

L2 Learners' Reading Problems in Terms of the Factors Relating to Their Meta-Knowledge of English Information Structure

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Abstract: This paper reports part of a project granted by Vietnam National University (VNU)-Hanoi (**project code: QG.13.13**), carried out in an effort to enhance the quality of teaching English to International Standard Programme (ISP) students. The paper explores two related issues. First, it investigates the problems L2 learner groups of different levels of proficiency might encounter in their reading in the English language in terms of the factors relating to their meta-knowledge of English information structure. Second, it attempts to find out whether a cognitive meta-linguistic approach can help the learners overcome their reading problems and develop their reading comprehension by first enhancing their meta-knowledge of English information structure. Analyses of the problems were based on learners' responses to the pre-teaching phase questionnaire and interviews, their post-teaching phase meta-linguistic test scores, their pre- and post-teaching phase reading test scores, and while teaching phase classroom worksheets and answer-sheets. Data analyses show that no strong evidence was found of mother tongue reading strategy interference in any of the reading problems. The fall in experience of problems in the while and post-teaching phase suggests there was a positive relationship between the meta-cognitive teaching method and the learners' overcoming the problems. There were no big differences between the two groups in their encountering and solving the problems. The insignificant differences in percentages varied according to each specific problem, however, no generalization could be made with respect to the relationship between the learners' levels of proficiency and their problems.

Keywords: L2 learners' reading problems, meta-knowledge, information structure, cognitive meta-linguistic approach, levels of proficiency.

1. Introduction

The study was carried out on the following assumptions. The first assumption is that L2

learners do not reach a satisfactory level in their reading skills because they encounter some problems while attempting to develop the skill and this might be partially related to their not having a clear understanding of English information structure (for a detailed discussion of English information structure at sentential

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level and discourse level, see [1, 2]), and to their being influenced by the meta-knowledge of their L1 information structure (for L1 interference, see [3-11]). The second assumption is that learner groups of different levels of proficiency might encounter their reading problems at different extents. A cognitive meta-linguistic approach (see Tuan [12]) is adopted to help the learners overcome their reading problems and develop their reading comprehension by first enhancing their meta-knowledge of English information structure. This cognitive meta-linguistic approach adopts two cognitive models of language learning and teaching: Anderson ([13-16])'s Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT)* model, and Johnson [17]'s DECPRO model in which learners are expected to have some declarative knowledge of information structure before they can proceduralize it in reading activities. Anderson's (1983; 1985; 1990; 1995) Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) theory of cognition is mentioned as the theoretical background for Johnson's model. An analytical framework centering on L2 learners' problems in their reading skills is set up based on previous research into the issue, such as Singer [18].

The teaching approach aims at developing L2 learners' communicative language ability as understood in Bachman's [19] model in which ability is viewed as consisting of both explicit/analyzed knowledge and the implementing of this knowledge in language use. The knowledge learners are expected to have concerns English information structure. The skill expected to be improved is reading academic texts.

The selection of information structure meta-knowledge is based on our assumption of what is essential in helping L2 learners understand more about the constructing of academic written texts, which then will help them in their reading. Based on our discussions on sentential and discourse level English information structure ([1]; [2]), 4 units have been designed, each consisting of two or three lessons. Depending on the content load of the lessons,

some lessons are divided into two parts. Following are the title of each unit and lesson. The contents of each lesson, the lesson plans including the meta-linguistic exercises following the meta-linguistic lessons, as well as the activities in the skill development phase are all based on our discussions about English information structure and drawn from principles of cognitive meta-linguistic approaches.

Unit 1: Sentential level issues of English information structure

Lesson 1: The given/new status of the information exchanged

Part 1: Introduction of information structure

Part 2: The given/new status distinction and the contextual constraints on the given/new status

Lesson 2: The order in which information is distributed in the sentence

Part 1: Information distributing principles and tendencies

Part 2: Canonical constructions (7 major clause types) and non-canonical constructions

Unit 2: Discourse-level issues of information structure

Lesson 1: Clause relations and types of clause relations

Lesson 2: Textual patterns

Lesson 3: Rhetorical features of academic texts from genre analysis perspective

Unit 3: A comparison of English and Vietnamese information structure

Lesson 1: Topic-prominent and subject-prominent languages

Lesson 2: Directness in English and indirectness in Vietnamese writing style

Unit 4: Incorporating meta-knowledge of English information structure into L2 reading and writing strategies

Lesson 1: L2 learners' problems in reading and writing

Lesson 2: Suggestions for L2 learners' development of reading and writing skills

For more detailed description of the syllabus, see [12].

The analysis of each problem is both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative analysis encompasses findings showing percentages of the learners in each group, and in the two groups as a whole, who encountered the problem over three phases before, during, and after the execution of the meta-cognitive teaching method to see whether it changed overtime. Qualitative analysis explores the reasons why the learners encountered the problems in the pre-teaching phase. A comparison is made of the findings obtained from the two groups to find out if there were any significant quantitative differences.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research questions

The paper discusses the following three research questions:

1. What problems (if any) do L2 learners encounter in their reading in English as the result of their lack of a clear and systematic meta-knowledge of English information structure?
2. Which among these problems arises because of the interference of their mother tongue information structure features and their L1 reading strategies?
3. Are there any quantitative differences between student groups of different English proficiency in terms of their problems?

Analyses of the problems including L1 interference were based on learners' responses to the pre-teaching phase questionnaire and interviews, their post-teaching phase meta-linguistic test scores, their pre- and post-teaching phase reading test scores, and while

teaching phase classroom worksheets and answer-sheets.

2.2. The participants

The 48 participants in the study were second year students of Information Technology (IT) in their second semester of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) studies, at a Vietnamese university. The participants fell into 2 groups, group one consisting of 22, group two of 26 students. The students who were selected to take part in the study were assessed as having higher levels of proficiency based on the placement test (which primarily focused on their grammatical knowledge). Their level of English proficiency was considered as intermediate, as assessed by the English Department of the university. On average, Group 1 learners had spent approximately one year more studying English than Group 2 learners before they joined the meta-cognitive linguistic classes. In terms of proficiency level, Group one students got scores of 8 to 10 on a 10-point scale in a placement test done at the beginning of the first semester in their first year by the English Department. Students in Group 2 got scores of 5 to 7 on the same test. The test basically involved only learners' grammatical knowledge. As concerns their L2 reading skill, results from the pre-teaching phase reading test showed that Group 1 learners were better at reading comprehension. Group 1 learners' mean score was 6.7, whereas that of Group 2 was 5.0. As informed by the two colleagues who had been in charge of the two groups, Group 2 learners (the less proficient group) were more motivated and showed a more positive and cooperative attitude to learning in the class. Data from the pre-teaching phase interview showed no big differences between the two groups in terms of their L1 literacy.

2.3. The data

The data include the participants' responses to questionnaires, their meta-linguistic and reading test scores, and their answers to reading

worksheets and retrospective post-task answer-sheets. As the aim of the study is to investigate the learners' problems and development in their reading skills over all the three phases of the research, some instruments (the questionnaires and the reading tests) were administered twice, before and after the teaching phase; the others (the reading worksheets and post-task answer-sheets) were collected in the while teaching phase.

