Reading Strategies in Iranian EFL learners

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ABSTRACT
Reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension. The aims of this study is to compare using of metacognitive strategies in reading skill by advanced, intermediate and elementary levels learners of English language. 200 Iranian EFL students both male and female were participated in this study. Their language proficiency level was classified to elementary, intermediate and advanced learners. It is convincing to mention that the participants were English major in teaching, translation and literature. The researcher utilized a questionnaire which was 22 items based on Likert Scale. The metacognitive reading strategies questionnaire (MRSQ) is administered to investigate the frequency of participants use of metacognitive reading strategies developed by Taraban, Kerr and Ryerson (2004). The results of the chi-square indicate that there is a significant relationship between the proficiency level of the students and their use of meta-cognitive strategies ($\chi^2 (8) = 74.67, P = .000 < .05$). That is, as proficiency level increases the students make more use of meta-cognitive strategies. It should be also noted that gender as an independent variable in this study didn't cause any significant difference in the performance, i.e., we can claim that no significant differences between male and female students exist regarding the use of metacognitive strategies.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions
Some of the learners have problem in reading comprehension. It is supposed that appropriate use of metacognitive strategies have a positive impact on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension. The current research in second language reading has begun to focus on readers' strategies. Reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension.

In this respect, the aims of this study is to compare using of metacognitive strategies in reading skill by advanced, intermediate and elementary levels learners of English language.

The study addressed the following two research questions:

- **RQ1**: Is there any difference between advanced, intermediate and elementary level language students in terms of using metacognitive reading strategies?
- **RQ2**: Dose gender difference have any influence on the metacognitive strategy use?

Introduction
Reading is considered to be the most important language skill and defined as the ability of drawing meaning from the text and interpreting this information in an appropriate way, Grabe and Stoller (2002). Reading is the kind of process in which one needs to not only understand its direct meaning, but also comprehend its implied ideas. As Tierney and Readence (2005) states, “Learning to read is not only learning to recognize words; it is also learning to make sense of texts” (p. 51).

The skill of reading is also the central point of attention in foreign language teaching (Richards & Renandya, 2002: 273). According to them; there are two basic reasons for this. Their first reason indicates reading as the most important goal of many foreign language learners, whereas their second reason considers a great number of pedagogical aims of texts that help reading to become so important. Also Anderson (1999) highlights that with a greater exposure to the target language via reading since foreign language learners greater possibilities of mastering their proficiency in English. He points out that by the help of reading learners are exposed to a great amount of language which results in proficiency in the target language.

Reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension. Research in second language reading suggests that readers use a variety of strategies to assist them with the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information. Strategies are defined as learning techniques, behaviors, problem-solving or study skills which make learning more effective and efficient (Rigney, 1978).

People read different things with different aims and use different strategies for different tasks. In order for readers to achieve their purpose in reading the text, they need to follow reading strategies during the process. In this respect, O’Malley and Chamot listed learning strategies in three categories of metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective. The present study aims to focus on metacognitive reading strategies.

One of the first definitions of metacognition comes from Flavell (1979), who describes it as one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them. He also asserts that metacognition includes the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of information processing activities. He uses these ideas to provide the following succinct formulation: ‘metacognition refers to the knowledge, awareness and control of one’s own learning’. There are three aspect of metacognition: metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive monitoring, self regulation and control.

Keywords
Reading strategies, Metacognitive strategies, EFL learners.
Review of the Related Literature

Reading Comprehension Strategies

Researches mostly regards reading processes as being of two major components, which are decoding and comprehension. Decoding is the recognition of words and their meanings, while comprehension requires relevant background knowledge and the application of general reading strategies, such as predicting the content of the text, guessing unknown words in context, making inferences, recognizing the type of text and text structure, and grasping the main ideas of the paragraph.

Brown (2001) states that for EFL learners who are already literate in a previous language, reading comprehension is primarily a matter of developing appropriate, effective comprehension strategies. Some strategies are related to bottom-up procedures, and others enhance the top-down processes. From the many reading strategies related to top-down processing, question-generation stands apart for more consideration, since it is believed that if this strategy and its key aspects are taught by EFL teachers, brilliant results will be observed in learners’ reading comprehension performance. However, the researcher would tend to review some key aspects related to this strategy first. Since question-generation is a cognitive learning strategy when used in reading for comprehension, the author finds it important to review issues like learning strategies, communication strategies, cognitive, meta-cognitive strategies, reading strategies and the importance of teaching them.

