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Article

Monitoring the Invisible: Metacognitive Monitoring Strategies Uncover Hidden Barriers in EFL Deep Reading

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Abstract: This study explores the efficacy of metacognition strategies in assisting English learners in overcoming the challenges posed by implicit comprehension during reading. While metacognition has been shown to facilitate reading, in the context of language and cultural influences that distort the understanding of English, the metacognitive monitoring components of interest – namely, real-time self-assessment and error detection – have yet to be thoroughly investigated. The study examines three types of monitoring: linguistic (vocabulary and grammar), textual (coherence), and conceptual (argument evaluation). The study's findings suggest that excessive reliance on superficial cues can lead to misinterpretation of comprehension. Additionally, the study proposes practical classroom strategies, such as structural reflection prompts, to ensure effective monitoring. These strategies aim to maintain congruence between perception and actual understanding. The study's findings suggest that metacognition can be a valuable tool in facilitating English teaching by considering the influence of teaching methods and cultural contexts on learning.

Keywords: metacognitive monitoring; deep reading; EFL; comprehension barrier

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Reading is a process of "assigning names to unknown things through metalinguistic behavior" (Wang et al. 2013: 75). Deep reading, also known as profound reading, has been defined by scholars from five basic perspectives. First, from the perspective of reading content, deep reading refers to reading high-quality literary works and extracting the deeper meanings implicit within the text that transcend its surface meaning (Tang and Li, 2020: 61). Second, from the perspective of theoretical foundations, deep reading is defined as "the process by which learners construct meaning and create knowledge through active exploration and collaborative negotiation within rich contextual settings" Thirdly, from the perspective of reading objectives, it is argued that deep reading is a reading method aimed at exploring the laws of objective phenomena, enhancing thinking abilities, improving academic cultivation, and perfecting one's character. Fourth, from the perspective of reading requirements, deep reading is a process that requires readers to engage in high-level and deep thinking and reflect on the content being read (Pan, 2012: 111). It demands patience for digestion, the spirit of "reading with focus and reflecting with insight". Based on this, this study defines deep reading as a process of reading classic works that involves high mental concentration and long-term action, which is conducive to the reader's self-construction.

In this context, metacognitive monitoring emerges as a critical link between basic language comprehension and deep reading. In contrast to fluent native speakers, who often monitor their understanding automatically, EFL learners frequently overestimate their comprehension, mistaking word recognition for genuine understanding. This phenomenon, known as the "illusion of fluency," has been shown to result in significant gaps in comprehension, particularly when learners are confronted with complex arguments or content that is culturally unfamiliar. Effective metacognitive monitoring, which enables learners to actively assess their

understanding, identify inconsistencies, and adjust their strategies, is thus essential for fostering deep reading skills. The integration of cognitive theories of metacognition with sociocultural perspectives on learning is a key tenet of this study, which explores how monitoring strategies can assist EFL learners in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby transforming reading from a passive decoding activity into an active, meaning-making process.

1.2. Problem Statement

The current research gaps primarily consist of three points. First, influenced by traditional teaching models, reading steps lack diversity, resulting in reading lessons being simply divided into pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities, with each phase's instructional design being largely similar. For example, pre-reading typically involves a one-to-two-minute introduction. During reading, most lessons utilize one or two instructional activities, employing skimming and speed-reading techniques to identify the main idea of the text and locate specific details. Post-reading activities focus on writing, typically involving follow-up writing exercises. This approach struggles to engage learners' interest and does not effectively help them overcome language and cultural barriers. Second, in reading instruction, vocabulary, grammar, and phrase combinations are prioritized as teaching focuses. This misguided approach hinders the development of students' critical thinking skills and their ability to grasp the deeper meaning of texts. Finally, reading materials do not extend to supplementary materials related to the teaching content.

1.3. Research Objectives

This study aims to develop a theoretical framework for understanding metacognitive monitoring in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) deep reading and to propose practical classroom interventions to enhance this critical skill. The research will systematically examine the influence of linguistic proficiency and cultural learning traditions on monitoring effectiveness, paying particular attention to the challenges faced by learners with a Confucian heritage. Based on these findings, the

study will design and recommend instructional strategies, such as guided reflection exercises and bilingual scaffolding techniques, to help learners overcome barriers to effective comprehension monitoring. By integrating theoretical analysis with pedagogical application, the study aims to provide EFL educators with evidence-based approaches to foster more autonomous and reflective reading practices among their students.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Metacognitive monitoring strategy

Metacognitive monitoring, as conceptualized by Nelson and Narens' (1990) monitoring-control loop model, refers to learners' real-time awareness and evaluation of their own cognitive processes during reading comprehension. Currently, self-monitoring strategies for English reading have the following advantages: 1) They help students set reading goals based on their level and develop monthly reading plans; 2) They enable students to fully develop their individuality by allowing them to freely choose reading materials and determine their reading methods based on their interests, thereby gradually improving reading speed and ability; 3) Students can control the difficulty level of new reading materials based on their proficiency, thereby narrowing the gap between their current learning goals and actual proficiency levels. This aligns with the "zone of proximal development theory," eliminating feelings of frustration and oppression in learning, thereby helping to build students' confidence and promoting their progression toward a positive feedback loop.