2.4. Data validity

There were two measures applied to ensure the validity of the data obtained from the questionnaires. The first measure was used in the design of the questionnaires themselves, where questions that were likely to elicit untrustworthy responses from informants would be followed up by other questions to double check the validity [20]. For example, in the pre-teaching phase questionnaire, there is one question involving the learners' knowledge of the term 'textual pattern', - if an informant believed that he or she knew the term quite well and could use this meta-knowledge in his or her reading, he would have to give a brief explanation of the term. The second measure was to double-check the information given in the questionnaire in the interview and special attention was given to questions where informants were expected to be unsure of the answers.

As concerns the tests, attempts were made to include all that is relevant and necessary to get closer to the data required for answering the research questions. Besides, strict invigilation ensured that students did their tests seriously without exchanging ideas or copying others' work.

2.5. Data collection methods

The following four methods of data collection have been used: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, meta-linguistic and reading tests, and classroom-based methods (reading task worksheet and post-task retrospective answer sheets).

2.5.1. Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed adhering to the following principles:

- Questionnaire items should be 'answerable' and 'unambiguous' [20: 96].
- One question item should contain only one idea [21, 22].
- Questionnaire items must not reveal researchers' attitudes through leading questions [21].
- Questionnaires should be piloted in advance [20, 22].

The two questionnaires for the learners were administered before and after the teaching phase.

Pre-teaching phase questionnaire

The 23 items in the questionnaire covered three major areas: learners' identity and academic background, learners' meta-knowledge of English information structure, and learners' reading strategies in the English language. One additional question aiming at getting clues about the teaching mode students would most prefer was intended to make some adjustments (if needed) to the pre-designed lesson plans.

The validation of this information was promoted by the follow-up interviews in which learners were asked to give full explanations for their choices.

Post-teaching phase questionnaire

The 7 questions in the post-teaching phase questionnaire explored the learners' reading strategies and characteristics in the English language after receiving formal instruction enhancing their knowledge of information structure and skill development suggestions. The questionnaire also investigated their attitudes towards the suggestions for their skill development. The expectation was that a certain percentage of the learners would partially or completely stop using some of the mother tongue-transferred strategies in terms of information structure in their reading after the

instruction phase. There are several hypotheses underlying the questionnaire. First, after receiving formal instruction enhancing their knowledge of information structure, the learners would develop strategies that could better their reading comprehension. Second, the learners would show their preference for the reading skill development suggestions. Third, those whose strategies had changed would be more willing to adopt suggestions. Finally, not all mother tongue affected strategies could be changed.

2.5.2. *Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to validate the information given [20] in the pre-teaching phase questionnaire.

The interviews lasted around 30 minutes each, were run in an informal atmosphere in a small-sized classroom in our institution, and were semi-structured, which allowed the researcher to feel free in exploring the issues and topics concerned along with a short list of predetermined questions. These questions themselves could be developed in different directions depending on the individual informants.

2.5.3. *Tests*

The meta-linguistic test

The meta-linguistic test was administered at the post-teaching phase. It consists of 7 open-ended questions each aiming at giving information about our learners' understanding of aspects of English information structure assumed to assist in their skill development, in their understanding the global and local structure of an academic text and in structuring a piece of academic writing. The time limit for the test was 50 minutes. The questions in the test were based on the meta-linguistic lessons given to the learners in the teaching phase. Learners were tested on their ability to do the following: identifying clause types, identifying non-canonical constructions and the new information in each construction, rephrasing given sentences using subject-verb inversion

and identifying the given/new information of the original and rephrased sentences, using cleft structure to give focus to some elements of the given sentences, recognizing the discourse patterns, discourse elements, and discourse relations of a given passage, combining pairs of sentences to make one sentence and recognizing the local semantic relationships holding between them, and recognizing the cohesive devices used in a given paragraph. The total score is 45 depending on the number of specific questions. Learners' achievement was scored by the number of correct answers and converted into a percentage. So, for example, a student who got 38 correct answers scored 38/45 of the total, which was 84% in percentage.

The reading tests

The following were taken into consideration when the tests were designed and constructed:

- Minimize variations in test task characteristics (setting, participants, structure, format, time allotment, scoring method, input language, etc.) [23].
- Equivalence between tests [20]. The levels of difficulty in the tests should be strictly controlled to ensure that improvement found (if any) is valid.
- Pilot the tests in advance

Two reading tests (pre and post-teaching phase) were administered. The purpose in doing the tests at two different phases was to find out the learners' on-going development (if any). Measurements taken to ensure the similar levels of difficulties of the pre- and post-tests were discussed below. Some of the learners' reading problems (e.g., their reading patterns) were obtained from while-teaching phase reading worksheets and post-task answer-sheets. The assumption about the learners' meta-knowledge of the subject was double-checked through the pre-teaching phase questionnaire and interviews.

The two groups of students were equally treated in the test in terms of the level of difficulty and the time for doing the tests. In

other words, the tasks and the questions were not aimed at putting either group at a disadvantageous status against the other. The test degree of difficulty was based on learners' level of proficiency in terms of grammatical structure, vocabulary and specialist knowledge in information technology.

The design of the tests was controlled by the following factors: learners' assumed levels of English proficiency, learners' motivation and interest, and the features of their reading that need to be investigated, and the equivalence in the levels of difficulty. The contents of the reading passages in the reading tests all involved the learners' general knowledge of information technology, which was their field of study. This selection of content was to motivate learners' effort in solving problems more familiar and interesting to them. The topics selected were not to be too specific because some learners might be more familiar with one specific topic than another. The level of difficulty of the tests was judged on their vocabulary, structure, format, types of questions, etc.

In assuming there might be a causal relationship between the learners' understanding of information structure and their reading comprehension, the role of other factors, e.g. their own learning strategies in their improvement (if there was any) was not to be denied. Meta-knowledge of information structure could only be counted as a contributory factor; of course, it is undeniable that the passage of time and additional hours of instruction could also lead to improvement. However, it is argued that the meta-linguistic instruction played a major role in this development as the main instructional focus during the period. The time allotted for each test was 40 minutes.

Each reading test consisted of one reading passage, taken from [24, 25]. Because the two reading passages were used in the last units of the material, the levels of difficulty in vocabulary and grammar were guaranteed to be similar. To ensure the content validity of the

reading tests, Fulcher and Davidson [26]'s suggestions were adhered to in selecting text types and testing items. The text types selected were typical of texts used by learners in their academic studies. Testing items were chosen in such a way as to make inferences about learners' ability to process texts in expected features in their academic courses, i.e. to get the main idea and key specific information of a text. There were five sections testing both learners' ability to get specific information and their general comprehension. Learners' general comprehension was inferred from their ability to recognize the main idea and textual pattern of the texts. This was administered through a multiple-choice question, and a cloze test. Their ability to get specific information was based on an open-ended question, a true-false question, and a matching information question. The total score was 34 for the pre-test and 28 for the post-test, depending on the number of specific questions in each test. Learners' achievement was scored by the number of correct answers and converted into a percentage. For example, if a learner got 17 correct answers in the pre-test, his achievement was scored as 50%. Their ability to get the main idea of the passages is either yes or no, based on their response to first question, which is a multiple-choice question. Their ability to get specific information is based on the number of correct answers out of 32 questions in the pre-test and 26 questions in the post-test. In each test, there was one question involving their recognizing the textual pattern of the reading passage. So, for example if a student got 26/28 (93%) in total in the post-test, his or her scoring for getting specific information is 24/28 (86%).