Strategy

Strategies are procedures used in learning, thinking, etc. which serve as a way of reaching a goal. In language learning, learning strategies and communication strategies are those conscious or unconscious processes which language learners make use of in learning and using a language.

Communication Strategies vs. Learning Strategies

Faerch and Kasper (1983, cited in Ellis 1985) used another dichotomy to distinguish learning strategies from other strategies. The dichotomy is learning style vs learning strategies. Learning style refers to any individual’s preferred ways of going about learning. It is generally considered that one’s learning style will result from personality variables, including psychological and cognitive make-up, socio-cultural background, and educational experience. Learning strategies on the other hand are the mental processes which learners employ to learn and use the target language. These processes are called procedural knowledge.

According to Brown (1994) while learning strategies deal with the receptive domain of intake, memory, storage, and recall, communication strategies touch upon the employment of verbal or nonverbal mechanisms for the productive communication of information. In the arena of linguistic interaction, it is sometimes difficult, of course, to distinguish between the two, as Tarone (1983) cited in Brown (1994) aptly noted, since comprehension and production can occur almost simultaneously. Nevertheless, as long as you can appreciate the slipperiness of such a dichotomy, it remains a useful distinction in understanding the nature of strategies.

Oxford's Strategy System

Oxford’s classification (1990) has six main categories of strategy. Three under the heading of ‘direct’, and three under ‘indirect’.

A. Direct strategies: These strategies work with the language itself and are of three types:
   1. Memory strategies for remembering and retrieving new information.
   2. Cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language.
   3. Compensation strategies for using the language despite knowledge gaps.

B. Indirect strategies for general management of learning. These strategies are of three types:
   1. Meta-cognitive strategies for coordinating the learning process.
   2. Affective strategies for regulating emotions.
   3. Social strategies for learning with others.

Meta Cognitive Strategies

Richards & Renandye (2002) state that strategies of this type deal with the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of language learning activities. For example, students may develop a plan for monitoring their progress by constantly comparing their current level of proficiency with the course goals outlined in the curriculum. Here are three examples of metacognitive strategies (O’ Malley and Chamot 1990):

- Direct attention: deciding in advance to attend in general to a learning task and to ignore irrelevant distracters; maintaining attention during task execution.
- Self-management: understanding the conditions that help one successfully accomplish language tasks and arranging for the presence of those conditions; controlling one’s language performance to maximize use of what is already known.
- Problem identification: explicitly identifying the central point needing resolution in a task or identifying an aspect of the task that hinders its successful completion.

Followed by metacognitive studies in the L1 context, second language researchers have also drawn increasing attention on metacognitive strategies in second language learning, especially in the reading domain. Many second language reading researchers have pointed out the positive correlation of proficient second language readers with more awareness of using appropriate reading strategies in English reading tasks. Moreover, several researchers (Carrell, 1998; Sheorey and Mokhtari, 2001) assert that in order to make reading strategies effective in the reading process, metacognitive awareness or metacognition must be employed. This “metacognitive awareness” refers to knowledge of strategies as well as controlling this knowledge of action in the reading process (Carrell et al., 1989). In response to this positive relationship between metacognitive reading strategies and reading comprehension, several second language instructors began training second language learners with metacognitive reading strategies and the results suggested that metacognitive reading strategy instruction brings positive outcomes in language learner’s metacognitive awareness and reading comprehension.

Reading Strategy Research

Reading strategies can be defined as "plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning" (Duffy , 1993, p232) cited in (Richards & Renandye 2002). They range from bottom-up vocabulary strategies, such as looking up an unknown word in the dictionary, to more comprehensive actions, such as connecting what is being read to the reader's background knowledge. Research in the L1 and L2 fields has demonstrated that strategy use is different in more proficient and less proficient readers. More proficient readers use different types of strategies, and they use them in different ways (Pressley, Beard EL-Dinary, & Brown, 1992). Moreover, reading strategies can be taught to students, and when taught, strategies help improve student performance on tests of comprehension and recall (Carrell, 1985; Carrell, Pharis,
instrument can be accepted as an assessment tool for measuring students’ use of metacognitive strategies to understand the text. Taraban, Kerr and Rynearson also claim that many researchers have tended to develop related assessment tools before however neither of them was convenient for assessing the use of metacognitive strategies in college settings.