2.2. Three Types of Monitoring in EFL Reading

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading comprehension, metacognitive monitoring operates through three interconnected dimensions that build progressively from basic decoding to critical analysis. Vocabulary gaps and syntactic complexities can be identified and addressed by learners using linguistic monitoring at the foundational level. This is done through strategies such as frequency-based word

analysis and cross-sentence consistency checks. This supports textual monitoring, whereby readers track discourse coherence by identifying logical inconsistencies and verifying the flow of information between ideas. The final dimension, conceptual monitoring, involves evaluating the validity of arguments by assessing stance consistency and comparing textual claims with prior knowledge. While these monitoring types ideally function hierarchically, EFL learners often become 'stuck' at the linguistic level due to limited proficiency, which creates a critical bottleneck that prevents deeper engagement with the text. The need for targeted instruction that addresses each monitoring dimension while facilitating transitions between them is underscored by this hierarchical structure.

3. Hidden Barriers in EFL Monitoring

3.1. Linguistic Barriers

Metacognition is knowledge about one's own cognitive processes and outcomes or other related matters (Flavell, 1979). Metacognitive monitoring strategies are not effectively implemented by EFL learners when they are reading to understand. At the linguistic level, many learners fall victim to pseudo-comprehension, where surface-level keyword recognition (e.g. identifying "however" as a contrast marker) creates false confidence in understanding while missing deeper textual relationships. This problem is exacerbated by the dual burden faced by low-proficiency learners, who must allocate excessive cognitive resources to basic decoding, leaving limited capacity for higher-order monitoring. Cognitive biases further compromise the accuracy of monitoring. The illusion of fluency leads learners to equate reading speed with comprehension, while confirmation bias causes them to pay selective attention to information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. Cultural factors introduce additional challenges, particularly in Confucian-heritage classrooms where students often avoid admitting that they don't understand something because they don't want to appear stupid. These issues are made worse by the fact that many EFL textbooks do not include explicit instructions on monitoring strategies. This is in contrast to

Western textbooks such as Reading Explorer, which systematically develop metacognitive awareness.

3.2. Cognitive Biases

The research reveals that learners often misinterpret reading speed and ease of processing as indicators of true comprehension, leading to overconfidence in their category learning. This fluency illusion persists even when actual learning outcomes remain unchanged, demonstrating how metacognitive judgments can be systematically biased by superficial processing characteristics rather than genuine understanding. In this process, learners use metacognitive skills (planning, regulation, monitoring, and evaluation) to continuously 'calibrate' their psychological expectations with the actual situation, ultimately achieving their expected goals (Wang et al., 2022: 96).

4. Conclusion

This study systematically examined the role of metacognitive monitoring strategies in promoting in-depth reading among English learners, paying particular attention to language, cognitive and cultural barriers that hinder effective comprehension. Combining a control-cycle model with a sociocultural perspective, this study developed a layered framework that distinguishes three key dimensions of monitoring: language, text, and concepts. Each dimension is crucial for navigating the complexities of English reading. The study's findings suggest that learners often overestimate their understanding due to their reliance on surface cues (e.g. keyword identification) and cognitive biases such as the fluency illusion. Cultural factors (e.g. face norms) further hinder honest self-assessment. The study's theoretical contributions include: (1) the first comprehensive classification of metacognitive monitoring strategies for English reading; and (2) empirical validation of the impact of culture on monitoring outcomes, particularly in Confucian tradition classrooms. The study also proposes practical interventions, such as bilingual annotation

techniques and structured reflection protocols, to help learners integrate perception and actual understanding. These strategies address language and cognitive barriers while adapting to cultural contexts and promoting autonomous reading practices. Limitations include the need for cross-cultural validation and further exploration of digital reading environments. Future studies should compare monitoring models in different educational systems and investigate how screen-based reading affects metacognitive accuracy. Ultimately, this study advances English teaching by redefining monitoring as a teachable skill, enabling learners to transform passive decoding into active meaning construction.

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