Several aspects of the learners' strategies that were unlikely to be revealed in the tests such as their reading strategies were to be documented from the questionnaires, interviews or classroom worksheets and answer-sheets.

2.5.4. Classroom-based methods

These methods include reading task worksheets and post-task retrospective answer

sheets. The methods were applied to get the data that could not be obtained from the tests, the questionnaires, and the interviews or to get the data that can help triangulate with the other data. All these methods were administered in the while-teaching phase.

The following data involving learner's reading strategies were collected through classroom worksheets: recognizing the main idea, recognize semantic relations between sentences/paragraphs and the whole text, their appreciation of semantic relations between sentences/paragraphs and the whole text, and their understanding of information embedded in non-canonical constructions.

The following data involving learner's reading strategies were collected through post-task retrospective answer-sheets: reading patterns, consulting cohesive devices, setting of global/local goals for the reading, and their awareness of global aspects of the text such as its communicative purpose or its social functions. Pre-designed answer-sheets were given to the learners after each activity asking them about the strategies they had used in their reading. The answer-sheets were given after the reading because some questions in the answer-sheets were assumed to be able to affect the learners' practice, for example, in case of reading patterns, some of them might follow the pattern that they had been recommended in the previous meta-linguistic session if they were given the sheets beforehand. The questions were in the form of multiple-choice or yes/no because some students were believed not to be able to express the answers in their own words.

2.6. Data Collection Procedure

2.6.1. Pre-teaching phase

The following steps were taken before the teaching method was carried out: introducing the study to the participants, getting their informed consents, having them answer the pre-teaching phase questionnaire and do the reading tests, interviewing them to validate the information obtained in the questionnaire,

analyzing information in the questionnaire, the interview and the tests to get clues for update or adaptation of the teaching method.

2.6.2. While-teaching phase

The following steps were taken in this phase: giving the learners meta-linguistic lessons, having the learners perform the meta-linguistic and skill development tasks, getting the learners' reading worksheets and post-task answer-sheets.

2.6.3. Post-teaching phase

The following actions were undertaken after the teaching phase: having the learners answer the second questionnaire, and having them do the progress reading tests. The questionnaire and reading tests were done in one session.

2.7. Analytical framework

The analyses are both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative analyses were based on the multiple-choice and yes/no questions in the questionnaires, the test scores, the answer sheets, and the worksheets. Qualitative analyses were based on the open-ended questions in the questionnaires, the learners' responses in the pre-teaching phase interviews. Analyses from the two methods were triangulated for validity.

2.7.1. Quantitative analyses

The following categories were quantitatively analyzed:

Learners' problems and difficulties in reading in relation to their meta-knowledge of English information structure

Quantitative analyses of learners' problems in reading over the three phases were based on evidence from the pre-teaching phase questionnaire, the two reading tests, classroom reading worksheets, and post-task retrospective answer-sheets. The following problems the learners encountered over the three phases were quantitatively analyzed:

- Failing to recognize the main ideas of reading passages (reading tests and classroom reading worksheets multiple-choice questions)
- Having inappropriate reading patterns (pre-teaching phase questionnaire and post-task retrospective answer-sheets multiple choice questions)
- Failing to recognize the semantic relations between a sentence or a paragraph and the whole text (classroom reading worksheets matching tasks)
- Recognizing semantic implications of cohesive devices (post-task retrospective answer-sheets open-ended questions). A student must get all of the 7 or 10 question items right to be considered as having managed to perform the tasks.
- Having difficulty in recognizing the meanings imbedded in non-canonical constructions (classroom reading worksheets open-ended questions). A student must get all the 6 questions right in each task to be considered as having no difficulty doing the tasks.
- Not setting goals for their reading (post-task retrospective answer-sheets yes-no questions)

Evidence of mother tongue interference

L1 interference with the learners' reading skill was based on responses to the pre-teaching interview questions. Problems assumed to arise from their L1 reading strategies included their reading patterns, their setting up goals for reading, and their consulting cohesive devices.

Learners' development in reading skills

Quantitative analyses that inferred learners' development in reading relied on the differences in the percentages of learners who managed to get the main ideas and specific information of reading passages and overcome reading problems.

2.7.2. Qualitative analyses

The following categories were qualitatively analyzed (to validate the quantitative analyses or because the quantitative analyses could not answer the research questions). The method used was qualitative interpretation.

Learners' reading strategies in the pre-teaching phase

This analysis was based on the learners' responses to the pre-teaching phase interviews and explored the explanations for their responses in the pre-teaching phase questionnaires. In reading, the three problems qualitatively analyzed were the learners' strategies in reading patterns (question 20), cohesive device consulting (question 18), and setting goals for reading (question 17).

Interpretation conventions were as follows:

1. Indirectly reporting informants' responses. For example, in response to the question: 'when do you read the text from beginning to end?' an informant replied: 'When I read quite a long text, a story'. The report was: 'Some students reported that they used the strategy when they read a long text or a story.'
2. Grammatical mistakes were corrected, and main ideas were summarized. A student's reply: 'It's hardly to hold the main idea' in response to the question why he/she did not use the strategy mentioned, was summarized as 'some students reported that he/she did not use the first strategy because it was difficult for him/her to get the main idea of a reading passage'. Some information was interpreted based on the researcher's inference of the learners' responses to the 'yes-no' question, for example: 'Do you do the same in Vietnamese, in your mother tongue?' and the student answered 'yes', it is reported that the student had the strategy in his or her mother tongue.
3. The researcher's misunderstanding of the informants' replies, which

sometimes led to wrong assumptions in his questions and their responses, was rectified. For example, when an informant replied: 'Because I have learn way to produce the essay er not long enough and sometimes I forget thesis statement', and the researcher remarked: 'So when the essay is not a very long essay, you tend to forget to the thesis statement', and the informant said: 'yes.' In fact, based on the students' responses to the other questions, the researcher realized that what the student wanted to say in the first place was sometimes he forgot to produce thesis statements because his experience in writing essays was not long enough for him to remember about producing thesis statements.

4. The learners' responses in Vietnamese were translated into English (when learners could not express themselves in English).

The summarized findings about each strategy were both quantitative and qualitative, for example, based on the number of learners giving similar responses through the researcher's interpretation, it is reported that among the 25% (12/48) students who responded in the questionnaire that they would tend to read the text through from beginning to end first, 1 (2%) said that he/she used this strategy in his or her L1 reading.

Learners' meta-knowledge of English information structure in the pre-teaching phase

This was based on learners' responses in the pre-teaching phase interviews (questions 5 to 9).

Interpretation conventions:

1. Learners' understanding of a meta-linguistic aspect was judged from their responses. For example, in response to the question involving the grammaticality of a non-canonical sentence: 'why do you think that this sentence is not grammatically correct?'

(In fact, the sentence is grammatically correct) a student replied: 'I think it's not correct. The object must be here.' It was reported that the student did not have a clear meta-knowledge of non-canonical construction.

