently.

In regard to writing, [Victori \(1999\)](#) found that the proficient writers were more aware of their writing problems, and their knowledge of the requirements of writing tasks was broader and more accurate. Also, the effective writers responded that they would plan before writing and revise the content even after completing the essay. Compared to this observation, the intermediate and advanced level participants of the current study seemed to have developed some effective writing metacognitive knowledge in L1, but not in L2. The interview data showed the metacognitive awareness on text organization and the perception of a proficient piece of writing were the only knowledge shared across languages.

Moreover, metacognitive knowledge relating to causes to stop writing and revising process were contrastive across languages. The learners reported that they would stop to think what to write next, which is the process presented in [Flower and Hayes \(1981\)](#) while they would stop writing in order to examine language use in L2 writing. The respondents also indicated that they would review the content when they revise in L1, which is a proficient writing habit ([Krashen, 1984](#)), but they would fall into the confusion of editing and revising in L2 composition. These results might also be because of Japan's English education. As is often the case with Japanese undergraduate students ([Okabe, 2004](#)), all the respondents revealed they had never received writing instruction in L2, nor had they been assigned to write an essay or report in English. Therefore, they were provided with few opportunities to focus on global message in composing or revising.

Comparing different L2 language proficiency level groups, for the elementary level respondents, limited L1 linguistic knowledge in addition to limited L2 linguistic knowledge and the lack of experience in writing instruction seemed to have contributed to poor metacognitive knowledge on both skills in both languages. According to Krashen's (1984) theory, although the author only described L1 writers, these learners could be categorized as *remedial writers* in L1 and L2, who lack language input and writing instruction in either language. Therefore, these learners had not acquired the language, neither in L1 nor L2, to express their abstract ideas nor the metacognitive knowledge on structure to convey their thoughts in accordance with the conventions of academic writing. On the other hand, the intermediate and advanced learners could be categorized as *blocked writers* in L1, who have received input but not writing instruction, and as remedial writers in L2.

Therefore, writing instruction is necessary for any English proficiency level learners in order for them to effectively communicate their thoughts. In addition, for lower proficiency level students, input in both L1 and L2 should be offered through reading as they need the language to verbalize their abstract concepts into language; whereas, input in L2 might suffice in order for higher proficiency level students to improve their L2 reading and writing skills and metacognitive knowledge. Although instructors tend to focus on students' L2 language proficiency, it might be necessary to be aware that students' L1 language proficiency could also account for their lower success in L2 learning.

4. Conclusions

As a means to implement the activities to expose learners to input in both L1 and L2, the Internet would be a useful tool in reading and writing instruction. The present paper suggests assigning students to read news articles in L1 and L2 online on the same topic and to write summaries in L1 as Mason and Krashen (1997) found that summary writing in L1 improved students' reading and writing skills. Furthermore, sharing summaries and articles through a social networking website might reinforce instruction. Although finding articles written in students' L1 might be difficult for instructors who speak another language than that of students, the Internet allows students to look for articles themselves, and the instructor could easily see what articles students are reading if they are posted on the social networking website. Moreover, reading the articles on the same topic might help students to compare text organization, and this exposure to actual texts could provide more concrete examples which enrich what they learn in the classroom.

The interview data suggested that the participants were inclined to be preoccupied with bottom-up information when reading English texts; thus, their effective L1 reading strategies should be highlighted. In addition, as Carson et al. (1990) noted that the writing instructor should not assume the automatic transfer of L1 to L2 writing skills, students need opportunities to recognize their L1 and L2 writing strategies to

compare the similarities and differences of their metacognitive knowledge. In order to accomplish that, cognitive load in L2 reading needs to be lowered. Through reading both L1 and L2 texts, the L1 text might serve as a springboard for comprehension of L2 text and induce metacognitive awareness to evolve. The researchers of the present study have implemented these activities, and validity of this approach should be explored in the future research.

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