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Differences in reading strategies: how esl learners really read

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Abstract

Students' comprehension of a text relies much on the use of appropriate reading strategies during the activity. The use of such strategies would improve students' comprehension of the text, which, in turn helps them in their academic achievement at large. This study aimed to investigate the reading strategies used by ESL learners at tertiary level. Specifically, it aimed to identify the reading strategies frequently used by the ESL high and low achievers. It also aimed to find out whether there was any significant different in the type of strategies used by each group of ESL achievers. Forty undergraduate students were randomly selected as the respondents for this study. A twenty-eight-item questionnaire, which focused on the frequency of use of pre, while, and post-reading strategies was utilised in the study. It was found that both of the ESL high and low achievers frequently used certain reading strategies to grasp the meaning of the text. The ESL high achievers were also reported to significantly use post-reading strategies more frequently as compared to the ESL low achievers who tended to use while-reading strategies more frequently. The findings suggest that the use of appropriate reading strategies should be exposed to students to help them enhance their comprehension of a reading text and make them become better readers.

Keywords: reading strategies; ESL learners; reading comprehension

1. Introduction

Reading effectively and efficiently is a vital skill in life. In the educational contexts, be it at school or tertiary level, the ability to read well is a crucial asset for students, as they have to have attained a certain level of academic achievement. The explosion of research on reading in recent years has revealed the benefits of reading.

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Yilmaz (2000), for instance, confirmed that reading had a positive effect on the educational achievement of students. It was found that students failed in third grade because they were non-readers. It is often the case that reading at higher institutions of learning demands certain skills. Over the years, there has been accumulated evidence that emphasise the importance of some skills, and that learners equipped with such reading skills or strategies may be more successful than others.

Where learning is concerned, each individual has different learning abilities that are very much related to different levels and types of intelligence. In relation to this, Gardner (1983) points out that human beings do not share the same types and levels of intelligence, which are referred to as 'multiple intelligences'. In other words, what is emphasised here are individual differences and abilities. Such emphasis is supported by Lightbrown and Spada (1999) who states that a variety set of skills and preferred strategies are used by different learners to approach a task. Similarly, reading is done for various reasons and as such, different strategies could be used for the different purposes of reading (Lie & Cecilia, 2012).

In this light, this study attempts to find out whether or not undergraduates use certain strategies during their reading process and whether or not there is a difference in such strategies used by the high and low English as a Second Language (ESL) achievers.

2. Theoretical background

There are two main theoretical models of reading that currently dominate the literature. These models, namely, the bottom up approach and top down approach, or generally known as the schema theory, place heavy emphasis on the importance of reading comprehension process. In this light, reading can be regarded as a psycholinguistics guessing game in which the reader reconstructs as well as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display (Goodman, 1971; Green & Oxford, 1995; Chamot; 2005). According to the schema theory, comprehending a text is an interactive process between the readers' background knowledge and the text itself. This process can be divided into two parts;

Bottom-up Approach to Reading: The previously acquired knowledge structures (Schemata) are hierarchically organized from most general information at the top to most specific information at the bottom.

Top-down Approach to Reading: Many reading theorist currently conceptualize reading as an interactive, process-oriented activity in which a reader actively constructs meaning from the text by constructing background knowledge, including knowledge of language, with text information (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Noli & Sabariah, 2011).

Weber (1984) and Khezrlou (2012) emphasised that any reading process, be it in L1 or L2, needs to be perceived as a top-down/bottom-up interaction between the graphic exhibit in the passage, a variety of stages of linguistic knowledge and procedures, and a range of cognitive processes.

2.1 Literature review

Appropriate strategy use is said to be the distinct remark of efficient reading. Many empirical studies have linked success in reading to the quality and quantity of strategies used (Oxford, 1990; Alderson, 2000; Noli & Sabariah, 2011). It has been found that effective readers were more aware of strategy use than less effective readers (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). This suggests that one needs to be a strategic reader to be an effective reader. In other words, certain reading strategies need to be used to construct meaning effectively from any given written texts.