2. In some specific cases, the actual meaning of the informants' utterances was interpreted based on our language experience, for example, in response to the remark: 'But it seems that you don't know much about theme and rheme', the informant replied: 'yes', this was understood as he did not know much about theme and rheme. This is because in Vietnamese, people would say 'yes' to show their agreement with a statement irrespective of the negative/positive proposition of the statement.

This qualitative analysis was to validate the learners' responses to the questionnaire in case they left the questions unanswered but they could still answer the corresponding question in the interview, or on the contrary they had answered a question in the questionnaire but could not justify their answers in the interview.

3. Learners' reading problems in terms of the factors relating to their meta-knowledge of English information structure

The six reading problems explored in this study relating to L2 learners' meta-knowledge of information structure are:

Failing to recognize main ideas of reading passages

1. Having inappropriate reading patterns
2. Failing to recognize semantic relations between a sentence or a paragraph and the whole text
3. Overlooking cohesive devices
4. Having difficulty in recognizing focal meanings imbedded in non-canonical constructions
5. Not setting goals for reading

Each of the problems is seen as either directly or indirectly related to learners' meta-knowledge of information structure. The problems were assumed to belong to two types: one arising because of the learners' not fully understanding English information structure, and one in the form of their reading strategies, all relating to their meta-knowledge of English information structure. The first type included problems 1, 3, and 5 from the above list. Specifically, the assumption is that if the learners do not have the meta-knowledge of English textual patterns, they might fail to recognize the main ideas of the reading passage; if they do not have meta-knowledge of English clause relations and types of clause relations, they might fail to recognize the semantic relations between a sentence or a paragraph and the whole text; if they do not have the meta-knowledge of English non-canonical constructions, they might fail to recognize the focal meanings imbedded in non-canonical constructions. The second type included problems 2, 4, and 6. Problems 2, 4, and 6 are related to learners' meta-knowledge of information structure in such a way that the strategy might affect the learners' getting the main idea of the reading passage or the semantic links between various linguistic components of the passage. Data from the pre- and post-teaching phase tests and while-teaching tasks were compared with questionnaire and interview data to find out whether what the learners thought about their strategies were actually reflected in the tests and tasks. The while teaching phase classroom

worksheets and answer-sheets were exploited as sources of supplementary information which could not be obtained from the other methods of data collection.

3.1. Failing to recognize the main idea of a reading passage

Analyses of this issue were based on the pre- and post-teaching phase reading tests and two while-teaching phase reading tasks. The analyses were to find out the following: first, whether the learners encountered the problem over the three stages; second, whether there was any change in the percentage of learners who encountered the problem over time; third, whether there were any significant quantitative differences between the two groups of learners in encountering the problem.

As can be seen in Figure 1 below, in the pre-teaching phase, 64% (14/22) of the students in Group 1 and 65% (17/26) in Group 2, a total of 64.5% (31/48) of the students failed to get the main idea of the text. In the two while-teaching phase reading tasks, the percentages of Group 1 students who failed to get the main ideas of the texts fluctuated between 45% (10/22) in the first task and 36% (8/22) in the second. The percentages of students in Group 2 who could not get the main ideas in the two tasks were between 46% (12/26) and 35% (9/26). The percentages fell to 23% (5/22 students) of Group 1 and 12% (3/26 students) of Group 2, i.e. 17% (8/48 students) in total in the post-teaching phase.

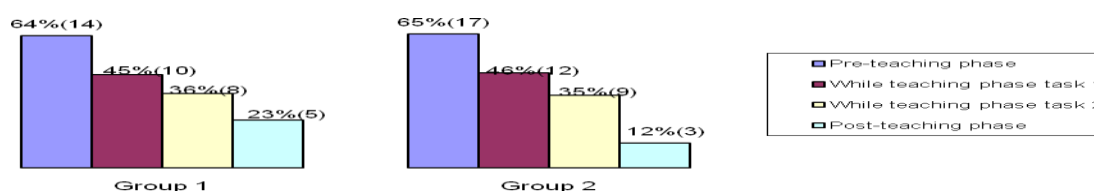


Figure 1. Learners' failure to get the main ideas of reading texts over the three phases.

The findings suggested that a certain percentage of the learners did encounter the

problem over the three phases and that there was a decrease in the percentages over time.

Surprisingly a slightly lower percentage in the post-teaching phase was found in Group 2 learners who still encountered the problem because this group learners' level of proficiency was assumed to be lower than that of Group 1. However, on the whole, there was not much difference in the percentages of students in the two groups over the phases.

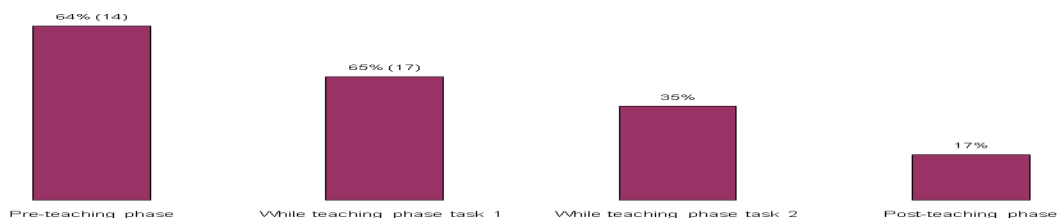


Figure 2. Learners' failure to get the main ideas over the three phases (Group 1 and Group 2 combined).

3.2. Having inappropriate reading patterns

L2 learners' having an inappropriate reading pattern, in this description, is their tendency to read a text from beginning to end without scanning it for main ideas first. The appropriate pattern involves learners looking for the main idea as an initial step and then following its logical development. Analyses of the learners' reading patterns were to find out the following: first, which of the two above-mentioned patterns they followed in the pre-teaching phase and the reasons for the practice including L1 reading strategy transfer; second, whether any among the learners changed or attempted to change this reading strategy in the while teaching phase. Third, whether there was any difference in the percentages of the learners in the two groups in using each pattern. Quantitative analyses of the issue in the pre-teaching phase were based on the learners' responses to question 20 in the questionnaire. Qualitative analyses were based on their explanations for the practice obtained from the interviews. Quantitative analysis of learners' change in the strategy was based on their responses to the two multiple-choice questions in the while teaching phase post-task retrospective answer-sheets. The answer-sheets

That a high percentage of the learners in the study (nearly two-thirds) encountered difficulty in getting the main idea of the reading passage in the pre-teaching phase test and some of them (17%; 8/48 students) (see Figure .2) still encountered the problem in the post-teaching phase suggests that the task is quite challenging to many L2 learners.

were given to the learners after each reading session in which they had to get the main idea as well as some specific information. In the answer-sheets, the learners were asked to say which of the two reading patterns they followed in the reading tasks and which of the two descriptions given best described their reading patterns in the tasks. Up to this point, the students had been advised to do some scanning first to get the main idea of a passage rather than reading texts from beginning to end although they had not been given any formal advice in a meta-linguistic lesson about what reading pattern they should follow.

Figure 3 below illustrates learners in both groups' reading patterns reported in the pre-teaching phase questionnaire.

