

The Relationship between Reading Comprehension and Reading Strategy Use among Malaysian ESL Learners

Pezhman Zare

Department of Language and Humanities Education
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Moomala Othman

Department of Language and Humanities Education
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Abstract

The study was an attempt to find out the rate of recurrence of reading strategy use among Malaysian ESL learners. It also tried to figure out the possible relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension. Moreover, the study was after the influence of gender on the use of these strategies. Ninety five ESL learners participated in the study. A reading strategy inventory and a reading comprehension test were used to collect the required data. The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics to determine the frequency of strategies employed by the learners. Independent sample t-test was also employed to find out how the use of strategies varied according to gender. Moreover, Pearson coefficient correlation was used to discover the association between reading strategy use and reading comprehension achievement. According to the findings Malaysian ESL learners can be categorized as high strategy users. It was also revealed that significant differences exist between male and female language learners in the use of reading strategies. Furthermore, the use of reading strategies had a strong positive correlation with reading comprehension achievement.

Key Words: Reading strategy use. Reading comprehension. Gender. ESL learners

Introduction

Research studies on reading comprehension have revealed that reading is a complex cognitive activity that is crucial for adequate functioning and for obtaining information in current society and requires an integration of memory and meaning construction (Alfassi, 2004). Students need to know how to learn from reading in order to be able to enter the present literate society and have a successful communication. Reading has been defined as an active process in which readers shift between sources of information, elaborate meaning and strategies, monitor their comprehension, and use the social context to reflect their response (Walker, 2000).

Research studies on second/foreign language reading have consistently confirmed the importance of reading strategies on developing language learners' reading comprehension skills (Zare & Nooreen, 2011; Brantmeier, 2002; Slataci & Akyel, 2002; Song, 1998; Carrell, 1989). They argue that strategy use is different in more and less proficient readers, who use the strategies in different ways. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that reading strategies can be taught to learners and that reading strategy instruction can benefit all students (Carrell, 1989; Carol, 2002; Janzen, 1996).

It was argued (May, 2001) that what a reader need to focus on is not only every single word in the text but also the semantics of the text. Meanwhile, many language learners mistakenly think that the purpose of reading is only to learn new vocabulary.

As a result, they only pay attention to correct pronunciation of each word. Consequently, these learners cannot see the very purpose of reading as a result of stumbling and mumbling over the isolated words in sentences (May, 2001; Alvermann & Phelps, 1998). Many language learners do not read for the purpose of understanding the writer's message, because they have developed a wrong concept of reading.

In this regard, it is expected that the findings of the current study bring this major issue into a better and clearer stage and help language learners and instructors improve teaching and learning process and achieve their goals.

Though, the study seeks answer to the following questions:

1. What is the frequency of reading strategy use of Malaysian ESL learners?
2. What is the relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension success?
3. What is the difference between Malaysian male and female ESL learners in the use of reading strategy?

Review of Literature

Reading is a cognitive activity in which the reader takes part in a conversation with the author through the text. On the other hand, reading strategies are considered as one of the features of cognitive psychology which are essential for a successful comprehension (Zare, 2012; May, 2001; Walker, 2000). Reading strategies has been defined by (Cohen, 1990) as mental processes that readers consciously select to use to complete reading tasks successfully. Reading strategies was defined (Baker & Boonkit, 2004) as "techniques and methods readers use to make their reading successful" (p. 302). Moreover, reading strategies also has been defined as plans and behaviors for solving problems when faced in constructing meaning (Janzen, 2003). He believes that these strategies range from bottom-up strategies to more comprehensive ones like top-down strategies. Bottom-up strategies are defined as making use of information, which is already present in the data, such as understanding the text by analyzing the words and sentences in the text itself, or looking up an unfamiliar word in the dictionary. On the other hand, top down strategies make use of previous knowledge such as connecting what is being read to readers background knowledge (Janzen, 2003). Some other strategies include evaluating, asking questions, checking for answers, making predictions, summarizing, paraphrasing and translating.

In addition, research studies have shown that successful comprehension does not happen automatically. But, it depends mostly on directed cognitive effort, which includes knowledge about and regulation of cognitive processing (Bazerman, 1985; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). During reading, the cognitive effort is expressed through strategies, which are "procedural, purposeful, effortful, willful, essential, and facilitative in nature" (Alexander & Jetton, 2000). "The reader must purposefully or intentionally or willfully invoke strategies" and does so to regulate and enhance learning and comprehension (Alexander & Jetton, 2000).

Less competent readers are not well aware of these strategies and of the counterproductive effects of poor strategies, and are not effective enough in their monitoring activities during reading. Incompetent readers can become skilled readers and develop their reading skills if they are provided with appropriate instruction about effective strategies and taught to monitor and check their comprehension while reading. In this regard, (Al Melhi, 2000) has uncovered that some differences exist between successful and less successful readers in terms of their actual and reported reading strategies, their use of reading strategies, their strategy awareness, and their perception of the good reader.