Presently, a general consensus in the literature regarding the definition of reading strategies is that strategies are conscious processes that are executed for a purpose (Choo, Eng, & Ahmad, 2012; Carrell, Gajdusek, & Wise, 1998). For a process to be considered a strategy, it needs to be observable or identifiable by the users when asked (Oxford, 1990). In this paper, reading strategies is defined as any processes that the readers are conscious of executing with the intention of constructing meaning from written texts.

Barnett (1989) uses the term reading strategy to explain the mental processes engaged when readers resolutely approach a text to make sense of what they read. To this, Carrell (1998) adds that strategies are conscious cognitive operation. Thus, conscious readers are able to discriminate between strategies that are suitable or unsuitable for particular reading conditions and that they are capable of observing their reading, which helps in enhancing their comprehension of what they read (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). The reader's metacognition is represented by this conscious knowledge and control of cognitive processes (Baker & Brown, 1984), which is strategic in nature.

Strategic reading involves three stages, namely, pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading (Noli & Sabariah, 2011). Strategic readers actively construct meaning as they read and interact with the text. They set purposes for reading, select methods of realizing these purposes, monitor, and repair their own comprehension as they read, and evaluate the complete task (Gardner, 1983). It is also said that a strategic reader creates, examines, and broaden meaning before, during, and after reading for a selection of texts. On the other hand, poor readers tend to initiate reading without thinking about the process of reading or the subject matter, omit or pay no attention to meanings of unfamiliar but crucial words, and do not incorporate prior knowledge in attempting to understand the text they are reading.

Constructing meaning from texts can begin even before reading. Research has found that strategic readers use planning strategies before they begin to read in order to make the texts more accessible during reading. Saricoban (2002) affirms that pre-reading activities assist students to activate what they know about a topic and foresee what they will read or hear. Students' attention too is aimed at the major points through such strategies.

During reading, effective readers use strategies to build their understanding of the text and become engaged in the reading process. Proficient readers know 'how' and 'when' to use certain reading strategies. They are also found to use monitoring strategies to make sure that they understand what they are reading (Samuels, Ediger, Willcutt, & Palumbo, 2005). Some of these strategies include checking for understanding, confirming predictions, asking questions and pausing (Goodman, Burke, & Sherman, 1980).

Well-planned response after reading is just as important as those before and during reading. Constructing meaning from texts does not end with the termination of reading. To have a deeper understanding of the texts, readers have to summarise major ideas and evaluate their readings (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001). This involves deep-level processing strategies that transform the literal meaning of the texts (Alexander, 2003). Some of these strategies are identifying what is salient, making inferences, drawing conclusions and reflecting upon the reading process (Pressley & Aflerbach, 1995).

As observed by Saricoban (2002), different strategies were used by both successful and less successful readers at an upper-intermediate level. Strategies such as analysing arguments, focusing on descriptions and certain kinds of verbs were those preferred by successful readers as these strategies helped them understand the purpose and the message conveyed by the author. Less successful readers also focused on the kinds of verbs. For example, they focused on verbs such as the ones that denote mental process and actions. Successful readers usually evaluate and try to comment on the encoded message by the author in order to extend their understanding of the text as a whole. It is therefore fair to conclude that strategies such as evaluating and commenting are vital in expanding one's interpretation and understanding of a text. Related to this is prior knowledge, which is important in reading as it becomes a bridge between what the reader already knows about the subject matter (background knowledge) and written text.

Despite the various useful findings on the use of reading strategies by ESL learners from different backgrounds, more can be learned about the use of different types of reading strategies, such as pre, while and post by learners of different proficiency levels. With this in mind, this study aimed to investigate the reading strategies used by ESL learners at tertiary level. Specifically, it aimed to identify the reading strategies, namely, pre, while and post frequently used by ESL high and low achievers and to determine whether there is there any difference in the use of the different types of strategies by ESL high and low achievers?

3. Methodology

A total of forty semester-one undergraduates from the Faculty of Chemical Engineering, Universiti Malaysia Pahang were randomly selected for the study. The selection was based on their proficiency levels, categorised as high ESL achievers and low ESL achievers. The distinction between high and low achievers of English as a second language (ESL) was based on their performance in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), which is a test to measure candidates' English language proficiency. Students who obtained Band 5 and 6 in MUET were categorized as ESL high achievers and those with Band 1 and 2 in MUET as low ESL achievers.