27% (6/22) of Group 1 students and 23% (6/26) in Group 2, a total of 25% (12/48) reported that they would always read a text through from beginning to end first. In the interviews, most of the reasons given were: it was easier for them (they found it difficult to get the main idea through scanning), and with beginning-to-end reading, if they got stuck somewhere they could look up new words in the dictionary. One Group 1 student said it was because he used the strategy in L1 reading.

23% (5/22) of the students in Group 1 and 19% (5/26 students) in Group 2, a total of 21% (10/48) reported in the questionnaire they used the scanning strategy. In the interviews, the following reasons were given for their using the strategy: to follow the text easily, to get important information, because it was the main idea that helped them to understand the text, reading from beginning to end was a waste of time because there was information they did not really need, it was difficult to get the main idea by reading from beginning to end, it was quicker to get the general meaning of the text, or they were advised to use the strategy by their English teachers at university.

Half of the Group 1 learners (50%; 11/22) and more than half of the group 2 learners (58%; 15/26), a total of 54% (26/48) reported that they used both strategies in their reading. In the interviews, the following reasons were given by those students for their tendency towards reading a text from beginning to end: when they could not see the structure of the text, when they read for fun or for entertainment, when they were looking for some specific information, when they read a story (like Harry Potter) to feel the emotions of

the characters, when they read a very long text, when they were taking a reading test (like CAE). The student who reported using the strategy when taking a CAE reading text explained that if he used scanning for main idea first in the text, he would not have enough time to look back at the text for some specific information. The following reasons were given for their tendency towards scanning a text: when they read a newspaper or a short story, when they read a book on a specific problem or issue, when they read academic, ESP, scientific, or technical books, when they wanted to know the purpose of the author, to understand or follow the text easily, to get important information, to realize the main topic or idea quickly, when they realized the topic sentence, when they read seriously, it was the strategy they used from high school or in their mother tongue. Among those students, two of them, unlike most of the others, reported that they used the beginning-to-end reading strategy for short texts and the scanning strategy for long texts. There was not much difference in the percentage of learners between the two groups in their reported reading patterns.

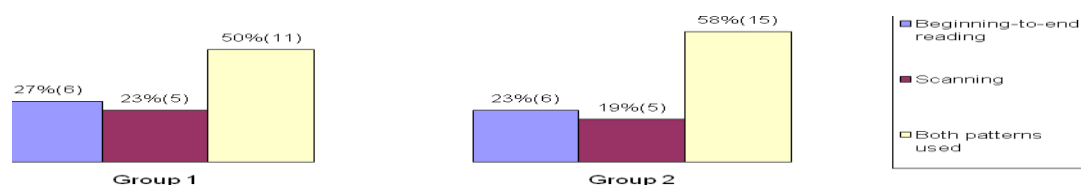


Figure 3. Learners' pre-teaching phase reading patterns (based on the pre-teaching phase questionnaire).

In the first while teaching phase reading task, all of the students reported using the scanning strategy. 68% (15/22 students) in the first group and 69% (18/26 students) in the second, i.e. 69% (33/48 students in total) said in the post-task answer-sheets that they tried to use scanning first to get the main idea and believed that they had managed to do so. 32% (7/22 students) in the first group and 31% (8/26 students) in the second, i.e. 31% (15/48

students) said that they had tried to use scanning but they could not get the main idea and went back to the beginning of the text and did the reading line by line. In the second while teaching phase reading task, again, among 100% of the students reported scanning, 86% (19/22 students) in the first group and 81% (21/26 students) in the second, a total of 83% (40/48 students) claimed to understand the main idea. The other students (3 in Group 1 and 5 in

Group 2, 17% (8/48 in total) reported they had tried to use scanning first but hardly understood what the passages were about after the scanning

and had to read the text again line by line (see Figure 4 below).

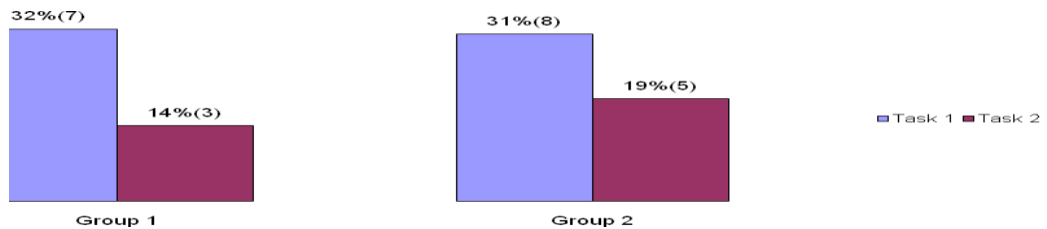


Figure 4. Percentages of learners' reported failure to get the main idea through scanning in the while-teaching phase reading tasks (data from students' post-task answer-sheets).

The data analysis in this reading strategy among the learners revealed the following. First, many learners used both reading patterns depending on the kinds of text they read or depending on the purpose of their reading. Second, although some learners acknowledged the efficiency of scanning, not all of them could employ it successfully. Third, the difficulty still existed among some students towards the end of the teaching phase. Fourth, there was little correspondence between learners' level of proficiency and their reading patterns, i.e. it was not necessarily the case that learners of higher levels of proficiency had a more appropriate reading pattern. Finally, with only one student (2%) reported bringing a poor strategy from L1 to L2 reading, it could be concluded that there was no substantial evidence for L1 reading strategy interference in this reading problem among L2 learners.

3.3. Failing to recognize the semantic relations between a sentence or a paragraph and the whole text

The findings presented in Figures 5a and 5b below were based on analyses of the learners' worksheets done in four reading tasks. In the tasks students did the following:

1. Choose the most suitable heading for each of five numbered paragraphs (2 tasks)
2. Choose the most suitable sentence among the five sentences taken from a reading passage for each numbered blank in the passage (2 tasks)

Students' success in solving the tasks was counted when they got all the five headings or sentences correct.

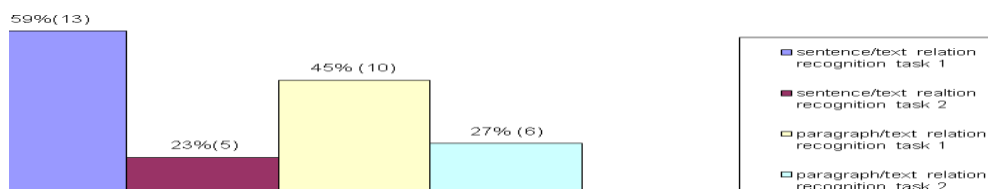


Figure 5a. Group 1 learners' failure to recognize the semantic relations between a sentence and a paragraph with the whole text.

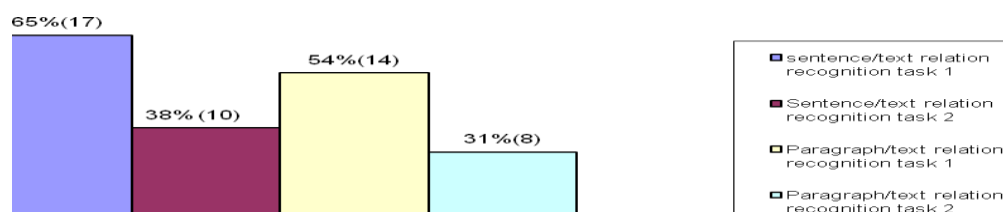


Figure 5b. Group 2 learners' failure to recognize the semantic relations between a sentence and a paragraph with the whole text.

