

Reading Strategies Used by Iranian EFL Learners While Reading Academic Texts

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Abstract

The major aim of this study was to explore the nature and frequency of the reading strategies used by the EFL learners while reading academic texts. Normally, students tend to read all the information provided in reading materials. This study explores whether learners use reading strategies to assist them in reading comprehension. There was a sample of 45 English language (EFL) learners from Islamic Azad University, Falavarjan Branch. The instrument utilized in this study was a survey questionnaire with 30 items including 13 global reading strategies, 8 problem solving strategies and 9 support reading strategies. The survey was going to signify how much EFL learners use each of these strategies while reading academic texts. The findings indicated that the participants used global reading strategies more (44.5%) than problem solving strategies (29.0%) and support reading strategies (26.5%). The results of the present study will let the instructors improve the reading strategies which are not used by EFL learners frequently. It also helps learners to promote the ability of using reading strategies and utilize the strategies in an appropriate and effective way.

Keywords: reading academic texts, reading strategies, reading comprehension

Introduction

Reading is a valuable source of input and plays a major role in the process of language learning. It helps learners gain information, broadens their understanding of different subjects, and thus assists them in achieving their academic goals (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). Chastain (1988) states “reading is a basic and complementary skill in language learning”. Since the late 1970's, ESL researchers have considered the relationship between reading strategies and successful and unsuccessful second language reading in L1 and/or L2 (Anderson & Roit, 1993; Block, 1986; Block, 1993; Carrell, 1998; Jimenez, Garcia & Pearson, 1995; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Paris, Cross & Lipson, 1984; Pearson & Fielding, 1991). Urquhart and Weir (1998) regarded reading strategies as “ways of getting around difficulties encountered while reading”. According to Brown (2001), reading in an L2 is not a monolingual event. L2 readers have access to their first language as they read. One of the main methods to enhance easy, joyful and active reading is through the utilization of reading strategies. A problem that EFL learners face in their language learning improvement is reading. Most of them try to understand the meaning of the reading word by word. They need to use reading strategies to get the gist of reading and guess what the reading says.

Experts believe that the learners will be more successful to learn reading if they utilize strategies. Learners can understand the aim of the text better by using reading techniques such as skimming, scanning, guessing, and underlying. Such techniques help students to keep and analyze the reading information in their mind more effectively.

There are some strategies for reading as Brown (2001, pp. 306-309) states:

1. Identify the purpose in reading. Efficient reading consists of clearly identifying the purpose in reading something.
2. Skim the text for main ideas. Skimming consists of quickly running one's eyes across a whole text (such as essay, article, or chapter) for its gist.
3. Scan the text for specific information. Scanning exercises may ask students to look for names or dates, to find a definition of a key concept, or to list a certain number of supporting details.
4. Use semantic mapping or clustering. This strategy helps the reader to provide some order to the chaos.

5. Guess when you are not certain. The learners can use guessing strategy to their advantage to:
 - guess the meaning of a word
 - guess a grammatical relationship (e.g., a pronoun reference)
 - guess a discourse relationship (coherence, cohesion, and unity)
 - guess about a culture reference
 - guess content message
 - infer implied meaning (“between the lines”)

If readers always attempt to understand all information in a text, they tend to become confused. Rice (2009) claims that reading is actually a process in which the reader interacts with the text to procure meaning. To interact with the reading material, it is essential for learners to have strategies that assist them in grasping the meaning of a text. One such strategy comprises identifying the topic and main ideas in the reading material to aid comprehension. “Reading is a receptive skill in that the reader is receiving a message from a writer. Reading is a basic and complementary skill in language learning (Chastain, 1988). There are many reasons why getting students to read English texts is an important part of a language teacher’s job. In the first place, many students want to be able to read texts in English either for their careers, for study purposes or simply for pleasure. Reading also has a positive effect on students’ vocabulary knowledge, on their spelling and on their writing (Harmer, 2007).