Primary data were collected using a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire, which comprised twenty-eight items, was adapted from Salleh's questionnaire (2007). The questionnaire, based on major reading strategies listed by Gardner (1983) elicits information on reading strategies employed by the two groups of learners. The questionnaire is divided into four parts, namely, 1) the respondents' background 2) use of pre-reading strategies, 3) use of while-reading strategies, and 4) use of post-reading strategies. Each of the sections on the reading strategies requires the respondents to evaluate a statement based on a three-point Likert scale, 'never', 'sometimes', and 'frequently'. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the frequency of use of the different types of reading strategies utilized by each group of ESL achievers.

As the current study focuses on semester-one undergraduates from the Faculty of Chemical Engineering, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, the finding cannot be generalized to other ESL learners especially those of different academic and demographic background.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Pre-reading strategies frequently used by ESL high and low achievers

As can be seen in Table 1, the ESL high achievers tended to use pre-reading strategy S3, i.e. to scan through the chapter introductions/summaries before reading the whole text (mean=2.75) whereby the ESL low achievers preferred to use S6 (mean=2.55), that is to think about the best way to understand a new chapter or a text. The strategy S5 'predicting the text content', however was least preferred by the ESL high achievers (mean=2.50) whereas S4, 'asking WH-questions before reading' was the least favoured by the ESL low achievers (mean=2.30).

Table 1. Means of frequency of use of pre-reading strategies among the ESL high and low achievers

	Pre-reading strategies	Mean score of ESL high achievers	Rank	Mean score of ESL low achievers	Rank
S1	I set my purpose for reading.	2.70	2	2.35	5
S2	I determine the points that I want to look for before reading a text.	2.50	5	2.45	3
S3	I scan through the chapter introduction/chapter summaries before reading the whole text.	2.75	1	2.40	4
S4	I ask a lot of WH-questions related to the subject matter to myself before I read.	2.60	3	2.30	6
S5	I predict the content of a text before reading it.	2.50	6	2.50	2
S6	When I start reading a new chapter or text, I first think about the best way to understand it.	2.55	4	2.55	1

Overall, these findings suggest that both ESL high and low achievers do plan to use certain reading methods, i.e., by 'thinking of the best was to understand a text' before actually reading them. In other words, constructing

meaning from texts can begin even before reading, whereby students prepare themselves mentally so as to obtain a maximum understanding of the reading text. This method relates very much to the use of metacognitive strategies as quoted from El-Hendi (1996) in which planning is considered as a crucial step before reading, other than monitoring and evaluating. Khezrlou (2012) also stressed that university students used these metacognitive strategies to plan before reading as to monitor, evaluate, and remediate their comprehension while reading.

4.2. While-reading strategies frequently used by ESL high and low achievers

Table 2 presents a comparison of the mean frequency of use of while-reading strategies mean across the two groups of ESL achievers.

Table 2. Frequency of use of while-reading strategies among the ESL high and low achievers

	While-reading strategies	Mean score of ESL high achievers	Rank	Mean score of ESL low achievers	Rank
S7	I give my complete attention as I read.	2.95	3	2.75	3
S8	As I read the text, I make notes simultaneously.	2.45	15	2.35	14
S9	I highlight main ideas as I read the text.	2.75	8	2.45	10
S10	I use different colours or highlighters to differentiate main ideas from supporting details.	2.15	16	2.00	16
S11	I imagine what I read	2.70	10	2.70	4
S12	I work through a chapter in a textbook item by item and I study each part separately.	2.65	11	2.40	12
S13	I repeat the main parts of a subject matter until I know them by heart.	2.65	12	2.45	11
S14	I try to find the key words of a text as I read.	2.80	4	2.60	6
S15	I do not proceed to the subsequent chapter until I have mastered the current chapter in detail.	2.80	5	2.40	13
S16	I try to see the connection between topics discussed in different chapters of a textbook.	2.80	6	2.55	9
S17	I try to construct an overall picture of a text for myself.	2.75	9	2.35	15
S18	When I am reading a topic, I try to think of cases I know from my own experience that are connected to that topic.	2.50	14	2.75	2
S19	When I don't understand an expression/ sentence, I read it again.	2.95	2	2.90	1
S20	I guess meanings of difficult words from contexts.	3.00	1	2.65	5
S21	I use dictionaries/ encyclopedias while reading.	2.55	13	2.55	7
S22	I communicate with myself as I read.	2.80	7	2.55	8

