



Reading strategy research in Iran

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ABSTRACT

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). One of the main methods to enhance easy, joyful and active reading is through the utilization of reading strategies. The present article is a synthesis and review of the most recent studies in the field of reading strategies in Iran.

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1. Introduction

According to Marzban (2008); although, the English courses in Iran's educational system are mostly reading oriented, with little or no attention to other skills, many EFL learners in Iran have major difficulties with reading comprehension; furthermore, Bastanfar and Hashemi (2010) asserted that; even though, the target in English courses in Iran is to give students of different majors, practice in reading English with the end result of enabling them to read and comprehend source materials, English reading comprehension has turned into a tough task for Iranian students; in addition, Zare and Mobarakrh (2011) also suggested that in spite of the fact that the major focus of all high school English syllabus in Iran is reading, the performance of learners on reading section, both in final exams and Iran university entrance examination is disappointing.

Carrell and Grabe (2002) classified the effective factors in L2/FL reading success into five general categories, i.e. vocabulary, L2/FL proficiency, background knowledge, reading strategies and extensive reading/exposure to print in both L1 and L2/FL.

The studies conducted to examine and rate the correlation of any of these factors with L2/FL enhancement, both inside and outside Iran, are supportive of these factors' being influential; though, they all still are totally open to further investigation into the discovery of the most influential methods for improving the utilization of these factors with different study samples.

The newest of these variables which are still in vogue and a lot of researchers' focus is directed toward them are the reading strategies. Although, extensive review of the related literature indicates that substantial and mindful reading strategy use, can result in considerable success in EFL reading comprehension (Oxford, Talbott, & Halleck, 1990; Stewner-Manzanares, Chamot, O'Malley, Küpper, & Russo, 1985; Wenden & Rubin, 1987); also, despite the great emphasis on usefulness and teachability of reading strategies and the positive outcomes of the studies in this field (Carrell, 1998; Macaro & Erler, 2008;

Zhang, 2008), instruction of reading strategies is still widely neglected by the Iranian educational system (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007); consequently, the focus of the present study is on the pieces of research conducted in the field of reading strategies as a fundamental enhancer of reading comprehension.

According to Best, et al. (2012), the factors that affect reading comprehension can also influence reading strategy use. It can also logically be generalized that the factors that play a role in the use of other LLSs [language learning strategies] may influence the use of reading strategies too.

Reviewing the related literature in the field of reading strategies' research, the factors investigated in correlation with reading strategy use can be classified as follows [labeled arbitrarily by the researcher]:

Biological variables: Age (Javadi, M., Yaghoobi, Hassanzade, & Ebadi, 2010) and gender (Nourzadeh, 2005),

Educational variables: reading comprehension (Naseri & Zaferanieh, 2012), reading strategy instruction (YipChengKow & BiglarBeigi, 2008), text genre, academic major and study duration abroad (Chomphuchart, 2006), EFL proficiency (Ebrahimi, 2012), Prior knowledge and text difficulty (Best et al., 2012), academic status and academic achievement (Javadi et al., 2010),

Sociocultural variables: abroad life experience (Hsu, 2007), residential area (Rajabi, 2009),

Affective variables: Subscales of achievement goals (Ghavam, Rastegar, & Razmi, 2011), Multiple intelligence (Marzban, 2008), self-efficacy beliefs (Naseri & Zaferanieh, 2012).

2. Studies on reading strategies in Iran

Strategic learning and by the same token strategic reading are still growing topics in Iran; however, 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.

The reading strategy studies in Iran are classified in the following section. However, before reviewing the reading

strategy research in Iran one point worth mentioning. The introduction of this research area into the Iranian academics has been very later than the world; as a result, the conducted studies are fewer and less various in procedures, variables studied and subjects. Consequently, the reading strategy studies in Iran are classified under only five categories, i.e.: a. successful and unsuccessful readers' strategies (Shokrpour and Nasiri, 2011; Ketabi, Ghavamnia, and Rezazadeh; 2012); b. reading strategy instruction outcomes (Noroozi and Birjandi, 1998; Fotovatian and Shokrpour, 2007; YipChengKow and BiglarBeigi, 2008; Motallebzadeh and Mamdoohi, 2011; Takallou, 2011; Aghaei and Pillaie, 2011; Amoli and Karbalaei, 2011; Moghadam, N.D.) ; c. factors affecting the use of reading strategies (Nourzadeh, 2005; Rajabi, 2009; Ghavam et.al., 2011; Masoud Rahimi and Mirzaei, 2012); d. reading strategy use and reading comprehension (Zare-ee, 2007); e. reading strategies while reading in the first language [Persian] vs. reading in EFL (Birjandi, 2001; Ebrahimi, 2012).

