

Reading Strategy Use: A Case of Skilled vs. Less-Skilled Iranian EFL Readers

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Abstract: This study examined the relationship between Iranian EFL learners reading comprehension ability and reported the use of reading strategies among the EFL learners. Participants were 62 students studying English in a private language institute in Hamedan. They completed a questionnaire of reading strategies aimed at determining their strategies when they do a reading task in English. They were also given a reading comprehension test with 20 multiple choice questions. Based on their scores on the test, they were divided into skilled and less skilled readers. The independent t-test was run to find whether there was any difference between the two groups in terms of their scores on the reading comprehension strategy questionnaire. The result showed that the two groups differed significantly with respect to the reported use of reading comprehension strategies with skilled readers reporting higher usage of cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Key words: cognitive and metacognitive strategies, reading comprehension, reading strategy

1. Introduction

The importance of the reading skill in second and foreign language learning has led researchers to considerable research on second language reading ability. For second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) learners, reading is important because they depend heavily on their written input than on oral input (Nunan, 2002).

Psycholinguistic models of second language reading consider reading as an active process of text comprehension which is made possible by readers' use of their background knowledge and appropriate strategies (e.g. previewing the text, using contextual clues, or making inferences) (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). A lot of attention has been paid to understanding what successful readers typically do while reading, including identifying the strategies they use and how they use those strategies. Language learners are active participants in the learning process, and they use various strategies to facilitate their learning. However, in many cases, they do not use appropriate strategies in the process or do not take advantage of all available strategies. Therefore, it is important to draw their attention to the type of strategies they use, and increase their awareness of the type of strategies that successful language learners use.

Reading is an interactive process combining top-down and bottom-up processing; as a result, it is very important for students to use appropriate reading strategies to increase their comprehension (Branett, as cited in Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014). Research on second and foreign language reading strategies is useful in increasing the awareness of ESL and EFL

learners in using appropriate reading strategies to improve their reading comprehension. Given that, the present study aims to investigate whether learners with higher reading ability and those with lower reading ability use different strategies in the process of reading comprehension. Therefore, the following research question was formulated:

Is there a significant difference between reading strategies used by high ability EFL readers and low ability EFL readers?

2. Review of the Related Literature

Reading comprehension has been defined by as the process of simultaneously extracting and making meaning which involves three essential elements: (1) the reader, (2) the text, and (3) the activity (Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005). Various theories exist to explain what is involved when we read. Current research views reading as an interactive, socio-cognitive process in which an individual construct meaning through his interaction with the written text that has been created by symbols (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Celce-Murcia (2001) believes that this interaction involves readers' interpreting the text, which is influenced by their past experiences, cultural background and language background as well as the readers' purpose for reading. In the past reading was considered to be a passive skill but it is now widely accepted that reading is an active process which involves generating ideas constructed by others (Nunan, 2002).

Reading strategies are important because they can help the ESL learners' reading process and gives them a clear sense of what they are doing while reading (Budin & Shahardin, 2011). English as Second Language (ESL) learners employs different reading strategies but most of them have no knowledge of what these reading strategies are. Most of them do not know that if they use reading strategies their understanding of the materials they read can be increased.

The content of reading comprehension instruction has developed over the past decades from the teaching long lists of comprehension skills such as following directions, and finding details to an emphasis upon teaching reading strategies such as activating background knowledge, making visual images, monitoring, and summarizing (Reutzel et al., 2005). Different definitions have been proposed for the term strategy. In general, strategies refer to many forms of mental processing. Learning strategies are learners' techniques, behaviors, and actions in a variety of learning contexts (Park & Kim, 2011). Alderson (1991) defines strategies as intentional actions that learners select and control to achieve desired goal or objectives.

Although scholars approach this issue in different ways, many of them agree that strategy use benefits learning in efficient and effective ways. Finding out which reading strategies are effective in improving or helping a learner in understanding reading materials can be help in determining which strategies should be focused on when teaching the reading comprehension skill.

Different typologies have been proposed for L1 and L2 reading strategies. Teachers in the ELTU at Chinese University, for example, developed a list of strategies for second language readers which includes strategies such as *previewing*, *skimming*, *scanning*, *clustering*, *predicting*, etc. (Nunan, 2002).