It is believed (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001) that, strategic awareness and monitoring of the comprehension process are significantly important features of competent reading. Such awareness and monitoring is often in the literature referred to as metacognition which includes knowledge of strategies for processing texts, the ability to monitor one's own comprehension, and the ability to modify strategies when needed (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997). Hsu (2004) discovered that high-proficiency junior high-school students employ reading strategies more frequently than low-proficiency students and use a variety of different strategies in the reading process. High-proficiency students tend to implement comprehension monitoring and problem identification during their reading process. Low-proficiency students are not confident when they encounter many unknown words in the text. Chen (1999) has conducted a survey to investigate the discrepancy of reading strategies for academic purposes between low achievers and high achievers among Taiwanese junior college students. The results demonstrated that the low achievers and the high achievers show different frequencies in applying different reading strategies. In addition, the high achievers employ a wider variety of strategies than the low achievers.

A number of studies have been conducted to explore the difference between male and female language learners in terms of language learning strategy use (Zare, 2010; Rahimi, Riazi, & Saif, 2008; Green & Oxford, 1995; Hashim, & Sahil, 1994). The findings of some of these studies have mostly shown that females used significantly more language learning strategies compared to males. A study was conducted (Green & Oxford, 1995) to explore language learning strategies among 374 ESL students from different levels in Puerto Rico. The results demonstrated that females used more strategies and employed them more frequently than males in all categories except the categories of cognitive and compensation strategies. It was found (Hashim, & Sahil, 1994) that Malaysian female learners employed affective strategies more frequently than males, but for the other five categories of language learning strategies no statistically significant difference was found between males and females.

In a different study, however, (Rahimi, Riazi, & Saif, 2008) investigated the use of language learning strategies among 196 EFL learners in Iran including 79 males and 117 females. The findings of the study revealed that no significant difference exists between males and females in the use of language learning strategies. It was explained (Rahimi, Riazi, & Saif, 2008) that this finding might be related to the fact that the participants of the study were all majoring in English and it may be possible that “the participants’ awareness of language learning processes minimized the gender effect in this study”(p.47).

Research on strategy use and gender is common which reflects a distinction between male and female learners in strategy use, but due to conflicting results provided by previous research studies, the relationship between language learning strategies and gender is still unclear. As illustrated, in some studies females outperformed males in the use of learning strategies while in some others it is the opposite. Due to these conflicting results and discrepancies, the researcher of the present study finds it plausible to explore the issue in a different context where English language is regarded as a foreign language and language learners have little exposure, if any, to the target language on a daily basis. For that reason, one of the objectives of this study is to find out the difference between Malaysian male and female ESL learners in terms of strategy use.

Methodology

Ninety five Malaysian ESL learners including 50 male and 45 female took part in the study. The sample of the study was selected through convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. A reading strategy inventory was administered as the instrument to elicit information on the learners’ use of reading strategies. The instrument had 15 items and the responses of the instrument are based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1= Never , 2= Rarely, 3= Occasionally, 4= Frequently, and 5= Always). Moreover, a reading comprehension test from a retired version of IELTS (International English Language Testing System) was used in order to assess the participants’ performance in reading comprehension. This test was appropriate to be used in the study as IELTS is a standardized, international and well-known test which is developed by Cambridge University.

Results and Discussion

The first research question of the study was an attempt to find out the overall frequency of reading strategy use of Malaysian ESL learners. Descriptive statistics were measured to answer the first research question. In Table 1 below the overall mean score, minimum, maximum, and the standard deviation of the participants’ responses to the whole instrument have been reported. As seen below in Table 1, the overall mean score demonstrates that the participants of the study were high strategy users ($M=3.38$) as long as reading strategy use is concerned. It is worth mentioning that based on Oxford’s (Oxford, 1990) classification, the student whose mean score is above 3.5 ($M \geq 3.5$) is considered to be a high strategy user, the one whose mean score is between 2.5 and 3.4 ($2.5 \leq M \leq 3.4$) is a medium strategy user, and the one below 2.4 ($M \leq 2.4$) is considered a low strategy user.

Table 1: Means of Reported Strategy Use

Reading strategy Use	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	95	2.41	4.92	3.88	.72479

English is a second language in Malaysia, and ESL learners have much exposure to English language in their daily life. As a result, they have plenty of opportunity to practice and use the target language on a daily basis. There are many ways to use and practice their English. Majority of people can use English language to communicate with each other. English language is widely used throughout Malaysia. People use the language from all walks of life with different age group.

The second research question of the present study was to investigate the relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension achievement. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was run in order to explore the relationship between these two variables. The result is presented below in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation between RSU and Reading Comprehension

		Reading Com.	RSU
Reading Com. Correlation	Pearson	1	.89**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	95	95
RSU	Pearson Correlation	.89**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	95	95

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note: Com (Comprehension); RSU (Reading Strategy Use)

As Table 2 demonstrates, a strong positive correlation ($r = .89$) exists between reading strategy use and reading comprehension achievement (The correlation is significant at the level of 0.01). In other words, as the frequency of strategy use increases, the reading comprehension scores increase as well. Based on the results, those language learners who have employed reading strategies more frequently got better results in reading comprehension test. This finding is supported by the results of the previous research in the field of second or foreign language learning (Hong, 2007; Cubukcu, 2008).