In the first while teaching phase tasks, findings from the worksheets showed that in total, 63% (30/48) of the students could not see the semantic relations between a sentence and the whole text and 50% (24/48) could not see the relations between a paragraph and the text. The total percentages in the second while teaching phase tasks were 31% (15/48) and 29% (14/48).

The findings suggested that the percentages of students in both groups who could not recognize the semantic relations between a given sentence and a paragraph with the whole text in the first while teaching phase tasks were quite high, and the tasks seemed difficult for more Group 2 students.

That nearly one-third of the students still failed to recognize sentence/text and paragraph/text links in the second two tasks suggests that the tasks are quite challenging for many L2 learners. The findings also suggested that there was some correspondence between learners' level of proficiency and their difficulty in realizing these semantic relations. The evidence was that more Group 2 students experienced this problem than Group 1 students in all the three phases.

3.4. Overlooking cohesive devices

Some L2 learners would presumably tend to overlook the significance of cohesive devices and pay more attention to the content words of a reading passage. Consequently, they might have difficulty in recognizing the semantic

implications of some cohesive devices in their reading.

Analyses of this issue in the study were to find out the following: first, whether there was enough evidence for the assumption about L2 learners' overlooking cohesive devices in their reading; second, what reasons lay behind this tendency; third, whether the learners had difficulty in recognizing semantic implications of some cohesive devices in a reading passage; fourth, whether a percentage of the learners changed their strategy after receiving our meta-linguistic instruction and overcame their problem; fifth, whether there were any differences between learners of the two groups in encountering and overcoming the problem.

Answers to the above questions were based on the learners' responses to question 18 in the pre-teaching phase questionnaire and interviews and on their worksheets and post-task answer-sheets in the two while-teaching phase reading tasks. The answer-sheets were given to the learners after they had done some other reading tasks like scanning for main ideas or recognizing the semantic relationships between some sentences and the whole text. The question on the answer-sheets involved whether the learners had paid attention to the cohesive devices in the reading passage. They were then asked to do a reading task in which they had to recognize the semantic implications of some cohesive devices.

In the pre-teaching phase questionnaire, 45% (10/22 students) in the first group and 42% (11/26 students) in the second, a total of 44%

(21/48 students) reported that they did not pay much attention to cohesive devices. The most common reasons (given by 18 of the students) in the interviews were among the following: they would pay more attention to the content or the main idea of the text rather than to the cohesive devices, they thought cohesive devices were not important particularly in technical texts, they thought cohesive devices did not change the content of the text, or they believed understanding the main idea of the text was enough. Less common reasons (given by 2 of the students) included: they were inexperienced in reading, or they did not have much understanding of the meaning of some cohesive devices. One of them said he/she did not pay attention to cohesive devices in L1 reading.

In the while teaching phase, the percentages of students who reported in the post-task answer-sheets that they consulted the cohesive devices in the texts increased, (100% in both groups) but data from the work-sheets showed that some of them, 35% (17/48) and 23% (11/48) failed to identify the semantic implications of the cohesive devices in question in the first and second tasks respectively (see Figure 6). This should entail that these students either had not fully consulted the devices or had had some difficulty in understanding the cohesive role of the devices. Not much difference was found between the two groups in this aspect.

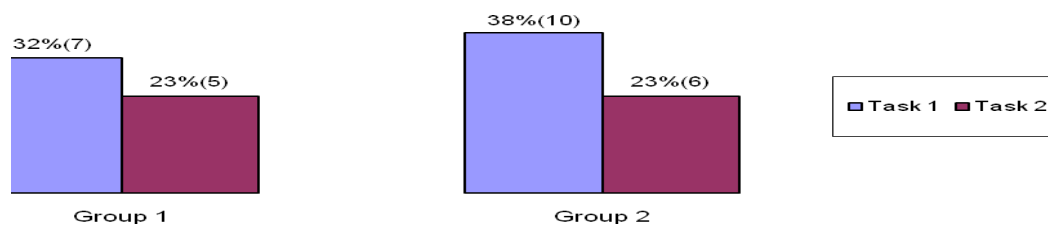


Figure 6. Learners' failure to recognize the semantic implication of cohesive devices in while-teaching reading comprehension tasks (data obtained from reading work-sheets)

The findings suggested the following: first, overlooking cohesive devices was a tendency among nearly half the students in the pre-teaching phase, the most common reason was that they did not think cohesive devices were important for their understanding a text; second, their strategy changed significantly in the while teaching phase with 100% of them reporting consulting cohesive devices while reading; third, realizing the semantic implications of cohesive devices could be an ongoing problem for some students; fourth, there was no correspondence between learners' level of proficiency and their tendency to consult cohesive devices. Finally, with only one student reporting bringing the strategy from mother tongue reading into L2 reading, no conclusion

could be reached about mother tongue transfer in this reading strategy.

3.5. *Having difficulty in recognizing the meanings embedded in non-canonical constructions*

Data analyzed for this reading problem were drawn from the learners' worksheets obtained in the two reading tasks administered in the while teaching phase. Non-canonical sentences used in the tasks were selected from several reading passages in the students' book and some further reading passages. The percentages of learners in each group who could not perform the tasks were presented in Figures 7a and 7b. The agglomerated percentages are shown in Figure 7c. In most cases, the percentage of students with problems

was similar in both groups, though slightly higher in the second group for it-cleft and there-sentences. On the whole, more students found it hard to recognize the information focus in there-existential, there-presentational sentences and inversions than in other constructions. Some of them (21%-29%, Figure 7c) still

encountered problems with these constructions in the second task. Not many students had difficulty in understanding the focus of other non-canonical constructions, the percentage fluctuating between 19% and 27% in the first task and between 8% and 10% in the second.

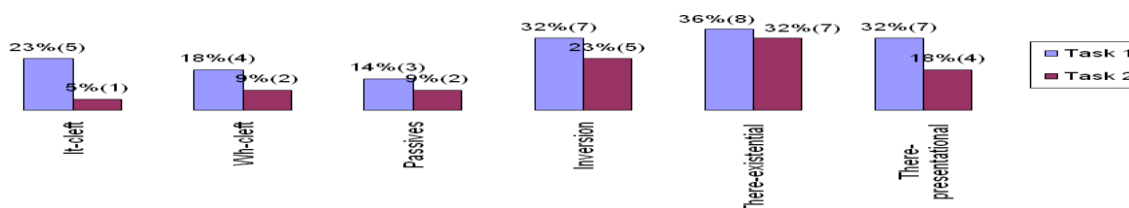


Figure 7a. Group 1 learners' failure to recognize the focal meanings imbedded in non-canonical constructions in the while-teaching phase (data drawn from learners' work-sheets)

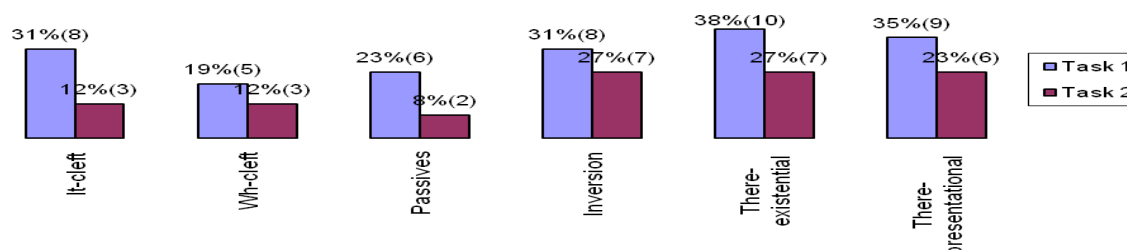


Figure 7b. Group 2 learners' failure to recognize the focal meanings imbedded in non-canonical constructions in the while-teaching phase (data drawn from learners' work-sheets).