Methods

Participants

In order to produce justifiable answer to the questions, 200 Iranian EFL students both male and female were participated in this study. Their language proficiency level was classified to elementary, intermediate and advanced learners. It is convincing this study. Their language proficiency level was classified to mention that the participants were English major in teaching, translation and literature. The kind of sampling was opportunistic sampling which means that the researcher distributed the questionnaire to the learner, since she was aware they were English major, and their level of language proficiency was suitable enough to answer the questionnaire.

Pilot Study

Before the research plan is prepared, it may be helpful to try out the proposed procedures on a few participants. This trial run, or pilot study, will first of all, help the researcher to decide whether the study is feasible, and whether it is worthwhile to continue. It provides an opportunity to access the appropriateness and practicality of data collocation instruments. It permits a preliminary testing of the hypothesis, which may give some indication of its tenability and suggest whether further refinement is needed. The pilot study will also demonstrate the adequacy of the research procedures and the measures which have been selected for the variables. Unanticipated problems that appear may be solved at this stage, thereby saving time and effort later. A pilot study is well worth the time required and is especially recommended for the beginning researchers. Accordingly, in order to gain access to almost proper instruments for the current research one pilot study was conducted. The researcher conducted a pilot study with thirty students – both male and female majoring in English language literature.

Instrumentation

The researcher utilized a questionnaire which was 22 items based on Likert Scale. In this study, is utilized aquestionaires instrument to collect data on the use of metacognitive reading strategies. The metacognitive reading strategies questionnaire (MRSQ) is administered to investigate the frequency of participants'useof metacognitive reading strategies developed by Taraban, Kerr and Rynearson (2004). It includes 22 items. Taraban, Kerr and Rynearson (2004) developed Metacognitive Reading Strategies Questionnaire (MRSQ) constituting of 22 statements in two broad categories of analytic and pragmatic to make language learners report their own position in terms of using metacognitive reading strategies. In other words, this

Table 1: Meta-Cognitive Strategies by Proficiency Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHOICES</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Usually</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within PROFICIENCY LEVEL Elementary</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Residual</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>1701</td>
<td>1439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within PROFICIENCY LEVEL Intermediate</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Residual</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within PROFICIENCY LEVEL Advanced</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Residual</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>759</td>
<td>1451</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>1680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within PROFICIENCY LEVEL Total</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As displayed in Table 2 the results of the chi-square indicate that there is a significant relationship between the proficiency level of the students and their use of meta-cognitive strategies (x² (8) = 74.67, P = .000 < .05). Thus the null-hypothesis as there is not any significant difference between advanced, intermediate and elementary level language students in terms of metacognitive reading strategies is rejected. As proficiency level increases the students make more use of metacognitive strategies.
variable in this study didn’t cause any significant difference in meat–cognitive strategies.

Conclusions

Does gender difference have any influence on the metacognitive strategy use?

An analysis of chi-square is run to probe the effect of gender differences on the use of meta-cognitive strategies. As displayed in Table 3, none of the Std. Residuals are out of the ranges of +/- 1.96, i.e. the male and female student make the same use of metacognitive strategies.

Table 3: Meat-Cognitive Strategies by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHOICES</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>74.673*</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Does gender difference have any influence on the metacognitive strategy use?

The non-significant chi-square value of 4.51 (P = .340 > .05) further supports the above mentioned conclusions as no significant difference between male and female students use of met-cognitive strategies. Thus the second null-hypothesis as gender difference does not have any influence on the metacognitive strategy use is supported.

Table 4: Chi-Square Meta-Cognitive Strategy Use by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHOICES</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>4.518*</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

We understood the elementary students never or seldom use metacognitive strategies. In other words, they usually or always fail to use metacognitive strategies. None of the Std. Residuals are significant for the intermediate group, i.e. the intermediate students’ use of metacognitive strategies or their avoiding of such strategies is not significant. However, the advanced students use metacognitive strategies significantly, i.e., they do not avoid these strategies.

It should be noted that proficiency as an independent variable in this study made a significant difference in the performance of the different levels (elementary, intermediate, advanced) i.e., we can claim that the more proficient a student the more the employment of metacognitive strategies in the process of reading comprehension or vice versa. In other words, as proficiency level increases the students make more use of meat-cognitive strategies.

It should be also noted that gender as an independent variable in this study didn’t cause any significant difference in the performance, i.e., we can claim that no significant differences between male and female students exist regarding the use of metacognitive strategies.

References