2.1. Successful and unsuccessful readers' 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, think aloud and 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 totally 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.

2.2. Reading strategy instruction outcomes

Noroozi and Birjandi (1998) conducted a study, comparing the effects of reflective reading strategy instruction on male and female Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension and strategy use. The results indicated that the female participants of all three proficiency levels [advanced, intermediate and starter] employed the instructed strategies more frequently than the male participants.

Fotovatian and Shokrpour (2007) carried out an experimental study comparing the effects of using reading comprehension strategies [cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective] as found by Fotovatian (2006) on the students' comprehension. They identified the most beneficial as well as those that hinder readers' comprehension and introduced the most helpful category of strategies. The results revealed that the good readers used a higher percentage of metacognitive strategies; although, both groups did not differ much in the use of cognitive and socio-affective strategies. On the other hand, some strategies in this study were reported to function negatively in terms of efficiency but not effectiveness. They hypothesized that the problem with such strategies as simplification, translation, or paying attention to single words may lie in their time-consuming nature. Simplification and translation were the strategies significantly used by the low-level group. This group used strategies like rereading, questioning for

clarification, simplifying, looking up all words, translating, question making in the text, inducting, paying attention to single words, summarizing and note-taking more frequently. Consequently, the poor readers relied more on local, text-based or bottom- up strategies in order to understand the text, while good readers relied on both types of strategies.

YipChengKow and BiglarBeigi (2008) studied the effects of metacognitive instruction of a cognitive strategy i.e. scanning, which is one of the SQ3R [survey, question, read, recite and review] strategies, on 60 out of 90 participants [30 in 2 classes as control groups, receiving no special strategic instruction, 30 in 2 other classes, being instructed on scanning cognitively – being told only what scanning is-, the other 30 in 2 other classes, being instructed on scanning metacognitively –being told what is scanning, what are its benefits, where to use it, how to use it, etc.]. In the post test of reading comprehension; although, the 90 participants were homogeneous in the pretest, the metacognitive experimental groups outperformed the other two groups.

Motallebzadeh and Mamdoohi (2011) conducted a study investigating the possible effects of cognitive learning strategies, on the Iranian EFL learners' improvement of reading comprehension. The comparison of the results, after one month of instructing control and experimental groups, revealed that the participants who had been taught the cognitive strategies could significantly outperform those in control group. There was significant evidence that the strategies were effective in raising the subjects' scores in EFL reading.

Takallou (2011), using Strategy Inventory for Language Learning [SILL] (Oxford, 1986-present) and the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach [CALLA] (Chamot & O'Malley, 1996), studied the effect of metacognitive learning strategies' instruction [planning & self-monitoring] on 93 Iranian university students. Data analysis revealed that the two experimental groups, who received the instructions, outperformed the control group on the reading comprehension test. Moreover, text type played an important role in the subjects' reading comprehension ability. The subjects performed better on authentic texts. In addition, the results showed that experimental groups' awareness of metacognitive reading strategies significantly increased after instruction.

Aghaei and Pillaie (2011) studied the effect of explicit instruction of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies on the reading performance and self-efficacy of 120 Iranian university students. The study examined a control group and an experimental group. The experimental group achieved significantly better results than the control group. Results of paired-sample t-tests and independent t-tests and size effect showed that reading comprehension, strategy use and self-efficacy can be improved through strategy instruction. They also realized that, within certain contexts, strategy instruction contributes to independent reading behaviors. Additional analysis showed that the experimental group developed a positive attitude after strategy instruction and was able to transfer the strategies to other languages and reading materials. Amoli and Karbalaei (2011) explored the outcomes of underlining reading strategy training to improve 60 Iranian EFL students' reading comprehension. The results revealed that, underlining strategy instruction facilitated the learners' EFL reading comprehension, while proficiency level of the participants did play no significant role in underlining strategy intervention.

Moghadam (N.D.) evaluated the effects of explicit training of a selected number of cognitive reading strategies on students'

comprehension of English for Specific Purposes [ESP] texts. The reading strategies were taught to participants through the procedure put forward by Janzen (1996). The result was that participants in experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of comprehension of ESP reading texts suggesting that they benefited from the reading strategy training.

2.3. Factors affecting the use of reading strategies

Nourzadeh (2005) studied the relationship between gender and use of reading strategies in 120 Iranian male -58- and female -63- high school students. The results of this study indicated that the female subjects showed more strategy awareness and used more reading strategies than the male subjects.