Many researchers have studied the use of EFL/ESL reading strategies among learners. Poole (2005) used the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) to explore the reading strategies of 248 university ESL students from the Midwest and South of the United States. The results showed that problem-solving strategies were used with high frequency while global and support strategies were used with medium frequency. Gorsuch and Taguchi (2008) found that Vietnamese college EFL students mostly used bottom-up, top-down, and cognitive strategies to assist comprehension in repeated reading sessions. Phakiti (2003) studied Thai university EFL students; those who frequently use metacognitive strategies had significantly better reading test performance.

Mokhtari and Sheorey (2008) later explained that skilled readers of FL and SL were characterized as globally aware. They were able to think about the reading process, to focus on planning, monitoring, goal-setting and assessment strategies, and to promote global skills as well as reading comprehension. Highly proficient students appear to use more and a greater variety of strategies in the reading of English texts. Kummin and Rahman (2010) reported that ESL university students from Kebangsaan, Malaysia, who were proficient in English

often used a variety of strategies, but those who were less proficient had little knowledge of metacognition. They were not able to use suitable strategies to evaluate their own reading comprehension.

In a study by Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), ESL reading strategies were divided into three categories: metacognitive, cognitive, and support. In their definitions, metacognitive strategies were intentionally and carefully planned techniques used by learners to monitor or manage their reading. Cognitive strategies were specific actions and procedures used by learners while working directly on the text. Support strategies are used when readers use tools to comprehend the text, such as using a dictionary, taking notes, or underlining or highlighting the text. Later, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2002) renamed two categories of their ESL reading strategies. Metacognitive strategies were renamed as global reading strategies, and cognitive strategies were renamed as problem-solving reading strategies.

Three main categories of reading strategies, as mentioned in Sheorey and Mokhtari (2002), are the focus of this study. The first category, global reading strategies, refers to pre reading activities such as having a purpose in mind before reading and thinking about what one already knows about the material before reading. The second category, problem solving strategies, refers to actions like rereading to understand the text and adjusting one's reading rate to the difficulty level of what the reader is reading. The last category, support reading strategies, concerns the use of creating outside reference materials from the text such as notes in the margins, summarizing, or simple underlining of important information.

Strategic learning and in similar manner strategic reading are growing topics in Iran; they have attracted a lot of scholars' attentions, and many different studies have been conducted providing an enormous body of valuable information regarding these fields of EFL learning in Iran.

Karbalaei (2010) compared reading strategy use in Iranian EFL and Indian ESL college students. The researcher found that Indian ESL students used mostly global and support strategies, as well as metacognitive reading strategies, while Iranian EFL students used mostly problem-solving reading strategies.

Shokrpour and Nasiri (2011) investigated the use of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies by 94 good and poor Iranian academic IELTS test takers. The analysis of the data revealed that there was not any significant difference between good and poor readers in using cognitive strategies. However, good readers outperformed the poor readers in employing metacognitive strategies. Within group data analysis revealed that in both

groups, there was a significantly positive correlation between the use of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies.

Ebrahimi (2012) used a strategy questionnaire, a think aloud procedure and an interview to investigate the cognitive strategies used by 8 Persian (4 of high and 4 of low reading proficiency) EFL graduate students while reading a hypermedia text. The results indicated that the cognitive strategies used by the two groups were completely different. The high group mainly used skimming and relied greatly upon their prior knowledge, while the low group mostly made use of paraphrasing, translating into first language and checking the unknown words in a dictionary.

Birjandi (2001) investigated the correlation between the use of reading strategies between the learners' first language (Persian) and EFL. The results of the study indicated that out of 17 strategies classified as positive reading strategies, 6 were used frequently in Persian and English and 10 were used moderately in both languages. However, out of 8 negative strategies, 6 were used moderately in both languages and two other strategies were used relatively infrequently in both languages. The results supported the view that reading strategies, among other aspects of reading ability, can be transferred from one language to another. Ebrahimi (2012) studied the L1 and FL reading strategies of Iranian university students of different EFL proficiencies. She made use of a 22 item 4-point Likert scale questionnaire, Kong's (2006) interview guide and Flesch-Kincaid's reliability formula. The participants were 10 (5 advanced, 5 intermediate) Iranian post graduate students. She checked the participants' first and foreign language reading comprehension through reading an English text and its Persian translation after which they completed the questionnaire and were interviewed. The data analysis indicated that there existed both similarities and differences in the strategies used by them for understanding the texts. The important point in that study was that the number of reading strategies used by the more proficient students was significantly more than that used by the less proficient students.

