Reading Online and Offline: Language Teachers’ Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Reading online is different from reading offline. Are language teachers’ strategies for reading electronic texts and reading printed texts different? Do language teachers have different attitudes toward reading printed texts and reading electronic texts, particularly web-based reading materials? Several groups of in-service language teachers enrolled in a postgraduate course on computer-assisted language learning offered by an Australian university were asked to respond to these questions in online discussion forums. This article presents data from the discussion forums and investigates the teachers’ perspectives on online reading, while exploring the differences between online reading and offline reading and the advantages and disadvantages of the two forms of reading. Findings indicate that many teachers liked to download and print study materials for both physical and academic reasons. While most teachers preferred to read online for accessing study materials, they preferred to print out copies for more detailed reading of journal articles. These results have implications for language teacher education and professional development in e-learning environments.

Keywords: Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Offline Reading, Online Reading, Teacher Perspectives, Teacher Practices

INTRODUCTION

Reading electronic texts is different from reading printed texts (Al-Shehri & Gitsaki, 2010; Dee-Lucas & Larkin, 1995; Dillon, 1992; Son, 2003; Sutherland-Smith, 2002; Weigel & Gardner, 2009). Electronic texts are read in digital form and include e-books, e-dictionaries, web documents and online instructional materials. They offer a nonlinear approach to reading and interactive features which enrich and expand the concept of literacy (Son, 2003; Sutherland-Smith, 2002). In computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environments, online reading is an essential skill for second/foreign language (L2/FL) learners and teachers. It is increasingly crucial as a great number of reading materials are provided online. As a result, there is a need for the understanding and evaluation of online reading skills and strategies. This article explores language teachers’ views on online reading by examining their responses to the question of how reading printed texts and reading electronic texts are different. It presents qualitative data from online discussion forums and investigates the teachers’ perspectives on and experiences with online reading. In this article, reading electronic texts on all types of computers and mobile devices is considered as online reading whereas reading printed texts (hard copies) is considered as offline reading.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have been conducted on online and off-line reading, particularly with a focus on online reading strategies of English as a second language (ESL) and/or English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. For example, Anderson (2003) examined metacognitive online reading strategies of ESL readers in the US and EFL readers in Costa Rica. He used an online survey of reading strategies (OSORS) adapted from the survey of reading strategies (SORS) (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002, cited in Anderson, 2003) with three categories of reading strategies: global reading strategies, problem solving strategies and support strategies. The results of his study showed that the online readers used problem solving strategies (e.g., adjusting reading rate, rereading difficult text, pausing to think about what one is reading) most frequently and the EFL readers reported using the problem solving strategies more frequently than the ESL readers. There were significant differences in the use of problem solving strategies between the ESL readers and the EFL readers whereas no differences were found in the use of global reading strategies and support reading strategies between the two groups in the study. Based on these results, Anderson argues that metacognitive online reading strategies play an important role in L2 reading and the distinction between EFL and ESL in online reading is fading.

In a different context, Huang, Chern and Lin (2009) investigated online reading strategies of EFL learners in Taiwan and the effects of strategy use on the learners’ reading comprehension. They created an online reading program which offers four strategy types of fifteen function buttons: global strategies, problem-solving strategies, support strategies and socio-affective strategies. They invited their university students to use the reading program to read four articles online and collected data on the frequency of the students’ use of each of the strategy support buttons. The results of their study showed that support strategies (e.g., using online dictionaries, online grammar resources, an online translation mechanism, highlighting tools and electronic notebooks) were used by the students most dominantly and contributed to their comprehension gains while global strategies (e.g., using previews, keywords and outlines of the texts, making predictions) contributed to better comprehension, particularly for low proficiency students. Huang, Chern and Lin assert that L2 learners’ personal learning styles and needs need to be considered for better reading performance.

With a different focus, Tseng (2010) looked into Taiwanese EFL university students’ perceptions of online reading. Her study used a paper-based reading comprehension test, an online reading comprehension test and then a questionnaire to collect data on the students’ opinions on online and offline reading. The results of the study indicate that the students disliked reading hypertext on computer screens and considered eyestrain, font size, background colours of web pages, inability to make notes and skipping lines as factors affecting their online reading performance. Tseng suggests that teachers should choose appropriate web pages for reading and teach their students how to read hypertext. She also advises to reduce eyestrain by adjusting viewing conditions of computer screens and web pages.

In dealing with online reading tasks, Park and Kim (2011) focused on three ESL learners’ reading-strategy use. Through the analysis of their data collected from online surveys, think-aloud protocols, observations, taking notes and interviews, they presented seven themes of strategies:

- Using hypermedia,
- Using computer applications and accessories,
- Dialoguing,
- Setting up reading purposes and planning,
- Previewing and determining what to read,
- Connecting prior knowledge and experiences with texts and tasks, and
- Inferring.
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