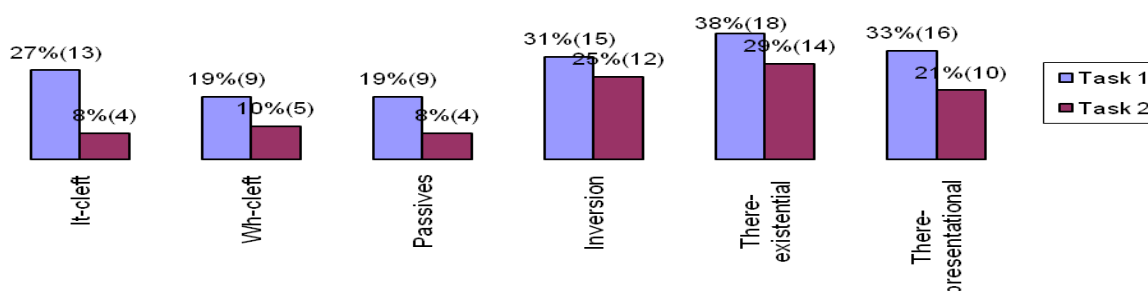


Figure 7c. Learners' failure to recognize the focal meanings embedded in non-canonical constructions (Group 1 and Group 2 combined).

The findings suggested the following. First, recognizing the focal meanings embedded in some non-canonical constructions is a problem for some L2 learners. Second, the information focus of cleft structure and passives were clearer to more learners than inversion, and there-sentences. Third, there was no big

difference between learners of different levels of proficiency in this issue.

3.6. Setting no goals before reading

Many L2 learners are assumed not to set up goals for their reading, for example, they do not

ask themselves what kind of information they need to get from the text they are going to read. Assumed potential impacts of not having this practice might include learners' difficulty in getting the main idea and some specific information of a reading passage or their losing track of the main idea.

Analyses of this reading strategy among the learners were to find out the following. First, what was the tendency among the learners in using the strategy in the pre-teaching phase and what reasons lay behind this tendency? Second, was there any change in this tendency in the while teaching phase? Third, was there enough evidence for L1 reading strategy transfer in this problem?

The analyses were based on the pre-teaching phase questionnaire and interviews and two post-task answer-sheets. In the answer-sheets, the learners were asked whether they had set up a goal before reading the passage. The first post-task answer-sheet was administered in the first lesson when learners had not been given any formal advice about using the strategy for their reading although some of them may have been aware of the strategy while answering question 18 in the questionnaire and the interviews. The second answer-sheet was administered towards the end of the while teaching phase when the learners had been explicitly given suggestions for using the strategy.

In the pre-teaching phase questionnaire, as we can see in Figures 8a and 8b below, the percentages of students who reported rarely or never using the strategy were 32% (7 students) in the first group and 15% (4 students) in the

second, a total of 23% (11/48) in both groups. In the interviews, the following reasons were given: they did not think that a goal was important for the reading, they did not realize that there should be a goal for the reading, they would tend to read any text with an interesting title, they thought every kind of knowledge in a text was necessary for the reader. For some students, not using the strategy was simply habitual, they would only surf the Internet and they would read anything that caught their attention, they would just open a book and read without thinking of any goal or purpose. One of them explained that a reader's whole reading process might be affected by the goal he set up, his understanding of the main idea of the text might be changed, and that the goal might make his reading perspective subjective.

The 40%; 19/48 students (36%; 8 students in Group 1 and 43%; 11 students in Group 2), who reported sometimes using the strategy in the questionnaire gave the following reasons in the interviews: when reading for what they liked or for what they were interested in, when reading for their ESP studies, when reading English books to improve their reading or to learn new vocabulary, when what they were going to read was a long text (they would only choose information that they could remember for their purpose), or because they got instruction from their University English teachers. At other times, they would tend not to use the strategy, for example when reading for fun, for entertainment, for relaxation, to kill the time, when reading newspapers or surfing the Internet.

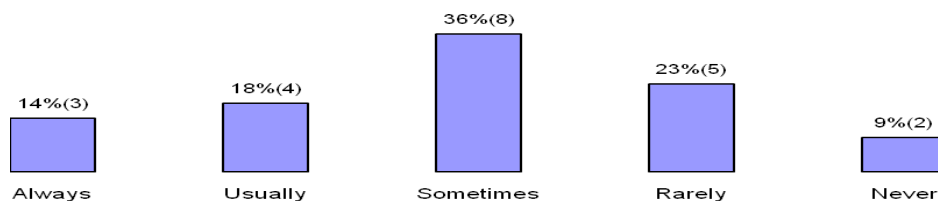


Figure 8a. Group 1 learners' tendency of setting reading goals in the pre-teaching phase, based on pre-teaching phase questionnaire responses.

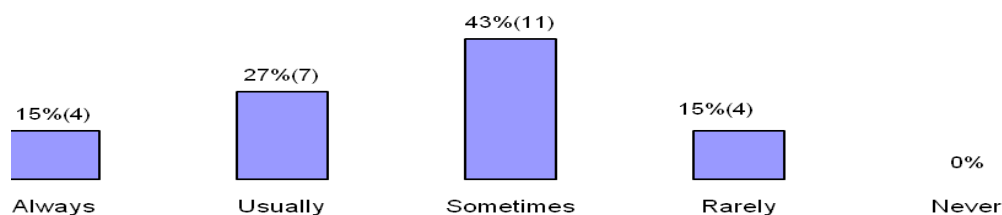


Figure 8b. Group 2 learners' tendency of setting reading goals in the pre-teaching phase, based on pre-teaching phase questionnaire responses

In the while teaching phase, 91% (20/22) of Group 1 students and 88% (23/26) of Group 2 students, a total of 90% (43/48) reported in the post-task answer-sheets that they did set a goal for reading the text given. In the second task, the percentages reporting using the strategy in both groups were 100%.

On the whole, the data showed that nearly a quarter of the learners did not frequently (never or rarely) use the strategy in the pre-teaching phase. The most common reason was that they were not aware of the importance of goal setting for reading. For nearly half of them, the practice was dependent on what they read. Setting up a goal was practiced when they read texts in their major studies. In the second while teaching phase reading task, after receiving instruction about the strategy, all of them reported using the strategy. There was little difference between the two groups on this issue. With no student reporting not practicing the strategy in L1 reading, it was concluded that there was no evidence for L1 strategy transfer in this problem.