In order to achieve the objectives of this study the following research question was asked: What reading strategies are used more frequently by Iranian EFL Learners while reading academic texts?

Method

Participants

A sample of 45 participants took part in the study. The participants were EFL students studying at third semester at an Azad university in Iran, Falavarjan branch. The students were native speakers of Persian. All participants were female and their age ranged from 23 to 29 with an average of 26. They were all studying English Language Teaching in order to get the bachelor degree.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey 2002 (See Appendix A). It consisted of 30 items, each with a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I never or almost never do this) to 5 (I always or almost always do this).

Procedure

In order to investigate the rate of using reading strategies, the following procedure was applied:

1. The participants were asked to read each statement and circle the numbers that applies to them.
2. The questionnaires were collected and scored for all 30 items.
3. The questionnaires were scored based on the strategy types: global, problem solving and support reading strategies.

The individual sheet was first scored based on the guidelines provided by Mokhtari & Sheorey (2002). Mokhtari's and Sheorey's assessment sheets were designed mainly for reading academic materials.

The overall average indicates how often the participants use reading strategies when reading academic materials. The average for each subscale shows which group of strategies (i.e., global, problem solving, or support strategies) the participants use most often when reading. It is important to note, however, that the best possible use of these strategies depends on the students reading ability in English, the type of material read, and the reading purpose. A low score on any of the subscales or parts of the inventory indicates that there may be some strategies in these parts that the students might want to learn about and consider using when reading. A brief description of these categories is given here:

Global reading strategies (GLOB) are the intentional, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor or manage their reading such as having a purpose in mind, previewing the text as to its length and organization, or using typographical aids and tables and figures. The items

1,3,4,6,8,12,15,17,20,21,23,24 and 27 are indications of global reading strategies.

Problem solving strategies (PROB) are the action and procedures that readers use while working directly with the text. these are localize focused techniques used when problems develop in understanding textual information; examples include adjusting one's speed of reading when the material becomes difficult or easy, guessing e meaning of unknown words, and rereading the text to improve comprehension. The items 7, 9, 11, 14,16, 19, 25 and 28 are indications of problem solving reading strategies.

Support strategies (SUP) are basic support mechanisms intended to aid the reader in comprehending the text such as using a dictionary, taking notes, underlining, or highlighting textual information. The items 2, 5, 10, 13, 18, 22, 26, 29 and 30 are indications of support reading strategies.

Results

This study tried to investigate the nature and frequency of the reading strategies used by EFL learners while reading academic texts. To answer the research question, the questionnaires were analyzed. According to the findings, the mean is 99.97. The standard deviation is 12.57. Table 1 shows the percentage of each GLOB, PROB, and SUP reading strategies.

Table 1
The percentage of GLOB, PROB, and SUP reading strategies

Strategy	Percentage
GLOB	
Reading strategies	44.5%
PROB	
Solving strategies	29.0%
SUP	
Reading strategies	26.5%

GLOB: global, PROB: problem, SUP: support

This findings show that most of the participants in this study use global reading strategies (44.5%), problem solving strategies (29.0%), and finally support reading strategies (26.5%).

The results indicated that Iranian EFL learners use all types of reading strategies (i.e., global, problem solving, or support strategies).