As shown in Table 2, the ESL high achievers tended to use while-reading strategies S20 'guessing meaning in context' (mean=3.00) whereas the ESL low achievers preferred to use S19 (mean=2.90) that is 'rereading difficult expressions and sentences'. The strategy S10 'using different colour/highlighters', however, seemed to be the

least preferred strategy by both ESL high and low achievers with the mean frequency of 2.15 and 2.00, respectively.

Overall, these findings suggest that nearly all ESL high and low achievers reread sentences that they did not understand while reading a text. This may be a sign of a lack of tolerance of ambiguity among the participants. This observation actually contradicts the finding of Brown (2000), which revealed that the ability to tolerate ambiguity in any reading text portrays the characteristics of effective readers. Lie and Cecilia (2012) also stresses that learners should not read too slowly and carefully as if they are trying to unearth the meaning. He further adds that effective readers should not face anxiety even though not all words in the reading text are familiar to them.

4.3. Post-reading strategies frequently used by ESL high and low achievers

As seen in Table 3, both the ESL high and low achievers preferred to use post-reading strategies S28 'recalling contents' (mean frequency of 2.95 and 2.60, respectively). The strategy S24 'finding other sources' such as books or article, however, was the least preferred strategy by the ESL high achievers (mean=2.60) while S25 'approaching lecturers for further explanation' was the least favoured by the ESL low achievers (mean=2.00).

Table 3. Means of frequency of use of post-reading strategies among the ESL high and low achievers

	Item	Mean score of high ESL achievers	Rank	Mean score of low ESL achievers	Rank
S23	I summarize the major ideas in a text after reading it.	2.90	2	2.30	4
S24	If I don't understand a text well, I try to find others sources (i.e. books, articles from websites, etc) about the subject concerned.	2.60	6	2.20	5
S25	If I don't understand a text well, I approach my lecturer for further explanation.	2.65	5	2.00	6
S26	I solve my doubts/exchange opinions with the people around me about the text that I read.	2.80	4	2.50	2
S27	When I have difficulty in understanding a text, I try to analyze why it is difficult for me.	2.85	3	2.45	3
S28	I try to recall what I have read.	2.95	1	2.60	1

The above findings suggest that the ESL high achievers were not in favour of S24- 'finding other sources to enhance understanding' and S25 'approaching lecturers for further explanation'. This supports Cabral's (2002) results, which indicate that many students tended to avoid the use of strategies that involved interaction with teachers. Students' shyness might have been the contributing factor as to why they chose not to approach their lecturers for further clarification or exchanging opinion with their peers on the subject matter.

4.4 Comparison in the use of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading strategies used by the ESL high achievers

Table 4 and Table 5 present detailed information of the means and standard deviation of each type of strategy, and the result of the ANOVA, respectively.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the ESL high achievers for pre, while, and post-reading strategies

Strategies	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error
Pre-reading	2.6000	.55610	.05076
(n=120)			
While-reading	2.7031	.51558	.02882
(n=320)			
Post-reading	2.7917	.44714	.04082
(n=120)			
Total	2.7000	.51385	.02171
(n=560)			

Table 5. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) result for the ESL high achievers

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Strategies	2.211	2	1.106	4.236	.015*
Within Strategies	145.389	557	.261		
Total	147.600	559			

As shown in Table 5, the ANOVA results indicated that there was a significant difference [F (2, 557) = 4.24, p = 0.015] in the use of reading strategies by the ESL high achievers at p≤0.05 level of significance. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean frequency of use for post-reading strategies was significantly different from that of the pre-reading strategies, in that the mean frequency of use of post-reading strategies was higher than pre-reading strategies ($\bar{X}$post=2.79, $\bar{X}$pre=2.60). However, the post hoc Tukey HSD test did not reveal any significant difference between the while-reading and post-reading strategies, or between the pre-reading and while-reading strategies. These results suggest that the post reading strategies were more frequently utilized by the ESL high achievers.