In general, reading strategies, like learning strategies, are considered in two major types: cognitive and meta-cognitive. Cognitive strategies help the reader in making meaning from the text. Meta-cognitive strategies are strategies that are used to monitor or control cognitive strategies (Akyel & Ercetin, 2009). They include checking the outcome of any attempt to solve a problem, planning one's next move, monitoring the effectiveness of any attempted action, testing, revising, and evaluating one's strategies for learning (Akyel et al., 2009). In other words, skimming a text for key information is using a cognitive strategy, but assessing the effectiveness of skimming for gathering textual information is a meta-cognitive strategy.

Many of the studies recognize the role of meta-cognitive awareness in reading comprehension in both the native language and a second language. In fact, strategic awareness and monitoring of the comprehension process are very important aspects of skilled reading. Auerbach and Paxton (1997) consider meta-cognitive awareness to be a critical element of pro-

fessional and strategic reading. They believe that such meta-cognition requires knowledge of strategies for processing texts, the ability to monitor comprehension, and the ability to adjust strategies when needed.

The reader's meta-cognitive knowledge about reading may be influenced by a number of factors, including previous experiences, beliefs, culture-specific instructional practices, and, in the case of non-native readers, proficiency in L2, and it may be activated, consciously or unconsciously, when the reader faces a reading task (Sheoreya & Mokhtari, 2001).

In the context of second language learning, learners use the strategies to make learning more effective and improve comprehension. According to Budin et al. (2011) reading strategies show how readers understand a task, help them to understand and guide them to comprehend. It is important for second language readers to be aware of their comprehension processes during reading.

Research in the field of strategies has proposed that poor readers are not strategic. They use some strategies that are not suitable for their reading experiences. They use fewer strategies, less complex and use them in an inappropriate way (Botsas & Padeliadu, 2003). On the other hand, good readers possess a well developed collection of strategies, they use them appropriately to help the successfully comprehend texts (Botsas et al., 2003). What these proficient readers have in common is the use of comprehension strategies to help them understand more of what they are reading. The ability to know when and how to use these strategies is essential to understand different types of texts such as stories, informational text or poetry. Good readers apply comprehension strategies without being directed to do so. They have become self-regulated in their use of these strategies (Kirmizia, 2010).

Most of the research in the reading strategies of second language learners is related to students at lower levels of proficiency (Auerbach et al., 1997; Block, 1992; Pritchard, 1990; Zhicheng, 1992). Few studies have investigated L2 reading strategies. Alderson (1991) found that L2 learners who used more L2 strategies scored higher on reading comprehension task. In his study, he concluded that successful strategic reading was not only a matter of using reading strategies but also knowing how to use a strategy successfully. Also, some studies have focused on training learners in strategy use (Carrel, 1995). The results of these studies show that strategy training can be beneficial in improving learners' reading ability. To increase students' awareness of such strategies, it is not easy and not the learners' responsibilities alone. Teachers play an important role in helping learners to use the strategies and also taught them how to determine if they are successful in their use of that strategy (Alderson, 1991).

Literature on the reading strategies of proficient second language learners or comparing the strategies of such learners with those of poor second language readers is almost nonexistent. Therefore, the present study is conducted with the purpose of comparing and contrasting comprehension strategies used by proficient and non-proficient second language readers.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 62 Iranian non-native-English-speaking students who were studying English in a private language institute in Hamedan. There were 23 male and 39 female learners. Their age ranged from 15 to 18. They have been studying English for a minimum of 1 years and a maximum of 3 years. They were all studying English at intermediate level of proficiency.

3.2 Instrument

The data for this study were collected using the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) developed by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002), which was applied to discover the reading strategies used by second and foreign language readers. The SORS measures the perceived use of the strategies by EFL and ESL students while reading materials in English. The SORS consists of 28 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("I never or almost never do this") to 5 ("I always or almost always do this"). The SORS measures three broad categories of reading strategies, namely, meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and support strategies (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002) as follows:

1. Meta-cognitive strategies are those intentional, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor their reading.
2. Cognitive strategies are the actions and procedures readers use while working directly with the text.
3. Support strategies are basically strategies which help the reader in comprehending the text such as using a dictionary, or taking notes.