Discussion

Based on the results presented, it is obvious that the most frequently used reading strategy in this study is global reading strategy. The results are in line with Mokhtari and Sheorey (2008). However, Poole (2005) had found the highest frequency among ESL Learners in problem-solving strategies. Karbalaei (2010) also reported results which were similar to Poole's (2005). As the Global Reading Strategies refer to pre reading activities such as having a purpose in mind before reading and thinking about what one already knows about the material before reading, it can be claimed that the participants use the overall strategy. As indicated in the items of the questionnaire the participants' choices reveal that they have a purpose in their mind when they read as well as they decide what to ignore and what to read closely. They try to guess what the content of text is about when they read and then check to see if their guess about the text is true or wrong. They think about what they know to help their understanding and review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organization. They use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information. All these features show that based on the level of participants, they are advanced enough to read a text professionally by using reading strategies.

As the percentage of problem solving shows, participants used problem solving strategy less than using global reading strategies. As problem solving strategies, claim the actions like rereading hard to understand text and adjusting one's reading rate to the difficulty level of what they're reading. Support strategies are the ones that were not employed by the participants frequently. These are strategies such as using references, taking notes, underlining, or highlighting textual information. Although these are essential strategies for reading academic texts, the participants were not using the summarizing or note taking techniques frequently. This result indicates that teachers should improve these strategies by training and practicing in reading classes.

The results of the present study will help the instructors to improve those reading strategies which are used by students less frequently and help learners

to promote the ability of using reading strategies and utilize the strategies that are appropriate effectively. In future studies, researchers could work on the factors that may let the learners improve their ability in utilizing reading strategies. Future research would also test to find out if there is any difference in using reading strategies while reading academic texts and non-academic ones.

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Appendix A
SURVEY OF READING STRATEGIES
Kouider Mokhtari and Ravi Sheorey, 2002

The purpose of this survey is to collect information about the various strategies you use when you read school-related academic materials in ENGLISH (e.g., reading textbooks for homework or examinations; reading journal articles, etc.). Each statement is followed by five numbers, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, and each number means the following:

‘1’ means that ‘I never or almost never do this’.

‘2’ means that ‘I do this only occasionally’.

‘3’ means that ‘I sometimes do this’. (About 50% of the time)

‘4’ mean that ‘I usually do this’.

‘5’ mean that ‘I always or almost always do this’.

After reading each statement, circle the number (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) which applies to you. Note that there is no right or wrong responses to any of the items on this survey.

Statement	Never	Always
1. I have a purpose in mind when I read.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
2. I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
3. I think about what I know to help me understand what I read.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
4. I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before reading it.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
5. When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
6. I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
7. I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

- what I am reading.
8. I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organization. 1 2 3 4 5
9. I try to get back on track when I lose concentration. 1 2 3 4 5
10. I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it. 1 2 3 4 5
11. I adjust my reading speed according to what I am reading. 1 2 3 4 5
12. When reading, I decide what to read closely and what to ignore. 1 2 3 4 5
13. I use reference materials (e.g. a dictionary) to help me understand what I read. 1 2 3 4 5
14. When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I am reading. 1 2 3 4 5
15. I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding. 1 2 3 4 5
16. I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading. 1 2 3 4 5
17. I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading. 1 2 3 4 5
18. I paraphrase (restate ideas in my own words) to better understand what I read. 1 2 3 4 5
19. I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read. 1 2 3 4 5
20. I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information. 1 2 3 4 5
21. I critically analyze and evaluate the information presented in the text. 1 2 3 4 5
22. I go back and forth in the text to find relationships among ideas in it. 1 2 3 4 5
23. I check my understanding when I come across new information. 1 2 3 4 5
24. I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read. 1 2 3 4 5
25. When text becomes difficult, I re-read it to increase my understanding. 1 2 3 4 5
26. I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text. 1 2 3 4 5
27. I check to see if my guesses about the text are right 1 2 3 4 5

or wrong.

28. When I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases. 1 2 3 4 5

29. When reading, I translate from English into my native language. 1 2 3 4 5

30. When reading, I think about information in both English and my mother tongue. 1 2 3 4 5

Biodata

Vida Yousefian has M.A in ELT. She is a faculty member at Islamic Azad University, Falavarjan Branch, Esfahan, Iran. Her main research interests are CALL, second language teaching and learner variables.