4.5 Comparison in the use of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading strategies used by the ESL Low achievers

Table 6 and Table 7 present detailed information of the means and standard deviation of each type of strategy, and the result of the ANOVA, respectively.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of the ESL low achievers for pre, while, and post-reading strategies.

Strategies	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error
Pre-reading (n=120)	2.4250	.64381	.05076
While-reading (n=320)	2.5250	.51558	.61282
Post-reading (n=120)	2.3333	.44714	.66526
Total (n=560)	2.4625	.51385	.63473

Table 7. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) result for the ESL low achievers

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Strategies	3.421	2	1.710	4.295	.014*
Within Strategies	221.792	557	.398		
Total	225.212	559			

As shown in Table 7, the ANOVA results indicated that there was a significant difference [F (2, 557) = 4.29, p = 0.014] in the use of reading strategies by the ESL low achievers at p≤0.05 level of significance. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean frequency of use for while-reading strategies was significantly different from that of the post-reading strategies, in that the mean frequency of use of while-reading strategies was higher than post-reading strategies ($\bar{X}$while=2.52, $\bar{X}$post=2.33). However, the post hoc Tukey HSD test did not reveal any significant difference between the pre-reading and while-reading strategies, or between the post-reading and pre-reading strategies. These results suggest that the while reading strategies were more frequently utilized by the ESL high achievers.

The findings illustrate a difference in the pattern of use of the different types of strategies for the two groups of achievers. While the ESL high achievers tended to frequently use more post-reading strategies, the ESL low achievers, in contrast, tended to frequently use more while-reading strategies.

These findings support the findings of an earlier study which illustrate that the use of strategies tended to differ according to the readers' learning stages (Takeuchi, 2002). This is also true for advanced readers. At university level, Alexander (2003) found that undergraduates for instance tended to process texts less strategically than postgraduates and faculty members. This seems to suggest that reading strategies continued to be used by ESL learners in tertiary education. This is no surprise considering the greater demands of reading required at a higher level of learning (Sugirin, 1999). To cope with these greater demands, an advanced learner therefore has to develop an extensive repertoire of reading strategies. However, some studies have suggested that it is not the choice of strategies that aid comprehension but it is the flexible use of multiple strategies (Pressley & Aflerbach, 1995;Anderson, 2000; Sugirin, 2002).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that all the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading strategies were generally applied by the two groups of learners included in the study: ESL high achievers and ESL low achievers. The ESL high achievers appeared to frequently use effective reading strategies than the ESL low achievers. The results also demonstrate that there were significant differences in the use of all pre, while, and post-reading strategies used by high and low ESL achievers. The ESL high achievers were also found to significantly use post reading strategies as compared to the ESL low achievers. Although the two groups of students applied almost similar strategies in reading, some were more favoured by high achievers of ESL, which perhaps helped them to become better and more successful readers.

The findings of this study have provided some insight into the nature of learning English among high and low achievers of ESL. It is imperative that appropriate language learning strategies be exposed to language learners so that they know 'how' to perform any reading tasks effectively and maximize their comprehension of a text. In this light, the reading strategies of successful readers should also be adopted by other students and educators can encourage learners to try them. Since successful students seem to use more strategies than unsuccessful students (Noli & Sabariah, 2011) it would be an advantage if weaker students can be encouraged to use all the strategies that have been proven to be effective.

It is suggested that future research look at the perceived difference in the use of reading strategies among learners based on learner's demographic and affective factors. It is also worthwhile to investigate the relationship between learners' preferences of reading strategies and their level of writing. In addition, researchers may find out if learners' reading strategies undergo changes after going through a specific course that explicitly train them in reading strategies. A comparison can be made between the pre-course reading strategies and the post-course reading strategies.

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