Rajabi (2009) investigated the effect of rural and urban orientations on top-down and bottom-up reading models of the Iranian EFL students. The results showed that in addition to bottom-up model, the urban students made use of top-down strategies including inferences, skimming for the main ideas, guessing the meaning of words from context, activating background knowledge, and focusing on the author's message, whereas rural subjects showed great reliance on texts and the application of bottom-up processing i.e. they heavily relied on the main content of the text, they never incorporated the knowledge of the world as well as their prior knowledge to answer reading comprehension questions.

Ghavam, et.al., (2011) conducted a study exploring the relationship between the subscales of achievement goals and the frequency of metacognitive reading strategies use of Iranian EFL learners, and tried to explore the possible significant differences between males and females regarding achievement goals and metacognitive reading strategy use of 103 freshman and sophomore students majoring in English Literature and English Translation in Shahid Bahonar and Azad universities of Kerman. In order to obtain the required data, two questionnaires were utilized; Achievement Goal Questionnaire [AGQ] developed by Elliot and McGregor (2001) to measure the participants' achievement goal orientations, and Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory [MARSII] developed by Mokhtari and Richard (2002) to measure the participants' frequency of metacognitive reading strategy use. The findings of this study revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between mastery-approach goal orientation and MRS use. Regarding the other three subscales of achievement goals [performance-approach, performance-avoidance, and mastery-avoidance] in relation with MRS use, all the correlations were significantly negative. Moreover, a significant difference was found between males and females regarding their achievement goals. Females were found to have higher scores of achievement goals. Regarding MRS use and gender, no significant difference was found between males and females.

Marzban (2008) investigated the relationship between the participants' use of reading strategies and their multiple intelligence [MI]. Using the reading section of a TOEFL test they chose 80 out of 135 test takers as successful EFL readers to fill MI inventory [developed by Armstrong, 1994] and a reading strategies inventory [developed by Oxford, 1990 & Waxman and Pardon, 1987 and originally adopted by Singhal, 2001]. The reliabilities of all tests were checked through Cronbach's Alpha. The computation of the results revealed that there existed a positive significant correlation between reading strategy use in general, metacognitive and cognitive reading strategies' use in particular and linguistic, logical, mathematical, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences.

2.4. Reading strategy use and reading comprehension

Zare-ee (2007) examined the relationship between the use of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies and EFL reading achievement. He collected data from 30 randomly selected EFL learners studying English Language and Literature at Kashan University, Iran. The participants included six male [20%] and 24 female [80 %] learners who were further classified into highly successful [n=6], moderately successful [n=19], and unsuccessful [n=5]. The collected data included reading comprehension achievement scores and responses to a 35- item five-point Likert-scale cognitive and metacognitive questionnaire. Transcripts of retrospective interviews with 4 highly successful and 4 unsuccessful test-takers were also used to further clarify the quantitative analyses. MANOVA results showed that students at higher levels of reading ability use meta-cognitive strategies more often than the less successful readers. Also, the use of meta-cognitive strategies can account for variation in EFL reading achievement and needs to be promoted by EFL teachers. Gender did not have a determining role in the use of either cognitive or meta-cognitive strategies in this study.

Alavi and Ganjabi (2008) investigated the relationship between 150 Iranian university student test-takers' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and the EFL reading comprehension performance by the use of TOEFL reading comprehension test followed by a cognitive-metacognitive questionnaire on how they thought while completing the test. The results suggested that first, the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies had a positive relationship with reading test performance; secondly, effective readers reported significantly higher metacognitive strategy use than the ineffective readers; and third, no significant difference was found between males and females in the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Motallebzadeh (2009) investigated the relationship between the students' choice of reading strategies and their performance on task-based tests through three instruments i.e. TOEFL test's reading comprehension sub section [to choose homogeneous participants in the field of reading comprehension from among 580 students], an IELTS reading sub-test as the study's main instrument and a reading strategy inventory (Bang & Guanfang, 2007). The two reading subtests and the reading inventory questionnaire were checked for their correlation to be measuring similar constructs. For this purpose Cronbach's Alpha was used. 180 students who got 70% of the total mark in the TOEFL were chosen out of the first 580 to participate in the main study. The results of IELTS reading subtest and reading strategies' inventory analysis showed that: first, test-takers preferred employing a variety of reading comprehension strategies, while taking task-based language proficiency tests; secondly, most test-takers, taking the IELTS as a task-based test, used different strategies during the test with various degrees. They obtained the highest mean score on using 'after reading' strategies and 'when encountering difficulty in text' strategies, indicating that these two strategies were used more frequently than other strategy types. Third, they obtained the lowest mean score on the 'while reading' strategies showing that these strategies were the least selected ones. Fourth, there was a significant correlation between participants' scores on the IELTS reading comprehension section and two of the reading strategies, i.e. remember the content of the text and when encountering difficulty strategies. This finding indicated that those who obtained higher scores on the IELTS reading comprehension test also obtained higher mean scores on the use of these two

strategies, that is, used these two strategies more frequently. Fifth, according to their results they concluded that strategy-based instruction can help L2 learners to be more aware of effective reading comprehension strategies in order to achieve better performance on task-based tests, and finally, sixth, FL/L2 teachers should develop some classroom tasks and exercises such as guessing word meanings, using contextual clues, analyzing reference words, and predicting text content to encourage learners to improve the use of while reading strategies.