Many other researchers who have conducted studies in different contexts have reached the same result. The results of their research studies unanimously confirmed the positive relationship between the use of reading strategies and reading comprehension achievement (Baker & Boonkit, 2004; Soleimani, 2008; Willingham, 2006; Griffiths, 2003).

The significant correlation between the use of strategies and reading comprehension achievement highlights the importance of strategy use in the process of language learning. It is of great importance to train the language learners to employ the appropriate strategies and use them as frequently as possible. These strategies can lead the reader towards a new understanding of reading and help him/her to comprehend the message of the written text and communicate with the author properly. Reading strategies assist the reader not to pay much attention to details but to get the overall message which is in fact the main purpose of the reading comprehension. In addition, many research findings have already demonstrated that strategy use will lead into improved language proficiency generally or in a specific skill area (Griffiths, 2003; Oxford, 2003; Ellis, 1994). Therefore, it is of great importance for language educators to pay attention to their students and train them to employ strategies as frequently as possible.

To answer the third question of the study and find out the difference between male and female ESL learners in term of reading strategies use, independent sample T-test test was conducted. The results are illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Means and standard deviations for RSU according to gender

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Males	50	3.12	.78	.11622
Females	45	4.21	.81	.13641

Note: RSU (Reading Strategy Use)

As Table 3 shows the mean score of reading strategy use of males is 3.12. On the other hand, the mean score of reading strategy use of females is 4.21. Analysis of the independent sample t-test investigated if there was a statistically significant difference between male and female ESL learners in term of reading strategy use. The results of such analysis are illustrated below.

Table 4: Independent sample t-test for RSU according to gender

	Leven's Test for Equality Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Equal variance assumed	.382	.728	.589	93	.612
Equal variance not assumed			.588	92	.612

Note: RSU (Reading Strategy Use)

Analysis of data from Table 3 and Table 4 clearly indicate that there was statistically significant difference between males ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .78$) and females ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .81$) in terms of reading strategy use ($t(93) = .589$, $p = .612$). Put it simply, males and females are significantly different with respect to their reading strategy use.

This finding is consistent with the previous study results that have investigated the effect of gender on language learning strategy use. In their study, Hong-Nam & Leavell (2007) discovered a significant difference between males and females in terms of their learning strategy use. They found that females use more language learning strategies than males. Lee (2003) has reached the same conclusion that girls use language learning strategies more frequently than boys. Griffiths (2003) has also found that female language learners use more learning strategies than males. On the other hand, It was found (Wharton, 2000) a totally different result in which he studied learners' strategy in learning Japanese and French as a foreign language in Singapore. The findings of his study indicated that men used strategies more frequently than women. As illustrated, in some studies females outperformed males in the use of learning strategies while in some others it is the opposite. Due to these conflicting results and discrepancies, more studies are needed to be conducted to explore the issue and reach clearer conclusions.

Conclusion and Implications

As it was illustrated and discussed above, findings revealed that Malaysian ESL learners are high strategy users. It was also concluded that the use of reading strategies had a positive and strong correlation with reading comprehension achievement among Malaysian ESL learners. This correlation indicates that the frequent and wide use of strategies influence reading comprehension achievement. In other words, those ESL learners who employ more strategies and use them as frequently as possible would show higher success in reading comprehension. Finally, it was concluded that female ESL learner significantly outperformed their male counterparts in terms of strategy use.

The study concludes that strategy use in general, and reading strategies in particular can assist the ESL learners improve their reading comprehension. In this regard, the language instructors need take their students learning strategies into considerations and try to recognize and identify these strategies in order to support less successful student to achieve success and master the target language. Teachers can identify these strategies through observations, language diaries, questionnaires, interviews and so on. By doing so, teachers will be able to assist language learners to recognize and appreciate the power of language learning strategies in the process of second or foreign language learning. Through strategies, teachers can also help the students to maintain their motivation, autonomy, and confidence and keep on going and try to accomplish the goal of learning the target language.

Consequently, instructors need to incorporate language learning strategies into their teaching methods and approaches, train the students to use the appropriate strategy for a specific purpose or a specific skill area, and encourage them to use the strategies as frequently as possible. Students can learn to use language learning strategies to improve their language skills. As it was found in the current study, reading strategies can help the learner improve reading skills and reading comprehension performance significantly. The significant correlation between reading strategy use and reading comprehension scores proved the point. Consequently, it can be claimed that language learners who employ appropriate strategy when approaching a special task will most probably reach desirable results. Last but not least, teachers are encouraged to train the language learners to employ appropriate strategy when dealing with a specific task in order to boost up their achievement.

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