The second instrument of the study was a reading comprehension test which included 20 questions and was given to the students. The text was taken from TOEFL reading comprehension test.

3.3 Procedure

The researcher first asked for the permission of the authorities of the language institute. After that, the researcher selected 4 female classes and 3 male classes at advanced level of proficiency. The SORS and the reading comprehension test were given to the students at the beginning of their class. The students were told about the purpose of the study and were told that their scores on the reading test would not affect their course grades and their response to the questionnaire would be reported anonymously and were asked to answer honestly. Of the 83 distributed questionnaires, 62 were returned. The data were then analyzed using SPSS. Students were divided into two groups: skilled and less skilled readers. Those who scored 10 and below 10 were classified as less skilled readers, and those who scored 15 and above were classified as skilled readers. T-test were then run to see whether there are any differences between the two groups in terms of the strategy they use while reading texts in English.

4. Results and Discussion

To answer the research question of this study as to whether there are any differences between skilled and less skilled readers with respect to their strategy use while reading a text in English, the participants responses in terms of the three subcategories of meta-cognitive, cognitive and support strategies were compared across both groups using t-test. Table 4.1 shows groups' means on the three major subcategories. Both skilled and less skilled readers showed a preference for cognitive strategies, followed by meta-cognitive strategies and support strategies.

Table 4.1

Skilled and Less Skilled Readers' Mean of Using the Three Subcategories of Reading Strategies

Strategy type	Mean	
	Skilled readers	Less skilled readers
Meta-cognitive	30	21
Cognitive	56	38
Support	37	30

However, differences were found in terms of the frequency of using these strategies while reading in English as a foreign language. Skilled readers made use of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies more frequently than less skilled readers did. The results of t-test showed that these differences are significant (Table 4.2). The t-observed value for meta-cognitive strategies is 9.26. This amount of t-value is higher than the critical value of 7.52 at 60 degrees of freedom. The t-observed value for cognitive strategies is 11.39. This amount of t-value is higher than the critical value of 7.52 at 9.26 degrees of freedom.

Table 4.2

The Result of T-Test for Cognitive and Meta-Cognitive Strategies

	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Cognitive strategies	0.008	11.393	60	.000
Meta-cognitive strategies	0.020	9.265	60	.000

Based on these results it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the skilled and less skilled readers in terms of frequency of meta-cognitive and cognitive strategy use. The investigation of the relationship between strategy use and reading ability shows an interesting interaction between these two variables. These differences in reported strategy usage can be explained by the differences in the reading ability between skilled and less skilled readers. The interrelation between these two variables in the present study is quite predictable, taken the results of previous research on L2 reading ability into account which has shown that reading proficiency is closely related to L2 readers' level of proficiency in the target language (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). It seem that skilled readers are more aware and conscious of reading strategies and their effectiveness, thus employ them to enhance their reading ability.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the differences in reported reading strategy use by native and non-native EFL learners. The result revealed significant differences between the two groups of EFL readers, i.e. skilled and less skilled readers. Although in this study all the students were studying English at intermediate level of proficiency, they differed in their reading ability which can be attributed to the reading strategy they employed while reading. These results show the significance of reading strategy use and the importance of raising EFL learners' awareness of such strategies to increase their efficiency of their reading ability. EFL teachers can play a major role in this respect.

Like any other of research, this study suffered from some limitations. First of all, the sample size was very small which lowers the possibility of generalizations. Further studies with larger sample size can be carried out to ensure the generalizability of the results. Also, participants of the present study were intermediate level students. Another study can be conducted to compare reported use of reading strategies by intermediate and advanced learners to see whether L2 proficiency level can be a mediating factor in reading strategy use.

In addition, a future study can investigate the reported strategy use by EFL learners while reading texts in their native language as well as English to probe the extent of overlap between the type of reading strategies they employ while reading in their first language (L1) and in English. Such study can show whether reading strategies are transferrable from L1 to L2 reading. In sum, the findings of the present study provide useful information for EFL teachers and learners to improve EFL reading ability.

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