Javadi et al. (2010), using MARSII, investigated the relationship between metacognitive awareness of reading strategies and students' academic status in Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. Results revealed that advanced students used more complex cognitive and metacognitive strategies than lower level students.

Moreover, some relationship was reported between metacognitive awareness and academic achievement of the participants. It was also found that metacognitive awareness and demographic variables such as age, gender and living area were not relevant factors.

Marefat and Barbari (2009) examined the potential inter-relationship between three language learning strategies [Formal, Functional and Monitoring], proficiency level and EFL reading comprehension ability of 60 Iranian EFL learners.

The results indicated that the participants mostly used monitoring strategy, meaning that the Iranian EFL learners pay more attention to the use of linguistic forms and modify language responses the most. Also, they found that the Iranian EFL learners do not employ the Formal, Functional or Monitoring learning strategies differently as far as their proficiency levels or reading comprehension abilities are concerned.

Based on these findings, they claimed that; although, almost all the learners unconsciously use a lot of strategies in their learning experiences, the idea of learning through strategies, especially what they can expand out of the classroom, was quite new for the subjects in this study. The analysis of learners' language learning strategies showed that the students of the high level of proficiency mostly used reading activities and students of the middle and lower levels of proficiency used listening activities more often. The results indicated that the Iranian participants in this study, regardless of their proficiency levels, used more receptive skills than productive ones.

Naseri and Zaferanieh (2012), in a co-relational study, explored the relationship between reading self-efficacy beliefs, reading strategies' use and reading comprehension level of Iranian EFL learners. In this study, Michigan reading comprehension test, a self-reported reading strategy use questionnaire, and a reading self-efficacy questionnaire were administered to eighty Junior and senior EFL students. The results of Spearman correlation coefficient, descriptive statistics, and Canonical correlation, indicated that a) there were significant strong positive correlations between reading self-efficacy beliefs and reading comprehension, also between reading self-efficacy beliefs and reading strategies' use, b) the most frequent use of reading strategy was found to be cognitive strategies, followed by testing strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, and finally compensatory strategies, c) regarding gender, the relationship between reading self-efficacy and reading strategies used by Iranian EFL senior and junior students made no difference.

2.5. Reading strategies while reading in the first language [Persian] vs. reading in EFL

Birjandi (2001) investigated the correlation between the use of reading strategies between his study participants' first language [Persian] and EFL. The study's final results 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. As the study's main instruments, she made use of a 22 item 4 point Likert scale questionnaire, Kong's (2006) interview guide and Flesch-Kincaide's reliability formula. The participants were 10 [5 advanced, 5 intermediate] Iranian post graduate level students in an ESL country. 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 revealed that, there existed both similarities and differences in the strategies used by them for understanding the texts. The significant point here was that the number of reading strategies used by the more proficient students was significantly more than the less proficient students.

3. Conclusion

Research in the field of reading strategies in Iran has started since 1990's with a few studies at the beginning and has accelerated in the recent years, attracting the attention of more and more researchers in the field. The variables, either dependent or independent, under investigation in combination with the reading strategies in Iranian studies, in order of attraction, include gender, EFL reading comprehension, EFL proficiency, age, living area, academic achievement, text type, achievement goals and self-efficacy. Most studies have focused on the correlation between strategy instruction and reading comprehension improvement of the participants, and all such studies have reported of positive reinforcing correlations. Most of the studies have chorally reported the metacognitive reading strategies as the most effective strategies whose widespread use differentiates the successful from the unsuccessful EFL reading comprehenders.

Some studies report no differences in strategy use between the two genders and some still more studies report females as more aware of metacognitive reading strategies, more frequent strategy users and beneficiaries of strategy instruction. In the solo study discussed in this section which has considered age as an independent variable, no difference in strategy use is indicated according to the participants' age differences. All the studies have made use of self-report strategy inventories as their data collection instruments and only one of them has reinforced the data through interviewing some participants. No study has investigated the correlation between more than three variables with EFL reading strategy use among Iranian students.

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