3.7. Summary of L2 learners' reading problems

The data showed that the students in the study did encounter the six expected problems in their reading comprehension related to their meta-knowledge of English information structure. The percentage of students encountering and overcoming the problems varied according to each problem and changed through time. The only problem solved by 100% of the students at the end of the teaching phase was that of setting goals for their reading. Difficulty in recognizing the semantic relations between a specific sentence or a paragraph and the whole text was the problem that was least solved. Figures 10a and 10b below give an overview of the extent to which most students' other reading problems were resolved in the course of the study. Difficulty in getting the main ideas of reading passages, and having an inefficient reading pattern, were largely resolved towards or at the end of the teaching phase. Students' difficulty in recognizing the meanings embedded in non-canonical constructions is presented in Figure 7c.

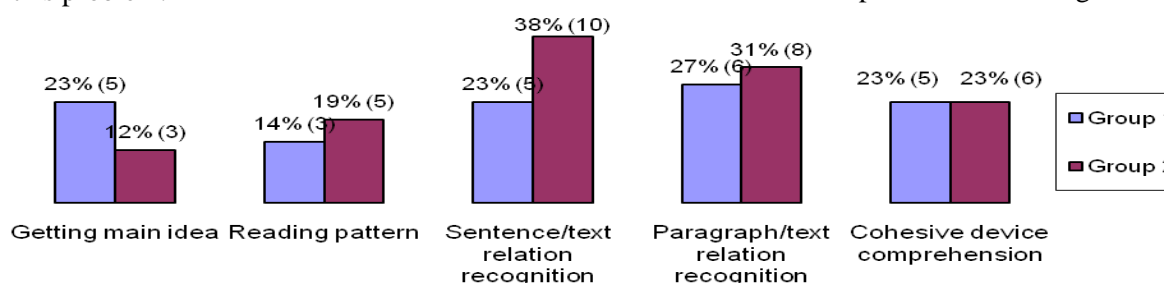


Figure 9a. Percentages of learners in each group whose problems were not resolved in the while or post-teaching phase based on while teaching phase work-sheets/post-task answer-sheets and post-teaching phase reading test

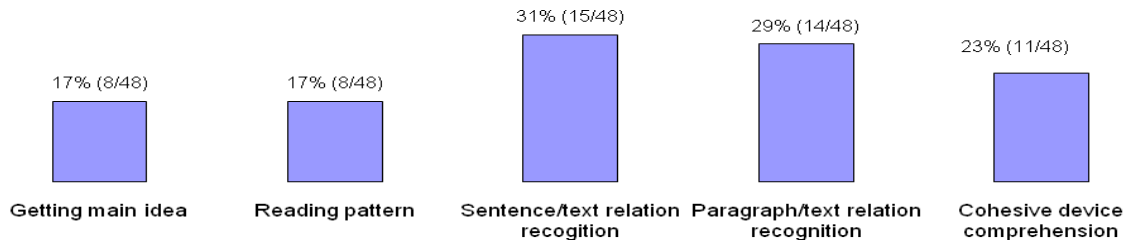


Figure 9b. Percentages of learners in both groups whose problems were not resolved in the while or post-teaching phase based on the while teaching phase work-sheets/post-task answer-sheets and post-teaching phase reading test

No strong evidence was found of mother tongue reading strategy interference in any of the reading problems. The fall in experience of problems in the while and post-teaching phase suggests there was a positive relationship between the meta-cognitive teaching method and the learners' overcoming the problems. There were no big differences between the two groups in their encountering and solving the problems. The insignificant differences in percentages varied according to each specific problem, however, no generalization could be made with respect to the relationship between the learners' levels of proficiency and their problems.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzed L2 learners' problems in their reading in the English language in areas related to their meta-knowledge of information structure. The findings suggested that the learners in the study encountered the reading problems anticipated before, during and after the teaching phase. The percentages of learners encountering the problems decreased over time and the extent to which each problem was solved towards the end of the post-teaching phase varied according to each specific problem. Most of the reading problems seemed to be caused by the learners' not having a clear and systematic meta-knowledge of English information structure (difficulty in getting main

ideas of reading passages, recognizing semantic relations between sentences/paragraphs and the whole text, and having trouble understanding information embedded in non-canonical constructions). However, not enough evidence could be found for the transfer from L1 to L2 reading strategies in any of the reading problems investigated.

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Những vấn đề học viên học tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ hai gặp phải trong quá trình đọc hiểu xét đến các yếu tố liên quan đến kiến thức siêu ngôn ngữ của học viên về cấu trúc thông tin tiếng Anh

Huỳnh Anh Tuấn

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Tóm tắt: Bài báo này trình bày một phần kết quả của một dự án nghiên cứu do ĐHQGHN tài trợ (QG.13.13) nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả việc dạy-học tiếng Anh cho sinh viên thuộc chương trình nhiệm vụ chiến lược của ĐHQGHN. Bài báo nghiên cứu 2 nội dung sau: (1) những vấn đề các nhóm học viên học tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ hai có trình độ tiếng Anh khác nhau có thể gặp phải trong quá trình đọc hiểu tiếng Anh xét đến các yếu tố có liên quan đến kiến thức siêu ngôn ngữ của người học về cấu trúc thông tin tiếng Anh, (2) tính hiệu quả (nếu có) của đường hướng nhận thức siêu ngôn ngữ trong việc giúp người học giải quyết các vấn đề trong quá trình đọc hiểu và cải thiện kỹ năng đọc hiểu thông qua việc nâng cao kiến thức siêu ngôn ngữ của người học về cấu trúc tiếng Anh. Việc phân tích các

vấn đề dựa trên các câu trả lời của học viên trong các bảng câu hỏi và các cuộc phỏng vấn, kết quả bài kiểm tra kiến thức siêu ngôn ngữ về cấu trúc thông tin tiếng Anh, kết quả bài kiểm tra đọc hiểu trước và sau khi áp dụng đường hướng giảng dạy kiến thức siêu ngôn ngữ và các bài làm của học viên trong quá trình giảng dạy. Kết quả phân tích dữ liệu cho thấy không có bằng chứng xác đáng cho việc chuyển di chiến lược đọc trong các vấn đề học viên gặp phải. Việc học viên ít gặp khó khăn hơn trong việc đọc hiểu trong và sau quá trình giảng dạy cho thấy có một mối quan hệ tích cực giữa phương pháp giảng dạy theo đường hướng nhận thức siêu ngôn ngữ và khả năng khắc phục vấn đề của học viên. Nghiên cứu cũng cho thấy không có khác biệt lớn giữa 2 nhóm học viên có trình độ năng lực tiếng Anh khác nhau trong việc gặp phải vấn đề và khắc phục vấn đề. Những khác biệt nhỏ về tỉ lệ phần trăm biến động tùy theo từng vấn đề cụ thể. Tuy nhiên nghiên cứu không thể đưa ra những nhận định khái quát về mối quan hệ giữa trình độ của học viên và những vấn đề họ gặp phải.

Từ khóa: Các vấn đề học viên học tiếng Anh gặp phải trong quá trình đọc hiểu, kiến thức siêu ngôn ngữ, cấu trúc thông tin, đường hướng nhận thức siêu ngôn ngữ, trình độ năng lực tiếng Anh.